



From The NC Board of Funeral Service.....

As the Coronavirus continues to spread across the United States, it has direct and immediate impact on North Carolina. With regard to the practice of funeral service, the NC Board of Funeral Service will send you regular updates on the crisis as more information is announced at both the state and federal levels.

As an important first step, please visit the Board website at www.ncbfs.org for links to current, critical sources of information regarding the virus and its impact on our state and profession.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION & UPDATES FOR LICENSEES

MECKLENBURG COUNTY ISSUES STAY-AT-HOME PROCLAMATION

As the number of COVID-19 cases continue to rise in Mecklenburg County, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Emergency Management Office has announced a **Stay-at-Home order for County residents**. The order will go into effect on Thursday, March 26 at 8:00 a.m. and will remain in effect for the next 21 days. The order was announced Tuesday afternoon by Mecklenburg County Public Health Director, Gibbie Harris during the Board of County Commissioners Budget and Public Policy meeting.

The order will require County residents to remain in their homes for the next 21 days as part of an attempt to reduce the number of new COVID-19 infections within the County. Exceptions will be allowed for those seeking medical treatment, buying food or exercising outdoors.

As stated in the Proclamation,

For the purposes of this Proclamation, Essential Businesses and Operations means Healthcare and Public Health Operations, Human Services Operations, Essential Governmental Functions, and Essential Infrastructure, and the following:

22. Funeral Services. Funeral, mortuary, cremation, burial, cemetery, and related services.

Essential workers also include hospital and medical staff, pharmacy employees, law enforcement, firefighters, EMS Agency (MEDIC), some government employees and food service and grocery store employees who will be allowed to travel to work.

"As we said from the beginning, we must act based on what we are seeing on the ground in our community," said Harris. "Mecklenburg County has far more cases than any other County in North Carolina, and this extra step will keep more people away from each other and begin to flatten the rate of new cases before the hospital system becomes overwhelmed."

The order will be enforced by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department.

The order will not prohibit restaurants from providing take out or delivery options. It also does not prohibit daycares, homeless shelters and government agencies from operating.

INFECTION PREVENTION GUIDELINES FROM THE CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER

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](#) 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.

PRENEED ANNUAL REPORTS

The Board has received calls regarding the possibility of an extension of the submission deadline for Preneed Annual Reports. The submission deadline is set by NC General Statute at NCGS 90-210.68(a1), and the Board has no authority to set aside, amend or otherwise revise this requirement.

We acknowledge and understand that the recent focus on the Coronavirus may certainly have had some impact on the availability of funeral home staff to complete the report; however, we will do all we can to provide support and information to you as needed in completing your reports prior on or before the deadline.

DIGITAL SIGNATURES – CREMATION AUTHORIZATION FORMS

Several licensees have contacted the Board in recent days with questions concerning whether or not digital signatures on certain Board documents are permissible given the current concerns on social distancing. Following are two questions we have received most frequently and responses from Brett Lisenbee, the Board's Compliance Officer:

- *With regard to the Cremation Authorization and Statement of Goods and Services, are E-Signatures considered permissible/legal by the Board of Funeral Service? We are already facing great difficulty in getting the Authorizations notarized for those who cannot come into one of our locations.*

Response: It is Board staff's opinion that e-signatures are acceptable on all Board required forms so long as they are "legal" signatures such as *DocuSign*, keypad/mouse signatures, or other

comparable method. A typewritten signature would not be sufficient. It would also be acceptable to conduct arrangement conferences via FaceTime, Skype, or similar application.

- *With Doctor offices potentially closing, are E-Signatures going to be allowed for them to sign Death Certificates as is the case in surrounding states do?*

Response:

I am not aware of any updated guidance concerning this. I do know that the State's electronic filing system is not yet available to licensees, in general. Since complaints regarding late death certificate filings tend to be received from local or state officials, it would be staff's recommendation for you to check with your local registrar(s) to determine how they plan to address filings that are statutorily late due to national or state emergencies.

EXTENSIONS FOR SUBMISSION OF CERTIFICATES OF PERFORMANCE [COP]

Mr. Lisenbee has also responded to a question concerning the submission of COP's:

- *Will there be an extension granted for submitting COP's – unlike when we were closed due to the hurricane last year?*

Response:

If your office is not open to receive / process mail, it is staff's opinion that you would be in compliance with the Board's governing statutes and rules to enter the date your staff returns to the facility and processes the payment, as the date received. It would be acceptable to enter that date on the receipt and COP in which case there would be no late fee assessed so long as Board staff received the COP within 10 days from the date payment was receipted by funeral home staff.

The NC Board of Funeral Service will continue to monitor news reports and other official sources of information to keep you informed to the best of our ability. We know that there are many uncertainties associated with our management of so many federal and state directives, and we will continue our best efforts to keep you apprised of any significant changes or requirements that affect professional funeral service in North Carolina. It is our sincere hope that each of you, your families, your staff, and those you serve remain safe and healthy.