



What Every Funeral Director Needs to Know

About Green Funerals:

A Handbook for Funeral Directors

This guide is meant to help members of the funeral industry understand the community and the affairs of families who choose environmentally sustainable death care. It includes resources, standards, and suggestions for best practice. Our goal is to be informative and supportive so that industry professionals can better educate families on the topic and promote this sustainable process.

What Are Green Funerals, Home Funerals, Blended Funerals, and Green Burials?

Green funeral is a general term sometimes confused with home funerals, green burials and home burials, but is more commonly used to describe post-death care, from death to disposition, using only natural means. This requires use of nontoxic preservation techniques and organic materials with minimal carbon footprints.

Home funeral, sometimes referred to as home vigils or DIY funerals, occur when the next-of-kin or designated agent retains custody and control of the body to bathe and dress at home, often for a period of 1-3 days before disposition. A home funeral guide may be included to help educate and support families during the funeral period. For many, the experience is about avoiding institutional settings and caring for their own with familiar hands.

Blended funerals happen when the family has a home vigil and hires a funeral director for filing paperwork, transportation, or other facets that the family prefers to have done by a professional. Blended funeral families may welcome funeral directors into the home-based body care process, but more likely will want to perform these rituals themselves with possible guidance by phone or pre-arranged tuition.

Green embalming or professional green body preparation

may be requested by families who want services provided by a funeral director that will culminate in a green burial. For these families, non-invasive, natural means of cleansing and preparing the body for burial may be a priority, with public visitations of unembalmed bodies a viable option. If embalming is necessary or requested, the GBC approves an essential oil based product.

Green burial allows full body interment into the ground in a manner that does not inhibit decomposition. The three top defining characteristics of any green burial are: absence of a vault, non-toxic preparation of the body, and use of containers made of organic materials. Green burials provide families with a rich, meaningful, and healing experience while furthering legitimate environmental and societal aims such as protecting worker health, reducing carbon emissions, conserving natural resources, and preserving native habitat.

Green Burial Certification Ratings

The Green Burial Council is the only independent environmental certification organization setting verifiable standards for green burial in North America. We offer environmental certificates for funeral homes, cemeteries and product

manufacturers. Cemeteries are rated at three levels:

- **Hybrid Burial Grounds** are conventional cemeteries offering the option for burial without the need for a vault (partial, inverted or otherwise), a vault lid, concrete box, slab or partitioned liner. Hybrid Burial Grounds do not require the embalming of decedents and must allow for any kind of eco-friendly burial containers, including shrouds.
- **Natural Burial Grounds** require the adoption of practices/protocols that are energy-conserving, minimize waste, and do not require the use of toxic chemicals. A Natural Burial Ground achieves GBC certification by prohibiting the use of vaults (partial, inverted or otherwise), vault lids, concrete boxes, slabs or partitioned liners, and by prohibiting the burial of decedents embalmed with toxic chemicals, as well as by banning burial containers not made from natural/plant derived materials. It must have in place a program of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and be designed, operated and maintained to produce a naturalistic appearance, based on use of plants and materials native to the region, and patterns of landscape derived from and compatible with regional ecosystems.
- **Conservation Burial Grounds**, in addition to meeting all the requirements for a Natural Burial Ground, must further legitimate land conservation. It must protect in perpetuity an area of land specifically and exclusively designated for conservation. A Conservation Burial Ground must involve an established conservation organization that holds a conservation easement or has in place a deed restriction guaranteeing long-term stewardship.

What's Really Green?

The phrase “there are many shades of green” is a misnomer. While many people use it to describe the many levels and options available, it also infers that there is a blurred line between what is environmentally acceptable and what might be allowed to “let slide”. Standards are not negotiable by definition; the GBC’s standards are based on scientific facts and best practices. Anything short of fully compliant may qualify as greenwashing, which the GBC takes very seriously. GBC standards are available at greenburialcouncil.org.

Greenwashing is the act of marketing goods or services deceptively by hiding dubious aspects of their environmental profile. In the case of green burial, the full picture of environmentally sound practices is what counts. For instance, a casket made of organic materials may be green, but transporting it over 3000 miles to its destination using fossil fuels and child labor to construct it is not considered green.

The following are estimates of how much nonorganic material is buried in conventional US lawn cemeteries annually: over 1.6 million tons of concrete; 20 million board feet of rainforest or other exotic non-sustainably harvested woods; 4.3 million gallons of embalming fluid; 64,500 tons of steel, and 17,000 tons of copper and bronze. Cremation uses enough natural gas and electricity to produce 140 lbs. of CO² per average body. Obviously, neither conventional burial nor cremation practices are considered green by any definition.

Your Guide to Green Products

The Green Burial Council acknowledges funeral service providers who pledge to promote GBC certified products and cemeteries that have met stringent environmental standards. Each certification is based on proven standards that adhere to best environmental practices, ensuring

that the products and services from that trusted provider are of the highest quality.

Merchandise used, including caskets and shrouds, must be made of biodegradable materials. These may be furnished by the family, an agent, or be purchased from a firm that sells products. Families may not be charged for providing their own containers. Families looking for green products are counting on their funeral director to have practiced due diligence in meeting their desire for genuine eco-friendly containers.

When purchasing caskets, shrouds, and urns, look for containers that are plant-derived, recycled plant-derived, natural, animal, or unfired earthen materials. This would include the shell, liner, and adornments. Fasteners and handles (other than those made from brass or chrome) may be present, but check for excessive or inefficient use. Also, be aware of and avoid finishes and adhesives that release toxic by-products within the ground through expected processes of breakdown and disposition.

What to Expect at the Green Burial Cemetery

While all green cemeteries do not operate the same, the following is a typical description of what a funeral director might expect to encounter at the interment. Funeral directors may be expected to act as guides to the family and participants by explaining the process and what is about to occur at an appropriately planned moment, unless the family chooses to do this themselves.

One important task for funeral directors is to guide the family and attendees in where to walk and stand to ensure protection of plant species or delicate areas as well as for their safety and comfort. It is the cemetery operator's responsibility to inform the funeral director of any concerns in this regard prior to arrival. [*For other cemetery responsibilities, see Opening, Closing, and Maintenance of a Green Burial Grave*]

Prior to arrival of the body at the cemetery, or upon arrival, cemetery personnel need to be made aware of any issues that might require special precautions or procedures. Cemetery staff may be waiting at the entrance with a burial cart or other mode of transporting the body to the gravesite. The family may choose to assist in placing the deceased on the cart and help guide it to a chapel or graveside for the service.

The gravesite may be adorned with natural local greenery along the grave floor or covering the excavated dirt mound to soften the appearance. When first approaching the site, there will be ropes and slats across the grave where the casket or shrouding board may rest for a ceremony before being lowered. Wide boards are placed around the grave edges to inhibit collapse, which are often covered in greens.

The family may choose to assist in placing the body on the boards over the gravesite. After the service, the family may assist in lowering their loved one into the grave with ropes placed at intervals under the casket or body. Many people choose to participate by shoveling the dirt back into the grave and decorating the mound. Once the site is backfilled, the family often places a marker, if there is one.

Cemetery staff is responsible for completing the mound and clearing the area once the family has left. With no indoor/outdoor carpet, hydraulic lowering devices, vault installation, or other conventional lawn cemetery grave preparation, funeral directors are essentially done when the service is complete.

Preparing for At-Need and Pre-Arranged Green Burial Services

What families are often looking for from professionals is a restored faith in the industry and in their local mortician in particular. They are

seeking someone to guide and help them who is in sync with their contemporary views and desire for the environmental, social, and spiritual congruity with the life their loved one has led. They are in need of someone who is familiar with all the options, including green practices, and knows logistics, legalities, and practical information about what to expect throughout the funeral process. This is best accomplished by being direct and honest, without the use of euphemistic language, but still remaining within the comfort of the individuals, in order to remove the veils of the industry, create more transparency, and in turn bringing back trust for the funeral industry.

It is the funeral director's responsibility to explain specific green burial options and costs, understand the family's objectives, provide information to facilitate their decision, to the extent that they require assistance, and step back as they handle things to whatever degree they find comforting. Families rely on funeral directors to assess the condition of the body, though they may not be aware of it, and determine what can and can't be accomplished given the circumstances. This is obviously an important step, and must be accomplished in order to set the timing of services/burial in accordance with law. Once a date is set, funeral directors may be responsible for military honors, clergy, newspapers, and communicating with the cemetery, such as you would for a conventional funeral.

A family (or funeral director on behalf of the family) with a plot already reserved must call the cemetery at time of need to open the gravesite, typically with at least 24 hours notice. For those who have not made previous arrangements, a tour of the facility with the goal of choosing a plot location or giving the cemetery permission to do so will be necessary. Customers should expect to receive a bill of sale at purchase, followed by a deed within an average of 3-5 days, issued after the plot is surveyed.

If involved, a funeral director is responsible for generating a burial permit, which is required by the cemetery at time of disposition. In some states, this permit is generated at time of filing the death certificate. In others, the permit is generated once the death certificate is certified by the physician, and can be accessed prior to actually filing the death certificate. The permit must be given to the cemetery before burial can take place.

When the family contracts with a funeral director to prepare the body for green burial, it becomes the funeral director's responsibility to ensure that the body arrives in condition for burial without conventional embalming. Families will expect to have the option of natural body preparation [as described above] or green embalming [See *Your Guide to Green Products* above]. Some green burial cemeteries have rules and policies describing their expectations, so be sure to ask for written guidelines to have on hand for staff and to answer client questions. Guidelines might include:

- What the process is for making an interment appointment at the cemetery
- A time limit for burial from time of death to time of disposition
- Use of required and/or recommended refrigeration techniques and their specific time requirements
- Use of body fluid containment techniques, such as wax paper liners in lieu of plastic body bags
- How the body should be transported to the cemetery
- How the body will be transported inside the cemetery to the grave site
- What specific casket/shroud products are acceptable
- Directions on how shrouded bodies must be presented
- Protocol on who is responsible and what to do if the body is not deemed presentable
- Lowering options, including manual with straps by family members, lowering device

- Notifying the grounds crew of oversized casket requirements
- What greenery, flowers or other natural materials are allowed in the grave
- Who is responsible for closing the grave
- What limitations there are on family and public visitation
- Payment procedures and expectations

How to Provide Public Visitations Without Embalming

Having a public visitation without embalming allows the public to understand the true appearance and nature of death. Just because the body doesn't have that life-like color doesn't mean that the family is going to blame you for them not looking good. If this is concerning to you, use our *Authorization for Viewing an Unembalmed Body* document (below) to help guide the explanation of what to expect and alleviate liability that you may feel you are opening yourself up to.

Part of the green burial best practice is making sure that family members are educated about what happens to the body after death; it cools, it loses its color, it becomes stiff with rigor mortis and moves out of rigor mortis. Families may look to funeral directors or home funeral guides to explain and demystify the handling and care of their dead loved one's body. The degree to which they feel safe and supported will relate directly to their satisfaction with the experience and to their service provider.

Funeral directors are taught that universal precautions are important when treating someone with a verifiably contagious disease. However, most bodies are not infectious, and those who are may not be candidates for embalming. Unembalmed bodies, as confirmed by the CID [See below, Facts About Public Health and Safety], pose less risk of spreading contagion than living people who spit, spew, and sneeze.

Basic body care, including washing the body and covering noxious wounds, are all that is necessary for green burial preparation. Wearing gloves and all other appropriate attire while maintaining clean surfaces on and around the body are sufficient techniques for body care. It is important to note that in regards to safety around dead bodies, studies have shown that embalmers have an 8+ times higher risk of contracting leukemia and other blood diseases and a 3 times higher risk of contracting ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) from exposure to formaldehyde-based formulas.

Be prepared for the family to be involved with body care and cleaning, whether in their home by bed bath or in your facility on a table. Home funeral guides create kits with wash clothes, oils, soaps, gloves, diapers and other goods for body care in the home. More funeral directors are partnering with guides or making house calls to aid families in home preparation. If the body is to be washed in the funeral home, be prepared to have the family in the prep room without access to dangerous chemicals or instruments. You may even consider having something set up in a private room and helping with a bed bath there. The key is asking what is best for the family and not assuming what is best for them. Every death is different for every person involved and only those people and those families know what is best for them.

More and more, families are saying no to embalming to avoid invasive, toxic procedures on their loved ones for cosmetic reasons. They accept the use of cooling preservation techniques, such as dry ice or Techni-ice, air conditioning or refrigeration, and dismiss outdated notions that dead bodies are dangerous. Many families have reported that they chose cremation not just to save on cost but to avoid visitations. That has led to a perceived disconnect between loss and ritual that is restored through green burial.

It is generally accepted that, depending on the circumstances of death, a body may be kept at home for up to three days without showing unacceptable signs of decomposition. In lieu of embalming, bodies may be refrigerated, or kept in a 65° room, with air conditioning, dry ice or Techni-ice beneath and on top of major organ areas, or cooling blankets. A body that has been bathed and prepped will show well during visitation at zero risk to anyone involved in the preparation process and in attendance at services. Even post autopsy and victims with major disfigurements have been successfully prepared for unembalmed visitation without creating a health risk to either workers or visitors.

When preparing shrouded bodies for transportation and green burial, waxed paper is effective and environmentally sound as an interior layer. When formed into a tray-like shape under the body, fluids, if present, are caught. This helps avert a situation where there is visible leakage, resulting in refusal by the cemetery to bury until the situation is rectified and to avoid discomfort for the family.

Facts About Public Health and Safety

According to Dr. Michael Osterholm of the Center for Infectious Disease Policy and Research, *“...the mere presence of a dead body without regard to its embalmed status and one that is not leaking blood from an open wound or perforation, does not pose any increased risk of infectious disease transmission for the person who might handle that body or review it in a private setting. Once a human dies, infectious agents that would be of any concern, including those on the individual's skin or internal organs, is greatly diminished... there simply is no measurable risk of that body transmitting an infectious disease agent. The use of embalming is of no consequence in reducing this risk. . .”*¹ The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control concur. And according to the Pan American Health Organization, *“concern that dead bodies are*

infectious can be considered a ‘natural’ reaction by persons wanting to protect themselves from disease” although *“the risk that bodies...pose for the public is extremely small.”*

What This Means for Your Business

Funeral directors can agree that funeral care is changing, and to keep up with the overhead there is a need to be more and more creative. Green burial is a creative change that will sustain businesses into the future, not only environmentally, but economically and socially. More and more, people are opting for environmentally sensitive options, and it only makes sense that funeral directors help fulfill that life choice in death as well.

The question is, “How can funeral directors make up for what they have lost to direct cremation, the eschewing of embalming, or other loss areas?” The answer may lie in part in replacing those revenue centers with green goods and services. It would be incorrect to assume that green burial families are looking to save a buck by going this route; many families will pay a premium for the privilege of caring for their own and furthering conservation endeavors through natural burial. By providing quality certified goods and services, and creating a price list that caters to their specific needs and goals, funeral directors position themselves to help families and reap the rewards from their efforts.

Partnering with non-professional home funeral guides may in the long run bring in more business as families perceive the service as an added value. Many families are looking for a different experience in their home that does not include a professional, but want to be reassured that they are doing things correctly. Home funeral guides are trained in basic home body care and to recognize when professional help is required.

Developing a Green General Price List

More families may be encouraged to hire a professional if they know they can purchase goods and services á la carte to meet their specific needs. A GPL that lists green products and services in a clear, FTC-approved format is vital. *Suggested Green Goods and Services List for Funeral Directors* is available for download on the GBC website, which includes an extensive list of items recommended for inclusion in your green GPL. An example of an FTC-approved GPL is also included in *Essentials for Practicing Home Funeral Guides*, available on Amazon.com.

How to Talk About Green Burial in Your Community

Being proactive about educating the public — your customers — is key. As a funeral director, you already have standing presence in your community, and by speaking knowledgeably about a wide range of green services and options, you increase confidence and trust. Consider giving presentations to civic groups, churches, schools, senior centers, and other community groups in your area. Invite a local sexton, home funeral guide, hospice worker, clergy person — anyone who can broaden the conversation, support the concepts, and increase credibility — to share in getting the word out. The GBC provides free educational materials and support for public outreach initiatives, including brochures, PowerPoint presentations, and fact sheets.

SAMPLE Authorization for Viewing an Unembalmed Body

To ensure freedom from liability and to alert the family to the realities of viewing unembalmed bodies, the following form may be offered.

DECEDENT

Name _____

Date of Death _____

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Embalming is an effective way of slowing the decomposition rate of the body. All bodies will eventually decompose after death regardless of whether embalming takes place or not. Most embalming fluid has dissipated within 2-3 weeks. In most cases, it is possible to prepare a body by utilizing refrigeration, dry ice, Techni-ice, cooling blankets, A/C, or winter air. Embalming with environmentally-friendly embalming fluids is also an option. For viewing, unembalmed bodies will be pale, or possibly yellow or gray in color initially, as embalming helps restore color to the skin. Skin tends to relax, and the eyes and mouth may or may not be fully closed. If it is not possible to view the body we will explain the circumstances, suggest other options, and answer any questions that may arise.

REPRESENTATIVE

The person or the appointed agent of the person who by law has the paramount right to arrange and direct the disposition of the remains of the DECEDENT. No other person(s) has a superior right over the right of the REPRESENTATIVE. The REPRESENTATIVE warrants and represents to <Your Business Name> that the (s)he is the person or the appointed agent to carry out this decision.

INDEMNIFICATION

I, the REPRESENTATIVE, have read and understood the difference in viewing an unembalmed body from an embalmed body and do not hold <Your Business Name> accountable for any claims or causes of action related to the viewing of

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the body. This may include, but is not limited to, claims of emotional distress, arising or related in any respect to the viewing of the unembalmed body of the DECEDENT.

NAME OF REPRESENTATIVE _____

RELATIONSHIP TO DECEDENT _____

SIGNATURE OF REPRESENTATIVE _____

DATE _____

Resources

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| Green Burial Council | www.greenburialcouncil.org |
| National Home Funeral Alliance | www.homefuneralalliance.org |
| Funeral Consumers Alliance | www.funerals.org |
| National Funeral Director Association | www.nfda.org |

Harris, Mark. *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*. Scribner: New York, NY. 2007.

Kelly, Suzanne. *Greening Death: Reclaiming Burial Practices and Restoring Our Tie to the Earth*. Roman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD. 2015.

Webster, Lee. *Essentials for Practicing Home Funeral Guides*. CreateSpace. 2015.

Slocum, Joshua and Carlson, Lisa. *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*. Upper Access, Inc. Hinesburg, Vermont. 2011

See also the Green Burial Council’s list of resources for the public, including:

- On the Way to the Green Burial Cemetery: A Guide for Families*
- Going Out Green: Four Ways to Ensure an Eco-friendly Burial*
- Your Green Burial Planning Guide*
- Basic Tenets of Green Burial Cemeteries*
- The Case for Green Burial and The Case for Home Funeral*

¹For Dr. Osterholm’s complete testimony and more information on funeral-related health risks, go to [Dr. Osterholm Embalming Letter](http://www.funerals.org) and “Dead Bodies and Disease: The Danger That Does Not Exist” at <http://www.funerals.org>

This pamphlet was prepared by Lee Webster for the GBC with assistance from licensed funeral directors Samuel Perry and Lindsay Soyer.