

PART 1: HOME FUNERALS

Who Is Your Community's Deathcare Resource?

It should be you! Increase public trust, raise firm visibility and create new revenue streams.

BY MATILDA GARRIDO



Matilda Garrido

The home funeral movement in America is growing. The National Home Funeral Alliance currently has more than 2,000 members, growing from 500 in 2015, and more individuals are training as home funeral guides.

While many funeral directors may view this with dismay, as it might signal further movement away from the traditional embalming/casketing/burial business model, I think it presents a unique opportunity for funeral homes to increase community exposure, build trust and create new services and support for families that wish to be more hands-on with deathcare.

There are many ways we can explore this; as one funeral director told New Hampshire Funeral Resources, Education & Advocacy, “Being involved with something that seems new and modern [ironically!], like home funerals... is a big boost for visibility and reputation, and perceived relevance and viability in the community.”

The Federal Trade Commission notes that “people often select a funeral home or cemetery because it is close to home, has served the family in the past or has been recommended by someone they trust.” As a funeral director, you are uniquely positioned to help families that wish to hold a home funeral.

In some states, specific regulations require the involvement of a funeral director in aspects of home funerals, and you can easily draw on your years of experience in providing compassionate care to offer a comprehensive system of support. Expanding your business model to include home funerals will increase your visibility to the larger community and expose your firm to home funeral guests who may be interested in more traditional funeral services.

A Comparison: Funeral Directors And Home Funeral Guides

Home funeral guides are used by many families interested in a home funeral. They are trained through various programs (some weekend-long and others more comprehensive) to educate families in body



care and help them navigate the maze of regulations that vary from state to state regarding body transportation, body care, permitting, etc.

Their presence with the family as the family provides body care, waking and burial provides comfort and direction in much the same way a funeral director does during a more traditional funeral.

However, we know that their ability to aid a family from death to burial is limited. Although home funeral guides can transport a body in some states, they can never charge for this service. Similarly, they cannot charge for direct body care. The guides must either provide these services free of charge or educate the family on how to do these things themselves.

Complicating matters is that some facilities are reluctant to release the deceased to anyone other than a licensed funeral professional or may have internal policies against doing so, even if allowed by law. Permits are usually required for body transportation, and death certificates must be obtained, representing additional administrative steps for the family and home funeral guide.

These restrictions and regulations provide a good opportunity for funeral directors to position themselves to offer one-stop support to families interested in a more hands-on experience with their loved ones. Some families may want to do everything – transportation, total body care, burial – while others may wish for a less immersive care experience, simply wanting a longer time with their loved one before transfer or burial, or to bring their loved one home and wake them there.

As opposed to funeral guides, funeral directors can provide all levels of support and service. Presenting yourself as a funeral home that facilitates home deathcare will also increase trust in your community, further challenging the sadly still ingrained notion that funeral directors seek to force families into expensive services simply to make a buck. Offering support for home funerals can be a win-win for your firm and the families you serve. Here are some suggestions to get started:

- ♦ Have a non-funeral director member of your staff trained as a home funeral guide. Not only will this

Funeral directors, unlike home funeral guides, can provide all levels of support and service. As a funeral home that facilitates home deathcare, community trust will also grow.

mean that someone other than you can step in to provide that support to families, but you will also get a sense of the kinds of support home funeral guides market themselves as providing, so you can be sure you're covering all the bases.

- ◆ Add a community deathcare support section to your website, making it clear that you provide full support to families wishing for a home funeral experience. Be very specific about the kinds of support you can provide, both as a guide and as a funeral director. It would pay to be clear about what the law in your state/community mandates a funeral director provide versus what a home funeral guide can provide. Consult your state's regulations before discussing this or providing this information to families.

- ◆ For elements that are not regulated in your state (for instance, transportation from hospital to home), use language such as, "Some facilities may not be aware of a family's right to transport the body of their loved one. We can smoothly facilitate transfer, either transporting the body for you or *advocating on your behalf* [author's emphasis] with the facility so that you can do so."

- ◆ Create a home funeral support pricing list with services broken down à la carte so families can personalize their experience (transportation charges, permit and death certificate charges, body care support, etc.). Rather than list this pricing on your website, encourage families to pick it up at the funeral home, where you can combine it with a little guide to home funerals (with your funeral home's branding). This gives people a chance to meet you and see your facilities, and it offers you the opportunity to discuss their wants and needs and how you might support them.

- ◆ Make it clear that you can provide restoration for a home funeral if the family wishes (embalming, partial embalming, cosmetizing); families may not be aware of this. As a hospice volunteer and bereavement group facilitator, I have seen firsthand how restoration, even minor restoration, can positively impact a family's grief experience after a loved one dies following a long illness. This would also apply in cases of traumatic death.

The way to approach this conversation must be sensitive so as not to appear to be selling a service. It may pay to offer minimal cosmetizing at no charge. Families are unlikely to own or have access to the same cosmetizing tools as a funeral home, so this is a unique benefit.

- ◆ If embalming is involved, be transparent about how this might impact burial arrangements. Maintain a list of green and local cemeteries that permit families to participate in the burial process. You

can detail exactly how much a family can participate (i.e., dig the grave, etc.) in each cemetery. If your community permits home burial, note this and offer support throughout that process.

- ◆ Families may not know how or may not have the mental bandwidth because of their grief to find out where to get necessary supplies (casket, dry ice, etc.). Maintain a resource list to offer them or note it on your price list as a service offered.

Sadly, much reporting around home funerals still implies that funeral homes are resistant to change and reluctant to



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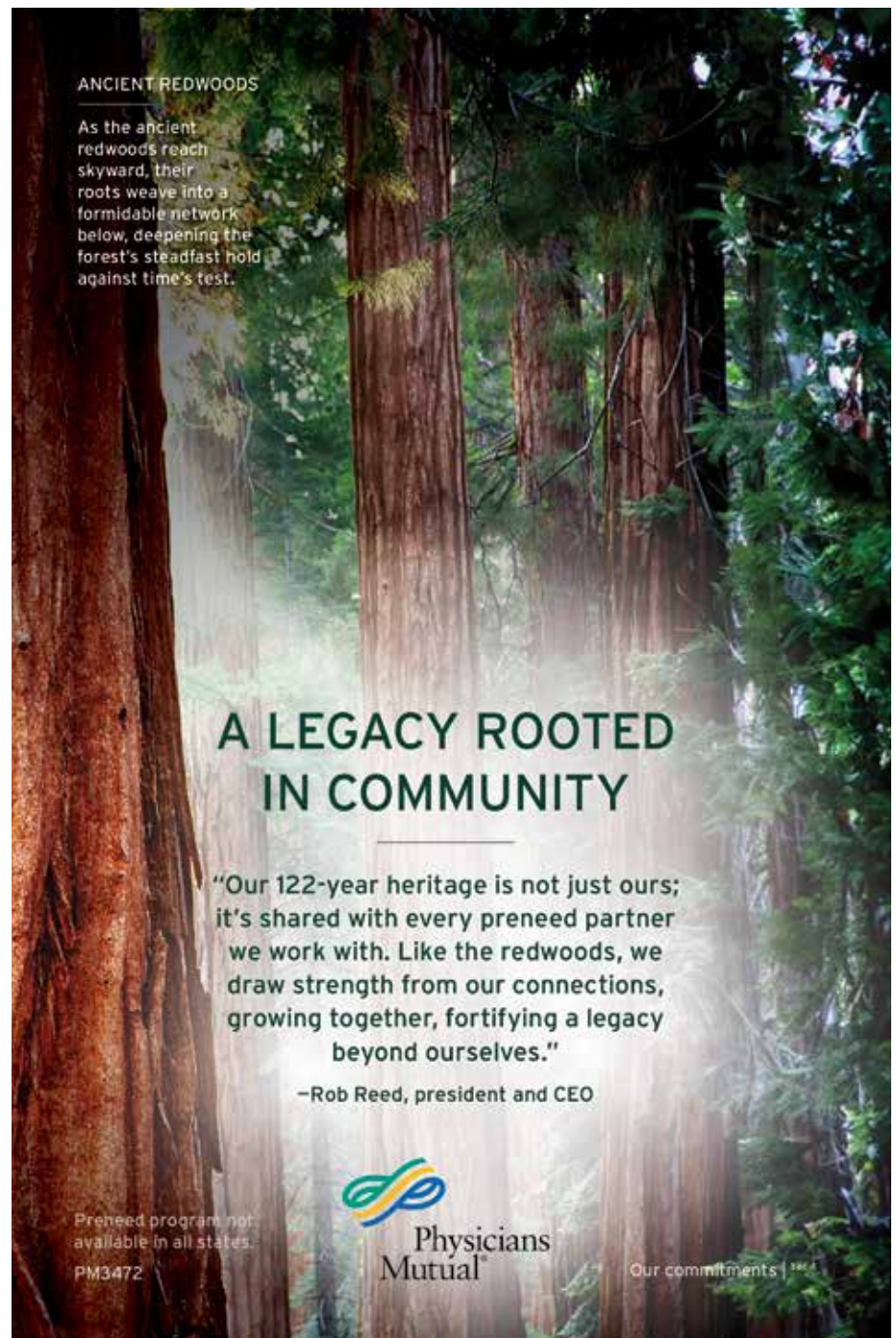
support families in becoming more hands-on. In a 2019 *New York Times* article titled “The Movement to Bring Death Closer,” author Maggie Jones writes, “The [funeral home] industry has taken on competitors, no matter how small... some funeral homes have their own policies that prohibit families from viewing or touching a body unless it’s embalmed... if your spouse has been dead for more than 24 hours, you cannot touch him or be in the same room with him...” This kind of unfortunate press does not reflect most funeral directors’ deep commitment to the families and communities they serve.

The industry may need to push back aggressively to remarket itself as supportive of the home funeral movement. Doing so also makes good business sense; it’s an additional revenue stream and increased positive exposure in the community, which will go a long way toward changing public perceptions.

In the words of another funeral director who spoke with New Hampshire Funeral Resources, Education & Advocacy, “If a home funeral family needs the help of a funeral director for part of the process or support throughout – securing a casket, for example – that’s income for the funeral home that wouldn’t be there otherwise if the family did everything on their own. So, it’s in the best interest [financially and otherwise] for funeral directors to build bridges with the home funeral community and present themselves as supportive of home funerals.”

Editor’s note: Next month, Garrido will continue her series on becoming a deathcare resource for your community by looking at grief groups for children and the larger community. ≡

Matilda Garrido, MS, CT, holds a Master of Science in thanatology (study of death, dying and bereavement), a Master of Science in bioethics and is certified in thanatology by the Association for Death Education and Counseling. She has extensive experience working with the dying, families of the dying and the bereaved, and is focused on normalizing the experience of grief and reducing death fears through education, focused action and increased community supports for the dying and grieving.



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