

Families First: Home Funerals and the National Home Funeral Alliance

By Lee Webster

“Care of the body after death engages our hearts, minds, bodies and spirits in a compassionate way and usually helps to facilitate healthy grief processes.”

—Donna Belk, *Undertaken With Love*



Why Home Funerals Matter

The rapid rise in family-directed after-death care in America is signaling a cultural shift that may change the course of funeral practices forever. For the past century, professionals have shouldered the care that many willingly sought at the outset, and others subsequently—and falsely—assumed was legally required. They are often surprised to learn that it is their right to exercise and simultaneously dismayed at learning that it is their right to lose if we are not diligent in its protection.

An increasingly savvy public is looking for less invasive, less expensive, and less environmentally damaging ways to conduct funerals, and in the process, is rediscovering the right and privilege to care for their own dead at home that was there all along. And they are waking up to this opportunity to engage in this life passage in a new and empowering way.

But home funeral families and advocates contend that it’s not just the right to care for our own dead that we are fighting for, to bathe them, to bury them. We are seeking the kinship and meaning that doing these simple, mindful things brings us. And the home funeral experience is, first and foremost, mindful. Instead of handing off the inconvenient responsibilities and uncomfortable details, we immerse ourselves in them—we want to be fully present with and for our loved ones, living and dead; we choose deliberately to not let this tender time speed by at a distance, in a blur.

A death in our lives requires reorganization. Just as the dying one is actively detaching, it’s the job of everyone who has been on this journey with the dying to re-form our own attachments, and to find a way to make meaning as we do so. As the dying person is disengaging from his or her community, the community itself is rebuilding by connecting intimately with those who matter most.

We believe that the more genuine, more invested, more present we are, the more authentic our personal and community experience will be. We see family-led after-death care in all its potential expressions as a conduit for clarity and shared experience at the deepest level—at a time when we are as close to mortality and mystery and human connection as we can possibly fathom.



The Fundamental Premise: Home Funerals are Family-Centered

At the root of the home funeral movement is the primal need—and right—of families to care for their own dead. The close network of individuals who make up their social constellation, whether related by blood or by experience, will comprise the community of care that will bear witness and form the experience, led by the legally appointed next-of-kin or designated agent. This community has an important job to do in supporting the family who is, to all intents and purposes, in charge from the moment of death to disposition.

“A home funeral happens when a loved one is cared for at home or sacred space after death, giving family and friends time to prepare the body, file legal paperwork, and gather and grieve in private. Home funerals can be held at the family home or not. Some nursing homes, church community care groups and funeral homes may allow the family to care for the deceased after death. The emphasis is on minimal, non-invasive, and environmentally friendly care of the body. Support and assistance to carry out after-death care may come from home funeral educators or guides, but their goal is to facilitate maximum involvement of the family in charge of the funeral process, and their social network.”

—From *NHFA Code of Ethics, Conduct and Practice*

Home funerals are an organic response to the intimate process and aftermath of death, and are as different as the people whose lives they honor. Once families are confident that they are acting within the law, their imaginations and hearts become their guide in how to best proceed. The missing piece is often the practical how-to of providing care: how to process paperwork, how to best care for the body, how to make arrangements for services and disposition. With the right tools, families innately sense what is needed next: ways to bring meaning to the experience by all within the larger community.

“...[T]hose who have participated in home funerals confirm their healing benefits...With each passing year, more people choose to reconnect with this sacred tradition and welcome the funeral back into the intimacy of the home.

“Although family-directed home funerals take more effort to arrange and carry out, many families feel they are more meaningful and healing than those arranged for them by a funeral director. A home funeral can help people gently integrate the death into their lives...

“A home funeral offers mourners a sense of control and helps them feel useful. It also enables families to create the ambience, to decide how the body is to be treated, to choose—without pressure—how to facilitate the most meaningful gathering for their loved one’s farewell...

“Ultimately, there is no one right way to hold a funeral. Every family is unique, and there are many options available to reflect that individuality. The family-directed home funeral offers a final, loving, hands-on opportunity to honor our dead and send them on their way—in their home, surrounded by the people who love them.”

—From *Undertaken With Love*

The prime directive of home funeral guidance is this: ***home funerals are created and conducted by and for families.***

- *Home funeral guides empower and educate families to conduct after-death care themselves as their state law allows. They may charge for educational and consultative services only; all voluntary services are performed free of charge and at the request of the family.*
- *Home funeral guides do not arrange funerals; they support the family in their own efforts to plan and make connections to goods and services.*

— From *Essentials for Practicing Home Funeral Guides: What You Can Expect From Your Home Funeral Guide*



The Mission of the National Home Funeral Alliance

The forming of a national education-based nonprofit organization to support home funeral families in 2010 brought advocates together for the first time. The mission of the organization became clear immediately: ***to educate and empower families and communities to care for their own dead.***

Through the development of a variety of original resources and materials, programs and events, the NHFA supports home funeral families directly, as well as people who make their knowledge available, called home funeral guides.

[Please note: many of the resources noted below are no longer available through the NHFA. Go to nhfuneral.org to access written documents. LW August 2020]

Some of those direct resources include:

- The NHFA [Planning Guide and Workbook for Home Funeral Families](#) guides individuals and provides legal parameters for conducting their own affairs with funeral specific advance directives. Also available to the public is the revised and improved book, [Undertaken With Love](#), that describes in detail how families and care communities can come together to support one another with practical guides and advice.
- [Restoring Families' Rights to Choose](#), a joint white paper written by the Funeral Consumers Alliance and the NHFA, addresses legal and legislative issues in a clear, concise argument for constitutional family rights. It also includes a summary of the laws by state in the [Quick Guide to Home Funeral Laws in Your State](#), an abbreviated chart extrapolated from [Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death](#), a chapter by chapter, state by state accounting of funeral law, required reading for all home funeral guides. Also included is the helpful and educational article, [What to Do When Families' Rights are Challenged](#) for families who run up against institutional policies that are not state law compliant or other obstacles in completing home funerals on their own.
- A [monthly newsletter](#) is sent to all members updating them on activities and pertinent news. Membership is free and has no obligations.

- Our [NHFA YouTube Channel](#) provides free access to how-to videos and informative guides to home funeral information
- Online directories facilitate direct contact with providers to families in need:

Home Funeral Guides	Celebrants
End of Life Guides	Teachers
Home Family-friendly Funeral Directors	Community Care Groups
	Speakers
- Our informational [rack card](#) is available in English and in Spanish.
- [Facebook](#) and other social media regularly forward home funeral-related news and original materials for the education of its thousands of followers.
- A [biennial conference](#) meets in varied locations around the country to provide direct education through skills trainings, exposure to experts in the field, and to encourage grassroots networking and support systems for home funeral guides and other interested persons, including the general public.
- Downloads of flyers that address law enforcement, institutional authorities, and others are available for free on the website page [What Authorities and Policymakers Can Do](#)

At its heart, the focus has always been on public education and personal empowerment.

“The Board sought to preserve the grassroots nature of the organization to make home funeral a household word again, forging ahead with initiatives intended to support rather than mandate, to inform rather than dictate, and to steer rather than regulate.”

— From *The History of the NHFA*



The Role of Home Funeral Guides

The term home funeral guide was adopted from the outset as a means of providing a consistent, nonthreatening public persona. The term chosen needed to sound trustworthy and credible, and indicate clearly what the person offered. After a great deal of outreach and thought, the term was selected to meet the definition of someone who educates and provides information to families conducting their own funerals.

“What we call ourselves is both a reflection of our own self-worth and a way of advertising to the world what we offer. In a field as “new” and unknown as this, at least to those who have no memory of the ancient practice of caring for our own dead without professional assistance, presenting a clear, consistent message is crucial for many reasons.

“As the pioneers who are shaping the national conversation about after-death care, it is up to us to unite in spirit and intention. Our words and the terms we use to describe ourselves and what we offer matter. We must find common terminology for what we do in order to be understood by those we seek to serve.”

—From *Clearly Defined: Matching our terminology to our intentions*

What also became clear early on was that home funeral guides were going to play a critical role in moving this agenda and that they needed to understand the ways in which they could support home funeral families effectively and compassionately within the law.

“During formation, there was an intent to unify home funeral guides under one roof, to create a networking body that was mutually supporting, and that would eventually give a public voice to this work...”

— From *The History of the NHFA*

Drawing on the historical assistance by birth midwives and spiritual communities in after-death care, home funeral guides sought to find their place. Due to the amount of time that had elapsed since families took care of their own as a matter of routine, certain skills needed to be reintroduced into the lexicon of after-death care, while new requirements in the process needed to be discovered and examined. Home funeral guides were ideally positioned to fill this gap.

Due to the legal limitations placed on non-family members in direct after-death care, guides had to develop an informed approach to helping families that would not risk conflict for those involved. Working with the Federal Trade Commission that oversees the funeral industry, and many home funeral-friendly licensed funeral directors, the NHFA identified the following basic guidelines for what home funeral guides can do in support of families.

Home funeral guides may charge for any of the following services:

Educational Services

- Teach/show/demonstrate to the family how to care for a body after death
- Public presentations about family-directed funerals
- Teaching in a classroom setting
- In-service training for medical professionals and others
- Community and spiritual care group training
- Training other home funeral guides/workshops

Consulting Services

- Family consultations about natural death care
- Planning details of a home vigil with the family (*pre- or at-need*)
- Skype or phone coaching of family during the home funeral
- Coordinating services when professional firms are involved
- Coordinating services when clergy, celebrants, spiritual or community groups and organizations are involved
- Assisting individuals in completing advance directives

Celebrant Services

- Assisting in organizing, planning the memorial service
- Coordinating or facilitating a ceremony at a home vigil, funeral, memorial, graveside, church, life celebration rituals, ceremonies or services with prayer, song
- Providing emotional and spiritual support to the family prior to, during, or after the death
- Coordinating church and/or graveside funeral services

Facilitation Services

- Time spent locating caskets, urns, shrouds or other products
- Time spent coordinating or confirming disposition in states where a licensed funeral director is not required by law to do so
- Time spent coordinating family logistics, including pick-ups of travelers, meals, containers, prior to and/or during the funeral period
- Travel expense reimbursement for services such as picking up and delivering cremated remains, running errands

Support Services

- Acting as a liaison for the family as needed
- Providing follow-up support after final disposition
- Support with house preparation for home vigil
- Overseeing/providing the food, flowers for home vigil

Home funeral guides provide support by invitation of the family but may not charge for any or all of these services:

- Any and all hands-on preparation of the body (*bathing, use of essential oils, dressing*)
- Providing and/or monitoring the cooling technique at the home vigil
- Contacting the crematory or cemetery
- Filing the necessary paperwork for the family
- Helping the family move the body from car to the grave or crematory
- Using own private vehicle to transport the body for the family
- Mediating family decisions regarding care and responsibilities
- Offering grief counseling (*must have a license to practice*)
- Acting as durable power of attorney or designated agent (*written, available depending on your state*)

Along with their own responsibilities, the duties and obligations of families were also developed:

With or without voluntary support by a home funeral guide, the person acting as funeral director is responsible for:

- Providing appropriate space for the family to tend to the loved one for the duration
- Filing and procurement of all legal documents with support as needed
- Providing items for the personal care of the loved one

- Notifying all parties as is legally necessary
- Making all decisions regarding the handling and disposition of their loved one
- Purchasing containers and final disposition plots
- Paying for all goods and services pertaining to the death and disposition
- Hiring of any additional services, including a funeral home for partial services
- Bathing, handling, and transporting the body
- Enlisting 4-6 people to help with moving the body
- Creating and organizing funeral or memorial plans with or without the help of a Home Funeral Guide

— from *Essentials for Practicing Home Funeral Guides:*
What You Can Expect From Your Home Funeral Guide



Home Funeral Guides and the Funeral Industry

Even with the best planning, death comes in its own time and under its own circumstances. Not every situation is appropriate for home funerals. Families often feel more confident with the combination of a home funeral guide and licensed funeral director, or simply by doing some parts themselves and hiring out the rest.

Having a working understanding between guides and funeral directors benefits families, and guides are encouraged to develop and maintain those relationships of trust and collaboration. In many ways, it is to the benefit of forward-thinking professionals to hire guides to do the parts they are unable to do themselves due to the nature of the goals the family may set for itself.

“The most important support funeral directors can provide home funeral families is the compassionate understanding that this is something families feel called to do for their loved one and themselves, their friends, and community. Home funeral families... are looking for simplicity, self-reliance, personal responsibility, and a shared, intimate experience that only they can conceive of and conduct.

“Incorporating home funeral guides into a funeral home’s professional service offerings is a choice many firms are making for the simple reason that guides act as a bridge to the family. Many home funeral families are opposed to having a funeral director in the home because they want it to be organic, simple, and intimate which, in their minds, is incompatible with having a professional present. This perception is not limited to those who are looking for a less expensive alternative; this has to do with creating an authentic family-centered experience.

“A good working relationship between a home funeral guide and a funeral director can result in better communication between the family and the professional, and ensure quality of service

when professionals are not offered entry. Families may be more receptive to hiring funeral directors for specific services when a guide is involved who can assess the families' capacity for completing tasks properly and on time, and refer for goods and services as needed."

— From *How Funeral Directors Can Support Home Funeral Families*
Changing Landscapes: Exploring the growth of ethical, compassionate, and environmentally sustainable green funeral service



Certification of Home Funeral Guides

The concept of certification is fraught with legal implications and consequences. Since the funeral industry is a licensed entity, anyone performing like services may become subject to mortuary board regulations and the federal government's Funeral Rule. Furthermore:

- *Requiring licensure or certification would force guides into becoming industry professionals, which is in direct opposition to what home funeral guides stand for, specifically keeping the care of the deceased in the hands of the family and not in the realm of industry professionals.*
- *Most importantly, licensure and mandatory certification could each have the ripple effect of curtailing families' rights by implying that someone with credentials is required to be involved in order to have a home funeral, a concept that would undoubtedly meet with resistance by any American concerned with keeping their legal rights intact.*

—From *NHFA Position on Licensure and Certification*

The NHFA acknowledges the value of certificates of completion or proficiency earned by students who successfully complete home funeral trainings that cover basic educational material. If inviting a home funeral guide who has earned this distinction into their home gives families more confidence, the result may prove worth the effort.



A Final Word About Social Justice and Home Funerals

The right to care for our own dead is deeply rooted in common human experience, and American constitutional family and privacy law. We, as individuals and as members of families, choose who we will marry, where we go to school, what type of medical care we wish to obtain, how we raise our children, and the list of personal choice goes on.

Inherent in the presumption of these family rights is the right to care for our own dead without interference or restriction. Yet, we are in a position to consider that innate right threatened by laws at the state level that curtail the ability of families.

Those that claim public health and safety as a reason for imposing restrictive laws are misled. These laws do not serve the interests of the country or its citizens. It is a well-established fact that the WHO, CDC, CID, and PAHO all agree that dead bodies do not pose increased health risks.

Compelling families to hire professionals to hire someone to supervise doing something the state has allowed one to do is unconstitutional. Further, restrictive laws have often force families to incur significant unwanted and unnecessary expenses, creating unnecessary hardship.

The truth is that even if most American families continue to choose to hire out the care of their deceased loved ones, the preservation of our rights is crucial to maintaining our national identity. Laws that restrict citizens from exercising fundamental rights or set limits, either high or low, that place undue burdens on select populations damage the social conscience and cultural fabric of our lives.

Home funerals in this sense present an opportunity to level the playing field. If death is the great equalizer, then home funerals are the opportunity to contribute with the best of our humanity, open to all.

