

Questions and Responses from Panel Discussion with Funeral Home Work Group Representatives

Q: What does a typical day look like in your death records work? What percentage of your day is spent doing death records work?

R: The panel members shared that 10-25% of the daily work is spent generating death records, reviewing a working copy with the family, locating doctors who will sign the death record, taking death certificates to doctors, picking them up from the health department, processing mail orders, and working on amendments.

Q: What is going well with your death records work?

R: The panel members felt everything goes well most of the time. They appreciate that the Help Desk is quick to respond and that it is really nice to have this safety net. In addition, they feel that the OVERS system is excellent and appreciate how electronic systems accelerate the process. Electronic amendments come through considerably faster. They are pleased to have a good working relationship with the county and appreciate their fast turnout from the county.

Q: What's challenging in your death records work?

R: The panel members are very appreciative that Oregon Vital Records has a forward-thinking process that allows a medical examiner to commit to signing the death certificate, which then allows the Funeral Home to proceed with the disposition without having to wait for the signature. This is not true of all the states. However, they shared that tracking down the certifier is extremely time consuming, inefficient, and really frustrating. Not only are these delays in the disposition challenging for the Funeral Homes, but these additional difficulties are also very hard on the grieving families. This part of the process is extremely inefficient as panel members say they end up making multiple phone calls and navigating multiple phone trees in an effort to track down the person who will sign the death certificate. The Funeral Homes cannot cremate or bury someone without a verbal affirmation that a medical examiner will sign the death certificate. They estimate that 85% of the medical examiners are responsive, but that the 15% of cases they have to track down create a significant amount of headache and heartache. Panel members shared how frustrating it is that this small percentage takes up such an inordinate amount of time when they can't track down the doctor.

- The Funeral Home can input the date and time of death when they create the death certificate, but if they make a mistake, they can't fix it. Instead, they have to get the doctor to amend it, and this holds up the whole process for the family, especially when it can be so challenging to contact the doctor. While this happens quite rarely

that these mistakes are made, it would be quite helpful if the Funeral Homes could amend that part of the death certificate.

- The Funeral Home orders Vital Records from every county around the state and each is different and has different requirements and this can cause some minor frustrations. For example, some keep the ID on file, some don't, some do payment by check, and some do invoices. The panel members said they maintain a running list of what to do for each county.

Q: What do you hope is next for you related to death records?

R: Panel members shared that the most difficult thing they face is medical examiners not signing death certificates electronically, and that this creates more frustration than anything else – not caseloads, or trauma deaths, or difficult families. The Funeral Homes have to face the pressure from families to get death certificates in a timely manner when most of the process is out of their locus of control. So it is particularly frustrating to take the heat and to not have leverage to move things along. The OFDA plans to introduce legislation in 2025 that will mandate doctors sign electronically, as well as to mandate that the facilities where a death has occurred to provide a name and contact information for who will be signing the death certificate, like they do in Washington.

- Panel members hope that more medical examiners will use the OVERS system because it streamlines the process: records don't get lost in the mail and they don't get delayed.

Q: What else could we have asked you about? Anything else to add?

R: If the system changes with the House Bill and Funeral Homes were allowed to get death certificates on behalf of the family indefinitely, the Funeral Homes would have to cut that off at some point, so they weren't ordering death certificates 10 years after the fact. The bookkeeper would want to keep it to a year after the death in order to contain this.

Q: Could you say more about how the different counties are different to work with?

R: Panel members elaborated on the variations in the ordering process from county to county. For example, a couple have an online portal for ordering which is very convenient, a lot of them have fax machines, some still require a paper check to be sent in with the order. This requires the Funeral Homes to make sure they are keeping up with everyone's different processes and make sure they are doing everything correctly, so they keep a checklist. This could be streamlined.

Q: How do counties decide the payment process? Why does it vary? How could this be streamlined?

R: County Work Group members responded that late payments were an issue when they used to bill Funeral Home. They would give 60-day extensions and then 90-day extensions,

but this had unsatisfactory results, so the accounting department decided to move to pay as they go, and it worked out a lot better. Funeral Homes can pay with check or with credit card and some counties keep IDs on file. Sometimes when they are working with a Funeral Home for the first time, then they have to get ID and an up-to-date order form. In short, it was more of an accounting decision to get payments in a timely manner.

Q: What is the ID? Do the Funeral Homes have a registration number?

R: The state requires a copy of the ID of every person who orders a certificate.

Q: What did you mean by allowing Funeral Homes to order the records indefinitely and having a cut off?

R: The panel members explained that Funeral Homes can only order death certificates up to six months after the event, after which it goes through the state. So, after this six-month period, the Funeral Homes have to refer the families to the state. The panel members shared that people do like to place the order through the Funeral Homes because they are familiar. The bookkeeper needs to close the contracts after a year for records keeping purposes. Clarification: The Funeral Homes, as long as they are listed on the record, can order the records regardless of the time frame. They just order from the state when it's past six months.

Q: How often does a funeral director see cases in which the medical certifier has been identified, they agree to sign the record and they are signed up in OVERS, so they are electronic, but then they still fail to sign or certify the record in a timely manner? What do you do in those situations?

R: The panel members said that it does happen a small percentage of times, even when everything is electronic. It gets sent to the doctor and it just sits there and doesn't get signed, and they have to call 2-3 times trying to get the document signed. Some doctors are notorious for holding a record for 2-3 weeks before signing. Some aren't getting notifications properly, or they will claim that they weren't notified.

Q: In regard to the Funeral Homes and the length of getting death certificates: it can be easier for families to go back to the Funeral Home because they been vetted based on eligibility, whereas some of the Funeral Homes will send to me family members that have ordered them from the Funeral Home as part of the service they are offering. Sometimes when families come to the county it can be a little more difficult to connect the dots and go through the vetting process to prove eligibility for family members, so they go back to the Funeral Home, and as a courtesy, the Funeral Home will reorder for them, but it seems that there are a couple of Funeral Homes that haven't done that. Do you see that in your Funeral Home, or have you handled these situations?

R: The panel members responded that they do see this a lot of times, and that the Funeral Home is happy to order for them again since it is already established, familiar, and easier.

Occasionally, outside family members call the Funeral Homes as well, but then there is more vetting to be done or they try at the county.

Q: Who is allowed to order death certificates and who is not?

R:

- Spouses, children, parents, and immediate family members who can prove their identity with an ID
- People with a legal need can be a grey area

Q: Alternate authorization for disposition is an Oregon law, and Oregon might be one of the only states that has the alternate authorization for disposition where the medical certifier can verbally sign off, but is that really still done for the majority of certificates? if we had more of the medical certifiers fully electronic, wouldn't they just go ahead and sign before you even had to call them? Is it still standard practice to do that alternate authorization for disposition, then find them, and then send the electronic version?

R:

- The panel members said that 99% of the cases use the alternate authorization, and that it is very rare that a doctor's going to certify prior to them being ready for disposition. The Funeral Home has all the information to create the death certificate and then have the doctor sign it before they can make a phone call and get a verbal.
- This way once the Funeral Home meets with the family and they are waiting for someone to be cremated they can move forward and not wait for days, so 99% use the alternate authorization.
- The panel members added that hospice organizations are the other part of this equation. Many hospice organizations have a medical examiner on staff who will be likely to sign. Some hospice organizations have a form that goes with the body that says who will be signing the form, and this is far more efficient.

Q: Does that depend on the individual practice? Who decides whether there is a form or not?

R: It is not uniform across all hospice organizations, some are proactive, but for some it is not part of their protocol. The panel members wished it was more uniform.

Q: Could you say more about how the OVERS system is working well? Do you get feedback about the OVERS system?

R:

- The panel members confirmed that it works well, however, some doctors won't sign electronically, so it has to be all done physically and taken everywhere. They have to print the death certificate on paper, mail it to the doctor or physically deliver it to the doctor, so the doctor can physically fill it out and then they have to physically deliver it to the health department so it can be entered into the OVERS system. Most of the time, if the doctor is on the OVERS system, they can send the death certificate

electronically, the doctor can fill it out and sign it electronically and then the Funeral Home can just send the order to the county.

- The panel members affirmed that their colleagues and the mortuaries are overwhelmingly positive about the OVERS system, that the mortuaries love it. When they can get all of the player on the same team, which is not always the case, but the system works.
- When a Funeral Home can't make a change or there is something that goes wonky within the OVERS system, the Help Desk is very responsive to what the Funeral Homes need, and when they need help fast, they respond very quickly.

Q: Could you say more about mandating electronic signatures, like Washington state?

R: The panel members explained that they don't want to change the OVERS system because it works, they want to change how medical certifiers commit, accessibility to medical certifiers, and to make sure 100% of the medical certifiers sign death certificates electronically.

Q: Thinking about equitable access for families to certificates: Are there any scenarios or groups of people having a more difficult time with meeting the obligations to get certificates? Such as an acceptable ID or other barriers that you've noticed?

R:

- The panel members said that there are no barriers for people who deserve to get the death certificates. Very occasionally there may be some very elderly people who are confused about how to get additional death certificates.
- The panel members have to be careful because sometimes people lie to them, so they have to look for red flags and be careful about what to provide. Funeral directors are not wired to say no, but with this process, sometimes they have to, which is hard for them.

Q: Some of the Funeral Homes will have families come to get the ashes, but they can't pick them up they are not able to pay for services, or they agreed to sign the contract but never met the needs of that contract. Does that happen at your Funeral Home?

R: The Funeral Home panel members occasionally have people who sign the contract, but they can't (or won't) meet the financial obligations. This is when the indigent fund comes in. Funeral Homes don't withhold ashes whether or not they can pay. The Funeral Home may not do a service for them, but they will create the death certificate, and the remains are returned regardless. If a family has no intention of meeting their obligations, it's better to watch them walk away with the ashes and move on to serve the next family.

Q: It has happened at the county that a family that can't pay for the services has come to the county to get the death certificate, and if they are able to show eligibility to the county then the county can supply the death certificate. How frequently might that happen?

R: The panel responded that they might go ahead and give the ashes and move on, but the Funeral Home will not front the money for the family's death certificates or any keepsake urns or peripheral items, and they already have to just write off the cremation as a loss, but the Funeral Home will not send the family to you to take care of that.

Q: What do you think of the disc system? At the county, we had a person who came in with three separate bags to try to identify the remains. The county reached out to a funeral director to help, and with the disk system they were able to determine the decedents, which gave the individual peace of mind.

R: The panel members agreed that the disc system has really come through in a number of situations. For instance, they've received a call from the Albany police department who need help to track down the family of when an urn ended up at Goodwill. Sometimes someone moves and leaves an urn behind. The disk system comes through on more than one occasion.

Q: Connected to the previous question about accessibility, are there groups of people who have more difficulties than others in accessing records?

R: The panel members have not encountered any examples of this.