

In 19th century America, before funeral homes, there were “undertakers,” carpenters or furniture store owners, who undertook the side business of building caskets. Before that, each family took care of its own deaths, with men making coffins and women washing and laying out the deceased in the parlor where friends and neighbors came to pay their respects. It is still done similarly in most of the world outside North America.

Now there is a growing attempt to return to the tradition of home funerals. Home funerals and family care of bodies is perfectly legal in Virginia. Embalming is not required, nor does it take a licensed mortician to transport a body. However, individuals need a Transit Permit to take a body outside of the state. Most cemeteries do not require a casket; in fact a casket would go against the religious tenets of Muslims and Jews who often bury bodies in direct contact with the earth and without embalming.

If you choose to bury your own dead, you have to file a Death Certificate, signed by the attending physician or coroner. The local health department requires this document within seventy-two hours. For cremation, you also need a Cremation Permit. You must also provide a casket or suitable container and make arrangements directly with the cemetery or crematory.

Who Will Opt for Home Funerals?

Not everyone will want to do a home funeral. The who might are:

- Those who are independent and don't need a lot of support.
- Those who consider death a natural part of life and are more curious than afraid of death.
- Those who value the personalization made possible by the after-death care of a loved one.
- Those acting upon the request of a loved one who wants to die at home, preparing for

their final exit amidst people they trust, rather than with strangers.

- Those who want to retain control and avoid the commercialization and impersonal aspect of funeral homes.
- Those who believe being physically involved helps in the grieving process, in achieving closure.
- Those who want to save money by avoiding embalming, an expensive casket, or the use of traditional funeral home services.

Planning Ahead Helps

The dying person can write or dictate his after-death wishes (a Funeral Consumer Alliance planning form or the “Before I Go, You Should Know” booklet would be fine) and arrange for a “Payable Upon Death” bank trust account naming an agent to receive money to cover final expenses.

The family can agree ahead of time who is to direct things and who will do which tasks. Lacking a family, the dying person can choose an agent, using an Advance Health Care Directive, to take charge of the disposition of the body.

The agent may need to locate a willing crematory operator or cemetery to work with, find or make the burial or cremation box and decorate it if desired, and make sure the hospice, the hospital, the nursing home, or all people at home know that this will be a home-directed funeral, so no one has the body picked up by a funeral home. If the death is unexpected, the medical examiner must be notified and an autopsy may be needed. The coroner needs to know whom to call when the body can be released.

A van, pickup truck, or SUV may be used for transporting the body. Two people may be needed for carrying the body and container. Handles or cut-outs in the burial container make it easier to move. If the body is to be cremated, someone needs to arrange to pick up the ashes after the cremation for scattering or interment.

Home Funerals and Memorials Can Be More Personal

The rites of a home funeral can be as religious or secular as wanted. The family may

- Use scented candles, incense, poetry, music, flowers, greenery, readings, speakers, flags, videos, photos, and/or other mementos.
- Hold the vigil or visitation at the time they desire, and make it as simple or elaborate as they wish.
- Invite and involve the people they want.
- Make and/or decorate the casket as they wish.
- Put personal belongings or notes in the casket if desired, and/or opt for a shroud or blanket for the body.
- Use dry ice for preservation, rather than embalming, if the body is to be kept for several days.
- Dig the grave themselves if on their own land or consult the cemetery administration as to the process of digging the grave in a cemetery: with attention to location, width, and depth of the grave and whether a liner is required.

Preservation and Care

If the body is to be viewed, wash the body with warm water and soap; clean and trim the nails; shampoo and arrange the hair; close the eyes and mouth; use cosmetics if desired. It is advisable to have pads available as some liquid may seep through orifices after death.

The body may be massaged with oil and dressed or wrapped in a shroud.

The body may be arranged in the container. A pillow and cover may be used. Dry ice may be placed under a blanket beneath the body to keep the body fresh for several days.

If the body is to be cremated, all contents of the box must be combustible. Pacemakers have to be removed because the batteries would explode and damage the retort, but artificial joints and other surgical miscellany may be left.

Legal Matters and Paperwork

If there is time to plan ahead, it is helpful to have a list of all the known sources of death benefits, the location of current and unpaid bills, the most significant persons in the life of the dying one and how to contact them, and the location of important papers, and relevant combinations, passwords, and other information that would help the one administering the estate and/or funeral.

Information Needed for the Death Certificate:

A blank death certificate may be obtained from the county public health department. It must be completed in black ink, and taken to the person's physician for signature and filling in the cause of death. It must be filed within seventy-two hours of death with the Department of Health. The form is in duplicate.

Needed information includes the address of the decedent, military service dates and discharge (there could be death benefits coming) names of each parent, occupation of the decedent, educational level, social security number, birth and death dates, marital status, and cemetery or final disposition plans,

A Cremation Permit will be necessary if you are using a crematory. This may also be obtained at the county public health department after you have the certified Death Certificate.

The cemetery will need a copy of the approved Death Certificate before accepting the body. Additional certified Death Certificates are necessary for collecting death benefits and transferring property and accounts. It is a good idea to get several copies from the registrar.

Other Options

- The family can choose to do only part of the after-death care, leaving the rest to a funeral home.
- The body can be kept refrigerated at the mortuary and be delivered to the home for services.
- The mortuary may transport the body.
- The mortuary may be used for getting the Death Certificate and Cremation Permit.
- The mortuary may be used for obtaining the casket or alternative container.
- The mortuary may agree to allow a family member to wash and dress the body at the funeral home and then provide all the other services.

Many funeral homes will try to work out the arrangements the family would like.

Resources

Final Passages, Jerri Lyons, Director, P.O. Box 1721 , Sebastopol, CA 95473
finalpassages@softcom.net,
www.finalpassages.org.

Crossings: Caring for Our Own at Death,
7108 Holly Avenue, Takoma Park, MD 20912
crossingcare@earthlink.net

Funeral Ethics Organization, Lisa Carlson,
author of *Caring for the Dead, Your Final Act of Love*,
UpperAccess Publishers, (800) 310-8320.

Revised 2007

Home Funerals in Virginia

A Revived Tradition



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