

COVID-19: How to Handle the Deceased Webinar - Cemeteries

The following is based on information available as of May 4, 2020.

Receiving the body

How should we be handling/receiving a casket or urn for burial?

Many organizations have implemented operational directives for receiving remains at their cemeteries. Some more robust than others, but all provide their employees and those witnessing interment with a safe and dignified service.

When remains arrive at the cemetery and prior to the casket or urn being removed from the transport vehicle, cemeteries are requiring the casket or urn be disinfected.

- Using a disinfectant wipe or cloth soaked in disinfectant the casket handles and surrounding surface is completely wiped down. The same would occur with an urn.
- Once properly disinfected the casket or urn is then removed from the vehicle. (Many cemeteries are requiring that their staff handle act as pall bearers to further avoid close contact and ensure their safety)

Process

Are there steps/precautions cemeteries should be taking for the gravesite/chapel services?

- Many have limited the number of attendees

at services. This is proving in many parts of the country to be near impossible to enforce. Therefore, many cemeteries are treating all interments as “direct” in nature. This means the interment is completed and all staff and equipment are safely away from the interment area prior to any gathering or committal service. Some have even erected temporary interment shelters to allow committal prayers to occur and then the staff of the cemetery takes the casket or urn to the place of interment therefore eliminating the graveside gathering.

- Some cemeteries have closed their indoor mausoleums to visitors due to a reduced ability to properly disinfect. In many of these cases the entombment or inurnment is performed “direct” with a very limited number of witnesses.
- Cemeteries have also limited the number of interments on any given day. This allows for proper scheduling and adequate time to complete burial procedures. Limited scheduling also ensures directives for proper disinfection of equipment are followed between interments.

Storage

For delayed services or just because of the quantity of burials, how do you store casketed remains?

- Many cemeteries are implementing “spring

burial” procedures. Holding remains in pre-determined, secure areas for interment at a later date.

- Some cemeteries are requiring remains be embalmed or caskets be secured in vaults in order to be stored for future interments.
- Any cemetery implementing this type of service should implement a strict chain of custody and record keeping procedure.

Identification

Due to the necessary lack of family involvement, how are you handling the ID of casketed remains or urns?

- Consider a system that incorporates the burial permit or other documentation you receive with the remains. For example, a tagging system in which you tag the vault or crypt/ niche with one tag and then upon the receipt of the burial permit with the remains you can apply a second tag to the casket or urn. At the place of interment, the two tags are matched to ensure proper handling.
- Consider implementing virtual arrangements and digital signatures so that families and staff are not required to meet face-to-face. Provide curb-side service for grave selection and verification.

Additional Questions

What can you do if funeral homes and or families refuse to comply with your cemetery directives?

- Make it clear to your staff that their safety is priority #1. They are not to feel pressured to remain in a situation that is potentially unsafe. Let them know they can step away from the situation to a safe area and allow the location leadership to communicate compassionately and professionally with families and funeral directors.

What should you do differently if the deceased had a confirmed COVID-19 cause of death?

- Nothing. Right now best practices require that you handle every casket and urn as if the cause of death was COVID-19. This practice ensures all safety precautions are taken with every interment.

Frequent hand washing, using disinfectant and social distancing probably have the biggest impact on safety but how do you manage employee fears?

- Provide employees with adequate PPE. Masks and gloves have the biggest impact on morale. Tyvek suits or rain gear are also good morale boosters.

How do you keep employees from infecting one other?

- Social distancing of employees of at least six feet should be required and enforced. Reduce the number of employees that work and travel together.
- Quarantine any employees that are asymptomatic but have been exposed to someone who is positive for COVID-19. Find an area for them to work where there is no contact with other employees and track their temperature daily.
- Assign one manager to contact employees that are in quarantine or feeling ill to check on their status and provide assistance with anything they may need such as medical attention, food, rides, etc.
- Follow the 14-day quarantine and 72-hour post symptoms guidelines from the Center for Disease Control (CDC).

