



Guidance for Funeral Homes and Funeral Directors

May 1, 2020

This Guidance takes effect immediately. When the State moves through the phases of the Governor's Reopening Rhode Island Plan and the limit on size of gatherings increases, funeral homes will be able to increase the size of groups referenced in this document accordingly.

Governor Raimondo and the Director of Health, Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott, include calling hours, wakes, funerals (inside and outside), graveside services, and burials as social gatherings. Therefore, the directives of groups of five or less, six feet of social distancing, and cloth face coverings apply. These guidelines are meant to provide clarification and assure consistency among all funeral homes in the state.

RIDOH recommends that funeral home staff should continue to follow universal precautions for all decedent care as COVID status may be unknown at the time of death.

Calling hours/Wakes

- No more than five people can be in the room with the casket/urn, and people should not congregate in other areas of the funeral home or in the parking lot. Anyone in a receiving line counts as one of the five people. All people must stay six feet away from each other and wear cloth face coverings that cover their mouths and noses. Anyone who is sick, has symptoms of COVID-19, or has been told to quarantine because they had close contact with someone who has/had COVID-19 should not attend.
- Funeral home directors may allow groups of five or less to go through the room with the casket/urn provided the following conditions are met:
 - All individuals must stay six feet away from each other at all times and must wear cloth face coverings that cover the mouth and nose.
 - All individuals are screened for COVID-19 symptoms, and anyone with symptoms cannot be allowed to enter.
 - In between each group of five or fewer people that enter, all high-touch surfaces shall be cleaned with an EPA-approved cleaning product.
- Consider providing hand sanitizer at entrance and exit of building.
- Discourage families and friends from sending flowers to the funeral home. COVID-19 virus can live on surfaces, including flowers and plants.

Funeral Services (Inside, Outside, and Graveside)

- No more than five people can attend. All people must stay six feet away from each other and wear cloth face coverings that cover their mouths and noses. Anyone who is sick or has symptoms of COVID-19 should not attend.
- Auxiliary staff/officiants, including pall bearers, clergy, funeral director, honor guards, bag piper, bugler, and organist are not included in the group of five; however, auxiliary staff/officiants must remain 12 feet away from mourners and wear a cloth face coverings that cover their mouth and noses. Pall bearers should return to their vehicles once the casket is positioned at the gravesite or inside the house of worship unless they are part of the five funeral attendees
- American flags that are draped over the casket can be folded and given to the funeral director after the attendees have returned to their cars. The funeral director will present the flag to the family at a later time.

- If funeral services are performed in a way that limits gatherings to five people and ensures proper social distancing, individuals from out of state can attend the funeral. Non-essential travel to Rhode Island is discouraged, but not prohibited.
 - If an out-of-state visitor attends the funeral and then immediately returns to their home state, they do not need to self quarantine.
 - If an out-of-state visitor intends to stay in Rhode Island for any length of time beyond the funeral, they need to have a safe space to self quarantine, and they must stay there for 14 days or until they leave the state, whichever is sooner.

Enbalming

- According to CDC guidance, embalming is allowed as long as funeral home staff uses appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). Individual funeral homes can decide whether they will provide embalming services given the state's PPE shortages.
- [Guidance for Decedent Care](#) is available on OSHA's website and CDC has [guidance for embalming](#) on their website.

Cremation

- There are no regulations related to where cremains can be stored. Where the cremains are stored is a decision to be made by the decedent's next-of-kin or legal representative.
- The usual policies and procedures for releasing cremains are still in effect.

Body Storage

- Funeral homes can hold decedents in cold storage or embalm decedents and store on site in non-refrigerated storage (depending on the funeral home's capabilities and as space permits) until the cemetery has availability for burial.

RIDOH is working with the Diocese of Providence, and the Diocese is looking into whether embalmed storage is possible at a large crypt at St. Ann's cemetery in Cranston should storage after embalming become a challenge at funeral homes.

Decedent Removal from Nursing Homes

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the protocol for removing decedents from nursing homes has changed.

- Nursing homes will identify one single location for retrieval of decedents in their building.
- Livery services should be informed by each respective facility to arrive at the pre-designated location to retrieve a decedent. The nursing home must disclose to the livery personnel if the decedent was COVID-19 positive or if COVID-19 was suspected. If the residence/facility does not have a transport table/gurney, they may request to use the livery service gurney.
- Prior to the arrival of the livery service, the nursing home staff will place the decedent in a body bag. In order to ensure that the decedent is correctly identified, they must have a bracelet or toe tag on their body identifying them, and a tag must also be placed on the outside of the body bag.
- As nursing homes continue to get PPE from the RIDOH warehouse, they will also be given a supply of body bags. Included in the box of body bags are toe tags and tags for the outside of the bag. In order to support the transition to this new protocol, each livery service has also been provided an initial allocation of body bags, gloves, and masks.
- Per CDC instructions, once bagged, the body bags of decedents who were COVID-19 positive or suspected to have COVID-19 must be wiped down with an EPA-approved cleaning product.
- The nursing home staff will transport the decedent to the pre-designated location for pick up by livery personnel. If appropriate, given the physical layout within the nursing home, the facility staff may transport the decedent to the pre-designated location just prior to the arrival of the livery.

Decedent removal from a hospice facility (does not apply to home hospice)

- Hospice facility is to follow the decedent removal protocol for nursing homes.

Decedent Removal from Assisted Living Residences (ALR)

- The ALR **must** disclose to the livery service or funeral home personnel who come to retrieve the resident if the decedent was COVID-19 positive or if COVID-19 was suspected.
- The ALR staff must create a clear path where the livery service or funeral home personnel will travel from the point of entering the building to the decedent's room without encountering other residents.

Decedent Removal from Hospital Morgues

- Hospital morgues are not required by RIDOH to inform funeral home livery of a decedent's COVID status. In some cases, a decedent's positive COVID status may not be known until sometime after death.

Any funeral home or funeral home staff found to be violating these directives may be subject to regulatory action on a license.