

COVID-19: Interment and Service Options

By the ICCFA Disaster Management Committee

The following is based on information available as of April 1, 2020.

The current COVID-19 crisis has affected all aspects of our lives. Including how we celebrate the loss of a loved one. In many states' gatherings of groups for any reason are either prohibited or restricted to a maximum number of attendees. Many funeral homes have implemented strategies and deployed technology to allow for recording or live streaming of services. But what do we do when it comes time for the interment and committal service? This is a question that has been brought before the ICCFA Disaster Management Committee. After doing some research and hearing from colleagues across the country we were able to obtain some operational directives being implemented throughout the country.

The options fall in to three categories. They are:

1. Interment and service now
2. Interment now and service at a later date
3. Interment and service at a later date.

Interment and service now:

Many operators we have spoken with have implemented directives in which the interment

is treated as "direct." When the casket/urn enter the cemetery, they are brought directly to the place of interment while attendees remain in their vehicles a safe distance away. The cemetery staff then completes the interment process immediately, witnessed from a safe distance by a pre-set number (typically 1-3) of designated immediate family members or witnesses. Following the completion of the interment process the cemetery staff leaves the area and attendees may then approach and conduct any services requested. This option works best outdoors, either at graveside or at a garden style building. In the case of entombment or inurnment at an indoor mausoleum, many cemeteries are also treating these cases as "direct" and are not allowing any gathering visitors indoors as a precautionary measure.

Interment now, service at a later date:

A number of cemeteries have elected to offer "direct" interment in the presence of some immediate family (again limited to designated numbers) or witness, however, the cemetery then offers families the option to set a future date for the actual committal service. In these cases, the families and friends, who would under normal circumstances travel to attend services but are unable to travel and gathering due to state stay at

home or shelter in place orders, have the option to gather later, often at no additional fee, and hold services. Some cemeteries and funeral homes are also videoing the interment and securely providing it to families.

Interment and service at a later date:

It is very common for burials to be postponed during the winter months in northern climates, a practice known as the “Spring Burial.” Bodies can be held at the funeral home, in a temporary crypt, or in a receiving tomb, from early December through late April until the ground has thawed.

As explained by the National Concrete Burial Vault Association (NCBVA; <https://www.ncbva.org/resources/Documents/Preserving%20Options.pdf>), “During these challenging times with changing rules and restrictions, we can learn from the techniques funeral directors use to properly preserve and carefully store the deceased; preserving the option for the family to have a full graveside service once things return to normal. Another benefit to this sometimes-lengthy delay is that it gives distant or extended family the opportunity to plan for travelling to attend the burial.”

In this scenario the cemetery or funeral home could hold the remains until the restrictions on gathering have been lifted and then interment and services are scheduled. There are various ways to store the casketed remains and include: funeral homes planning on delayed burials may be able to store properly embalmed bodies in caskets within their facilities (depending upon the length of time you plan on holding the deceased, you may want to consider a metal casket, as there is less risk of humidity having an impact on a metal casket versus a wood casket); or smaller facilities or facilities with larger volumes may want to work with local cemeteries to find out what kind of storage capabilities they

have (this may include traditional receiving tombs; mausoleums or crypts that can be made available for short-term storage with proper containment, or secure buildings that can supplement the funeral home’s facilities for storing caskets inside of sealed vaults).

Conclusion:

Whatever choice the family may decide, the funeral home should be aware of all options that may be available. Also, consider some points of discussion when talking with a family, that various professionals have shared when planning a delayed interment and/or service:

- Why your loved one deserves to be celebrated, no matter what.
- Delayed burials give family and friends a chance to share stories and memories about your loved one’s life.
- It gives those close to your loved one the closure they need to begin the grieving process.
- Your loved one deserves it. We need to be smart about how we do it, but your loved one’s life is important, and they should be celebrated, even if that means a delayed burial or service.
- Burial is a tradition. During times of chaos and uncertainty, traditions can help us stay grounded and remind us who we are.

All of these options for interment strike a balance between keeping everyone involved safe and providing the much-needed healing that comes from the interment ceremony.

