



# funeral service **insider**

independent news & guidance for funeral home owners and operators

## As Restrictions on Public Gatherings Rise, Funeral Homes Seek to Adapt to the Times

### Coronavirus Poses Numerous Challenges for Death Care

Big bottles of hand sanitizer. live on our website.”

Signs telling people to avoid shaking hands or hug at the exact time when they need those things the most.

Churches where you're normally welcome, suddenly telling you that you can't hold a service at their venue ... or cancelling all public funerals on your own.

This is funeral service right now, with every funeral home dealing with the coronavirus crisis in its own way, as best as it can.

“We have seen attendance decrease significantly, especially in the last few days,” says Matt Levinson, president at Sol Levinson and Bros., which serves the Jewish community in Pikesville, Maryland. “We have set a new policy as of (March 12) that we are not holding any more public funerals. We are having family private funerals, and since we have webcasting capability, the community will be able to watch the funerals

Levinson's firm is also urging people to not shake hands or give hugs. “We are providing sanitization stations and are encouraging people to leave more space between others at our services.” he says. “Most importantly, stay home if you are sick.”

Plans are being put in place so staff can work remotely, Levinson says. “It's critical that our staff stays healthy, so we are able to continue to operate in some capacity,” he says.

Corey Gaffney, president and CEO of Gaffney Group in Tacoma, Washington, recently had three suspected deceased individuals who died of COVID-19 in a cooler – and possibly more pending final test results. One was embalmed; the other two were expected to be cremated.

So far, Gaffney has seen an increase in direct cremation, with some families saying they'll hold a ceremony at a

## NFDA Posts Conversation With CDC Staff on Virus

The National Funeral Directors Association recently held a Facebook Live broadcast with Capt. Jill M. Shugart, Dr. Sarah Reagan-Steiner and Dr. David Berendes with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to provide guidance on responding- to the coronavirus pandemic.

On the broadcast, Shugart said community spread is being detected in a growing number of countries. “Because there was little to no pre-existing immunity to the new virus, it has spread worldwide,” she says.

She adds, “There is currently no known risk with being in the same room at the funeral or visitation service with the body of someone who died of coronavirus 2019 or COVID-19,” she says, adding that the world is still learning more about how it spreads. “The virus likely spreads primarily from respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes,” she says.

On the webinar, the CDC staff reviewed some personal protective equipment recommendations as well as tips on cleaning and waste disposal after the collection of specimens as well as after transporting human remains.

Visit <https://www.nfda.org/covid-19> to listen to the NFDA broadcast in its entirety. Visit [www.cdc.gov/COVID19](http://www.cdc.gov/COVID19) for additional resources.



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future date when people will attend. Casketed burial families are increasingly opting for graveside ceremonies so people can spread out.

Gaffney has also had families calling the firm to ask if he was cancelling services, “which at this time, we are not,” he says.

While he expected the above, Gaffney has been taken off guard by Washington Gov. Jay Inslee banning gatherings over 50 people and having masks placed on back order from his medical supplier. There’s also been an influx of families who had events scheduled for nursing homes asking if he could accommodate them.

Gaffney adds, “Certain places of death insist we leave the face uncovered as we leave the facility, even now. We respond, ‘For the safety of everyone involved, we are covering the face prior to departure, and this is not subject to debate.’”

Matthew Bailey, president of CT Life Tributes with locations in Connecticut, had a memorial service last week at a large retirement community for a man who was 102. “I was expecting a smaller turnout as a result, but it was still very, very well attended,” he says. “When we arrived, they took the temperature of our staff and had us sign a health evaluation form. I do think that we will see decreased

numbers for at least a brief period of time. We have several services coming up ... and I will be curious to see how turnout is.”

Bailey’s firm has always had hand sanitizer out and been attentive to sanitizing commonly used areas. “We are particularly attentive to this now,” he says. “We are also offering families to work with us using Passare’s collaboration center if they wish to do so to avoid in-person meetings.”

Dave Perotto, a funeral director at Bartolomeo & Perotto Funeral Home in Rochester, New York, is requiring staff to place a mask on all decedents before bringing them to the funeral home. “Everyone has been told to stay home with any sort of symptoms,” he says. “We can lose one team member but cannot afford to lose multiple people.”

While Perotto’s firm has survived an increased cremation rate, he knows the stakes are high. “This could put some businesses in financial peril ... this could bankrupt some funeral homes,” he says.

William Wappner, owner of Wappner Funeral Directors & Crematory, with locations in Mansfield, Ontario and Ashland, all in Ohio, and president of the Ohio Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors, notes Gov. Mike DeWine has banned gatherings of 100 or more, but

funeral services are exempt. “This still will have an impact,” he says.

Whether to move forward with a service is being left up to families, Wappner says. Staff are providing hand sanitizer and paying extra attention to disinfecting surfaces like doorknobs and office equipment, he says.

In a March 13 email, O’Connor Mortuary, with locations in Laguna Hills, Irvine and San Juan Capistrano, all in California, notified those on its email list that it was adhering with Centers of Disease Control guidelines and the California Department of Public Health. “At this time, all services will go on as scheduled, unless a family or venue requests to reschedule,” according to the email, which came from Becky Lomaka, the firm’s director of grief support and education.

While the services will go on (for now, at least), the mortuary anticipates attendance at services “will decrease due to the public awareness.” It is asking “those at risk” and those not feeling well to stay home and reach out to the family via the memorial page. The mortuary is also offering complementary video streaming of services in its chapel to families until further notice.

Like virtually every other employer, the mortuary has reiterated that anyone on its team feeling ill stay home and has

### Curbing the Spread of Coronavirus

Corey Gaffney, president and CEO of Gaffney Group in Tacoma, Washington, whose firm has already served multiple families who have lost loved ones to the coronavirus, says he’s enforced some common-sense measures to help curb its spread, including:

- Boosting the cleaning of facilities to three times a week.
- Coaching funeral directors to bring a clipboard to the place of death to use as a surface to write on and ensuring they bring their own pen to sign release forms.
- Proactively consulting with his lawyer about what happens if staff must take extended leaves of absence after using their paid time off.
- Thinking about what he should have on hand if he could not get supplies for 14 days or more.

recommended following the rules of social distancing, which includes staying six feet apart, washing hands frequently, avoiding touching the face, covering coughs with an arm or inner elbow and taking other necessary precautions.

In addition to maintaining smooth operations at his funeral home, Wappner is focused on minimizing the impact to the entire profession in his capacity as president of the Ohio state board. “We are still trying to hold our board meeting (March 18) in order not to put our apprentices and new licensees’ lives on hold,” he says. “We always interview apprentices partway

through the apprenticeship. We have canceled those interviews for this month.”

For now, the board must continue to meet in public to vote on anything, such as approving licenses for facilities, crematories, crematory operators, funeral directors, embalmers or apprentices. “The governor would have to pass an emergency order to allow the Sunshine Law to be overridden,” he says. “Our state board employees will be working from home to keep things running as best as they can.”

Ernie Heffner, president of Heffner Funeral Homes &

Crematory in York, Pennsylvania, says at least one church had notified the firm that it would not allow large gatherings moving forward – and more were expected to do the same.

While not much else had changed at Heffner’s firm at press time, he’s concerned. “In spite of all the press and info, I’m still not sure I have enough information to make a credible, confident determination about how concerned and/or reactionary I should be,” he says. “That said, my wife and I have decided that taking our 88- and 89-year-old mothers out for Sunday breakfast should be put on hold for the time being. I guess that pretty much says that I don't think it’s a hoax and erring on the side of caution is prudent.”

David Lee Hernandez, principal of Jersey Memorial Group, which owns firms in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and West Virginia, says his locations are placing signage throughout funeral homes and requiring visitors to sign and acknowledge their request for social distancing.

Hernandez adds that he’s also worked with his management team to restructure removals, embalming and establishing central prep facilities to minimize the chance of contam-

### Precious Materials

Protect that toilet paper and hand sanitizer.

Pray Funeral Home in Charlotte, Michigan, reported in a March 16 post on Facebook that a bottle of hand sanitizer for grieving friends and family was stolen during a visitation.



**Pray Funeral Home, Inc.**  
1 hr · 🌐

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BEWARE HAND SANITIZER IS LITERALLY DISAPPEARING! During our visitation last night someone decided they were worried enough that they needed our hand sanitizer that we have supplied for visitors to the funeral home! They took it home with them.



ination. With all schools in New Jersey ordered closed, he's trying to rearrange schedules to accommodate staff with children.

Lisa Thomas, business manager at Shackelford Funeral Directors with locations in Bolivar, Henderson and Savannah, all in Tennessee, says, "We are in a rural area with a city population of approximately 7,500 and a county population of around 22,000. I believe those statistics impact how our folks are responding to the COVID-19 outbreak. Although we're short on toilet paper and restaurant attendance seems to be down, visitations and services do not seem to have been affected – yet."

Thomas notes that the firm will start placing signs in strategic positions reminding people that it might be in their best interests to avoid physical contact with others. "As information has become available, especially as it relates to funeral service, it has been printed and distributed to all personnel," she says.

Thomas adds, "Any health situation as prevalent as COVID-19 should be concerning, but not to the point of hysteria, which seems to be where we are headed. When the people who truly require certain products cannot obtain them because the populace has engaged in panic buying and basically hoarding of those same products, we have an issue far greater than the threat of disease. Only when we look out for each

### NJSFDA Comments on the Virus

In a message it posted on Facebook, the New Jersey State Funeral Directors Association noted it has been receiving regular updates from state and federal agencies to ensure the information it sends to member funeral homes is current and relevant.

George R. Kelder Jr., CEO and executive director of the NJSFDA, says, "Health officials and the governor have indicated that one way to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus is through uniformly attempting to limit public gatherings such as viewings and funerals to 50 people. Our sympathies go out to anyone who has the additional burden of a death during this time. Because there are no current restrictions on the manner of disposition or how we honor our dead, we encourage those experiencing a death to work with their funeral director in creating meaningful public or private services that meet your needs yet fall within the current approach on limiting gatherings."

On the same day that message was posted, President Donald Trump advised people to not gather in groups larger than 10 in a new series of guidelines he recommended be followed for at least 15 days to slow the spread of the virus.

That guidance was significantly more stringent than the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention statement on March 15 recommending limiting gatherings to 50 people.

On its Facebook page, responding to the news about Trump's comments, NJSFDA stated, "Because the NJSFDA operates on facts, orders, statutes, and regulation (not news reports) unless a newer order supersedes NJ executive order no. 104 we are currently discouraging gatherings of more than 50 people."

other are we able to overcome situations such as the one we currently face. Collectively we seem to be attempting to do just that by limiting gatherings where COVID-19 can be easily spread. But individually? I'm not sure the majority are looking out for others as much as for themselves."

Asked what might happen if COVID-19 sticks around, Thomas says, "If COVID-19 sticks around, vaccine or not, I believe it will simply become another 'flu' in the minds of the public. The longer something exists, the more likely we are to accept it as the norm. And, so far, the flu hasn't changed the nature

of our profession.”

While Thomas says her firm has explored livestreaming funerals, she notes that before the outbreak, many families would simply use Facebook Live to broadcast services. “Granted, there are actually people who do not have a Facebook account and are therefore precluded from viewing through that medium, and that does make the service being streamed extremely public (which may not appeal to the family). We may have reached a point in society where webcasting of funeral services will become a necessity. But then how many people will simply stay home when they could attend and does that really offer the family the comfort and support the visitation and service are intended to provide?” she asks.

Jake Johnson, president and CEO of Johnson Consulting Group, wonders how this situation will affect things moving forward, including whether people who are coughing, sick and sneezing will be stigmatized. “What happens to the traditional

### Funeral Homes Respond to the Crisis

Throughout the country, funeral homes are corresponding with families to answer questions about coronavirus – and to share how they are responding to the pandemic.

Here is just one example of such a message sent by Morales Funeral Home in Houston.



#### **MORALES FUNERAL HOME IS PREPARED TO SAFELY CARE FOR FAMILIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Houston, TX – Morales Funeral Home remains committed and prepared to safely care for the families it serves during the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Whenever possible, Morales Funeral Home will continue to enable families to participate in the rituals that are most important to them.

As a member of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), we regularly receive information via NFDA from the CDC, Department of Health and Human Services and other agencies about the evolution of COVID-19 in the United States. NFDA continues to lead the conversation with federal officials about the role of funeral service as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic.

And according to the CDC, at this time, there is no known risk associated with being in the same room at a funeral or visitation service with the body of someone who died of confirmed or suspected COVID-19. Depending on a family's preferences, their loved one can be safely embalmed. Families may choose either burial or cremation as usual.

“At Morales Funeral Home we recognize our responsibility to protect the health of those we are privileged to serve,” said Christina Morales, President “We will continue to guide families, as we always have, in ways they can meaningfully and safely commemorate the life of their loved one, while adhering to the guidance issued by federal, state and local public health officials.”

Morales continued: “Our staff remains vigilant about cleaning our facilities and ensuring we're all following recommended healthy habits, such as keeping a proper social distant, staying home when sick, washing our hands, and covering coughs and sneezes. The CDC and our local public health officials have offered a lot of helpful guidance for businesses on this topic, which we continue to follow.”

We will be implementing the following measures to help prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- Encouraging remote arrangements with our funeral directors via phone conference or web
- Hosting a private, intimate graveside service and scheduling a memorial service sometime in the future
- Enhance sanitizing all furniture, equipment and vehicles

If the staff of Morales Funeral Home can be of assistance, please contact us at **(713) 223-1167** or via email: [info@moralesfuneralhome.com](mailto:info@moralesfuneralhome.com)

handshake in the future?” he asks. “People will most likely take their new cleanliness techniques well into the future when this whole situation is long gone.”

Johnson also thinks the media has contributed to inciting a panic, asking, “Where are the statistics of the mortality of this virus versus the regular flu? Where’s the statistics on prior SARS and MERS in comparison?”

He adds, “The virus is a reminder that we need our rest, we need to mitigate stress, and be responsible for cleanliness and not being around people when we are sick. It seems to me that most people – if not all – that are healthy and in good shape and well rested are at a very low risk

of serious illness or death from this.”

Even if that is true, the virus has also exposed serious systematic flaws in some states, Bailey says. “We have forms (in Connecticut) – particularly for cremation – that require a ‘hard’ or a ‘wet’ signature,” he says. “We cannot have emailed or faxed copies. We also have yet to implement an electronic death-registry system. During times like this when we are trying to limit social contact, this is putting exposed parties and funeral professionals together and at risk. I think it’s time Connecticut allows us to operate on a 21st century model.”

The best way to limit exposure is with universal precautions and

by wearing personal protective equipment while handling the deceased, Hernandez says. “It’s the public gatherings and physical contact that is of concern. But if it’s not eradicated and remains uncontained there’s much more to be concerned about than viewings.”

Byron Adkins, managing funeral director of The Arlington Memorial Gardens in Cincinnati, thinks the crisis could reshape the profession for the long term. “We could see the truly old-fashioned visitations at the residence come back into fashion – more family-only burials and even higher rates of cremation,” he says.

*Send comments or ideas to [tparmalee@kbpublications.com](mailto:tparmalee@kbpublications.com).*

### **Tom Hisle Joins American Enterprise as Regional Manager of Preneed Sales**

American Enterprise Group has announced Tom Hisle has joined the company as regional manager. Hisle will oversee preneed sales in Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia by building relationships with funeral homes and generate sales growth for AEG’s life business under the Great Western Insurance Co. brand.

Hisle, a Kentucky native, has over 38 years of funeral service experience. Prior to joining AEG, he worked for a casket company, managed a large funeral home, oversaw preneed staff and sold preneed extensively. Hisle earned his Bachelor of Science degree in business and marketing from the University of Kentucky and his MBA from Averett College. He also graduated from Mid-America College of Funeral Service.

Kenn Peterson, vice president, national sales – preneed at AEG, said, “We are excited to have Tom join our growing preneed sales team and look forward to the impact he will have helping funeral homes help more families make the worst day of their lives a little easier.”

## Get Guidance from Jason Troyer, Ph.D., on Coping with Burnout, Stress

Funeral directors are asked to perform a wide variety of roles and work in conditions that place them at an increased risk for burnout.

That’s why Jason Troyer, Ph.D., will review the challenges that funeral directors face and how burnout can impede funeral directors’ effectiveness on a free webinar at 2 p.m. Eastern Time, March 24.

Troyer, the founder of Mt Hope Grief Services and GriefPlan.com is well-known throughout the profession for providing grief content for their social media efforts on Facebook. He is also the creator of “Finding Resilience” resources offered through Homesteaders Life Company.



Jason Troyer, Ph.D.

Troyer also regularly partners with individual funeral homes to conduct workshops on hospice, journaling, mental health, grieving and related topics.

During the webinar, Troyer will highlight strategies for reducing burnout and creating a more positive work environment.

Visit [www.katesboylston.com/webinars](http://www.katesboylston.com/webinars) to sign up for this and other free webinars.

### Watch KB Webinars on Demand

Whether you missed Hayden Burrus’ webinar on perpetual care funds, Courtney Gould Miller’s talk on social media or Tyler Fraser’s insights on cremation urns and e-commerce, you can still hear all their guidance by visiting our on-demand webinar channel.

Just visit [www.katesboylston.com/ondemand](http://www.katesboylston.com/ondemand).



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