

## **“Indigent Burials and the Funeral Industry”**

When someone dies, the financial burden of the funeral falls on the family or friends. However, what happens to those whose family cannot afford it or for those who die without any family? In these cases, the responsibility falls on the county to take care of everything.

Unfortunately, with budget cuts and an increased number of indigents, more populated counties are being forced to keep bodies in the morgue until the county can afford to bury them. There have even been some recent cases where bodies have been left in morgues, unburied for up to two years because of lack of funds.

Because each county handles indigent cases so differently, it is difficult to come up with a unified solution that is both appropriate and economical. However, in recent times, it has become common practice to cremate the remains of indigents. This practice has already saved a considerable amount of money for local governments.

In some counties, though, funeral homes are asked to assist in the process. In Escambia County in Pensacola, the local funeral homes are on a rotation. Depending on which day a person passes away, it is already arranged that a specific funeral home will be responsible for taking care of the situation. Unfortunately, in many cases throughout the United States, funeral homes who assist the county are not reimbursed until much later. And, even then, it does not often cover the entire cost of the burial. Congress, however, is currently being lobbied to pass the Indigent Funeral Expense Reimbursement Act. This would allow funeral homes to claim a tax deduction for any unreimbursed expenses up to \$3,000.

As far as the decision to cremate or bury goes, there are two major factors that contribute to the decision of the funeral home: the requests of the family of the deceased and the policies of the funeral home.

Generally, when a deceased indigent is brought to the funeral home, it is up to the family whether he or she will be cremated or buried. However, some funeral homes cannot afford to offer this choice and will only perform cremations in these situations.

In cases when there is no next of kin to make the decision, policies might change. Though a few funeral homes have the policy of cremating unclaimed indigents instead of burying them, many funeral homes are hesitant to do this. The reason being that they could run into legal trouble for failing to notify next of kin if a family member does end up stepping forward and wishes to see the body.

For funeral homes or the local government, if a burial rather than cremation is either requested or it is the common practice in the county, one way for them to save money is by finding an economical casket. Most cemeteries only require a “suitable container.” Therefore, a simple, wood container such as a combo tray (<http://www.mcdonaldcontainers.com/combinatray.php>) could work perfectly. If there is no vault in place, though, there is a concern that the ground will sink once the wood starts to decay. However, most cemeteries require there to be a vault, so, depending on where the deceased is buried, this will not be a problem.

