

Even with COVID-19 restrictions, funeral workers still give their all



April 29, 2020

By Michael Riley Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

With the COVID-19 pandemic upon us, there have been concerns raised that funeral workers, including embalmers, may not have enough personal protective equipment to do their jobs safely and thoroughly. Funeral delays were another area of anxiety, and the impact such delays would have on loved ones of the deceased. Bancroft This Week found that while these worries were partially justified, they're not as dire as one might think.

Initially, as the COVID-19 pandemic swept around the world, funeral professionals were deemed non-essential by the federal government. A letter from the Funeral Services Association of Canada president Brett Watson to Canada's minister of health in late March changed that, and they are now classified as essential workers. As such, having access to adequate amounts of PPE is very important, according to Watson, who made the following statement after the decision had been reached.

"We are calling on all levels of government to make sure that funeral professionals receive the necessary PPE. While our frontline health-care professionals should continue to be the number one priority in receiving the necessary PPE they require, funeral workers should also be a priority due to the higher risk they face," he said.

David Brazeau, communications manager with the Bereavement Authority of Ontario says the need for PPE in the bereavement sector will continue to increase as the surge continues.

"We have anticipated that need and for more than six weeks we have been stressing this to the government. We know the government is working hard to meet that need. As the bereavement sector regulator, the BAO has also advised using PPE properly and not using it unnecessarily."

Allen Cole is the vice president of the FSAC and the owner and president of MacKinnon and Bowes, a Toronto funeral home. He says that funeral professionals are struggling to find the additional PPE to maintain worker safety within their work environment.

"Funeral professionals have always used PPE in their jobs to maintain worker safety while handling deceased persons. The scarcity of PPE represents challenges to maintain workplace safety during this pandemic. I am not aware of anyone running out yet because efforts have been made to secure more and share amongst each other for now. However, the long-term prospects are not good if replacement inventory is not made available soon."

Cole says they have engaged in discussions at all levels of government to bring attention to this potential shortfall in PPE supply.

?We anxiously await further word from our government authorities and suppliers concerning replenishment of our inventories. We will vigorously continue to bring awareness to this issue and hope to secure the needed supplies to maintain seamless delivery of these important services.?

Funeral delays are non-existent, Cole says, and the actual burials and cremations are looked after by funeral professionals immediately. Credit the Expedited Death Response for this, introduced by the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario on April 14. The EDR means that families must now choose their funeral home immediately upon the death of a loved one in hospital or long-term care facility in order to expedite the disposition of their remains. This important legislation prevents stockpiling of deceased loved ones, which has happened in other countries during COVID-19.

Small private viewings and ceremonies with immediate family may take place now, but only with 10 people or less. Some families have elected to go with live streaming options so more people can share the experience and say goodbye to their loved one. Any larger ceremonies are being put off until the pandemic restrictions ease and it is safe to do so.

Jeff Neuman, owner and funeral director at Neuman Funeral Home in Bancroft, says they are prepared for dealing with COVID-19 related issues, and that no funerals are being delayed under BAO guidelines.

?Our funeral home is well equipped with all the PPE that we need in order to keep our staff safe and prepared to deal with everything. We have not had any issues ordering or receiving PPE gear. No funerals are being delayed, and all interments and cremations are proceeding without delay. Services have been limited to 10 people or less and the majority of families have opted for a private family viewing of their loved ones with private graveside funerals or private cremation services. Some families are choosing to have celebrations of life memorial services later on in the summer months once distancing restrictions are lifted. Many families are finding our website valuable because friends and family can post condolence messages to the family that have lost a loved one. It enables people to grieve and share memories together as a family and as a community because of the social distancing limitations. Please be rest assured the Neuman Family Funeral Home and all our staff are well prepared to assist those in our community at all times,? he says.

FSAC vice president Allen Cole stresses that funeral service professionals are important members of the communities that support the needs of grieving families coast to coast.

?Every day our bereavement sector workers leave the safety of their homes and leave their families to serve the needs of others,? he says. ?They do so with a deep-rooted sense of commitment to serve the needs of their community and the families that call upon them at this tragic time in our country's history.?