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To: North Carolina Board of Funeral Service, NC Medical Examiners, Transporters
From: Michelle Aurelius, MD, Chief Medical Examiner
Date: March 23, 2020
Subject: Infection Prevention for Handling Decedents with COVID-19

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner has received several inquiries for guidance on handling the remains of decedents infected with COVID-19. The below information, previously published by the Washington State Department of Public Health, is a good reference for those working in the mortuary and funeral home industries as well as the medical examiner system who handle decedents on a regular basis. This information provides precautionary measures for preventing infection for those who handle deceased persons with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the illness caused by SARS-coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). SARS-CoV-2 was first identified in late 2019 and has since spread around the world. It can cause severe and fatal respiratory illness, but approximately 80% of cases are mild. Asymptomatic cases may still be infectious. The best prevention is frequent handwashing with soap and water. SARS-CoV-2 is most often spread by respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes, similar to how influenza and other respiratory infections spread. Transmission from respiratory droplets is not a concern when handling human remains or performing postmortem procedures. However, individuals handling decedents should take precautions to avoid contact with potentially infectious body fluids.

Preventing Contact with Infectious Body Fluids

When handling human remains with known or suspected COVID-19 infection, mortuary and funeral home workers should use Standard Precautions to ensure protection from body fluids splashing or contaminating eyes, mouth, nose, hands, or clothing. At a minimum, mortuary workers should:

- Wear nonsterile, nitrile gloves when handling potentially infectious materials.
- Wear heavy-duty gloves over the nitrile gloves if there is a risk of cuts, puncture wounds, or other injuries that break the skin.
- Wear a clean, long-sleeved fluid-resistant or impermeable gown to protect skin and clothing.
- Use a plastic face shield or a face mask and goggles to protect the face, eyes, nose, and mouth from splashes of potentially infectious bodily fluids.

Preventing Infectious Aerosols

COVID-19 could potentially be transmitted by infectious aerosols generated by using an oscillating saw, suctioning body fluids, or other aerosol generating procedure. If aerosol generating procedures are anticipated, refer to US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [guidance for postmortem specimens from deceased persons under investigation for COVID-19](#)

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for information on procedures that should be avoided, additional safety precautions, ventilation requirements, and respiratory protection.

Cleaning and Disinfection for COVID-19

Use an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-registered, hospital-grade disinfectant for routine cleaning and disinfection. Follow the instructions on the label and disinfect all equipment and surfaces potentially contaminated with infectious fluids, including the body bag. Use appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and respiratory protection following the disinfectant instructions for use.

Other Hazards

Other potential hazards during funeral preparations include moving heavy remains and handling embalming chemicals. Employers are responsible for following applicable Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requirements.

If the family's or other mourners' burial practices and death rituals involve handling or other interaction with the body, please contact your local health department for guidance on how to minimize risk for infection transmission.

Resources:

- See the OSHA Fact Sheet, [Health and Safety Recommendations for Workers Who Handle Human Remains](#), for more guidelines to ensure worker safety when handling human remains.
- [CDC guidance for postmortem specimens from deceased persons under investigation for COVID-19](#)
- [OSHA guidance for personal protective equipment](#)
- [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Coronavirus Website](#)
- [Washington State Infection Prevention Guidance for Funeral Homes Handling Deceased Cases of COVID-19](#)
- NC DHHS guidance: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/covid-19-guidance>

Applicable OSHA standards for employers include:

- Blood borne Pathogens ([29 CFR 1910.1030](#))
- Personal Protective Equipment ([29 CFR 1910.132](#))
- Respiratory Protection Standard ([29 CFR 1910.134](#))