



Arkansas Department of Health

4815 West Markham Street • Little Rock, Arkansas 72205-3867 • Telephone (501) 661-2000
Governor Asa Hutchinson
Nathaniel Smith, MD, MPH, Secretary of Health

March 24, 2020

Guidance for Funeral Homes Regarding Funeral Services and Handling Deceased Cases of COVID-19

Background:

This document was created to provide guidance for funeral homes regarding holding funeral services as well as preventing infection in mortuary and funeral home workers who handle deceased persons with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the illness caused by the novel coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2. It can cause severe and fatal respiratory illness, but approximately 80 percent of cases are mild. Asymptomatic cases may still be infectious.

The best prevention is frequent handwashing with soap and water. The virus that causes COVID-19 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, mortuary and funeral home workers should take precautions to avoid contact with potentially infectious body fluids.

Guidance for Holding Funeral Services

A funeral or visitation service can be held for a person who has died (from any cause, including COVID-19). However, the following guidelines should be observed to reduce the risk of transmission among attendees:

- Funeral services should be limited to 10 people in attendance, whenever possible.
- The Arkansas Department of Health recommends screening staff daily and all visitors for signs and symptoms of illness.
https://www.healthy.arkansas.gov/images/uploads/pdf/COVID-19_Visitor_Screening_Toolkit_final.pdf
- Social distancing and hand hygiene should be observed as much as possible during the funeral service.
- Staff experiencing symptoms should remain home.
- Visitors with symptoms of illness should be restricted access to the premises unless you provide a mask for the symptomatic visitor.

This and additional guidance may be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#funerals>

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.
- If it is necessary to transfer a body to a bag, follow standard precautions, including additional personal protective equipment (PPE) if the splashing of fluids is expected. For transporting a body after the body has been bagged, disinfect the outside of the bag with an EPA approved product expected to be effective against COVID-19 based on data for harder-to-kill viruses.
- Embalming can be conducted. During embalming, follow Standard Precautions, including the use of additional PPE if splashing is expected (e.g. disposable gown, face shield or goggles and facemask). Wear appropriate respiratory protection if any procedures will generate aerosols or, if required, for chemicals used in accordance with the manufacturer's label.

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.

Resources:

[CDC guidance for postmortem specimens from deceased persons under investigation for COVID-19](#)

- [OSHA COVID-19](#)

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.

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](#))

For any questions, please call ADH hotline at 1-800-803-7847.

This document was adapted from the Washington State Department of Health's *Infection Prevention for Funeral Homes Handling Deceased Cases of COVID-19*.