

Traditional Southwestern Alaska Burial Preparations And Impact of Medical Examiner's Procedures

A. In Medical Facility

When a loved one is dying, the family and friends gather around, typically at a clinic or hospital and stay there until death. At death, someone in the medical establishment declares the death. The body is then washed by the same gender friends/family members and clothed. The body is taken to the morgue and the family leaves to obtain a casket in which to transport the body to the family home. If there is no morgue, the body is taken directly to the family home. The body remains in the family home for 3 days. During those 3 days, there is a constant stream of friends bringing food and visiting. The family does their best to keep the home cool, to better preserve the body. After 3 days, the family holds a ceremony at the church or other facility and the body is then buried. There is no embalming. Bodies can be buried, even in the winter. Family members do not carry the casket or dig the grave. Friends or members of the community do this for them.

The body is buried in a wooden box or casket and funeral attendees gather during the grave side service and toss soil onto the box or casket. Another wooden box loaded with weight is placed on top of the casket to anchor the casket/box underground in case there is a high water table.

In 40 days, after the burial, the family and friends come together again and celebrate the life of the deceased loved one once more with food and talk.

B. Death not in a Medical Facility

Because Alaska statutes often require a death outside a medical facility to be reported to the Medical Examiner's office, sometimes these deaths require more steps in order to get a declaration of death and obtain a death certificate. AS 12.65.005. Current law requires the reporting of all suicides and accidents. Once the death is reported, the Medical Examiner (ME) must decide if the case is in its jurisdiction, and if so, whether to accept or decline the case. The report is first handled by an investigator in the ME's office who speaks to the state troopers, or other law enforcement on the scene. The investigator also speaks to witnesses or family members. After consulting with the ME's medical professionals, the investigator either advises that the body can remain in region and be turned over to the family, and the office will sign off on the death certificate, or the investigator will require that the body be shipped to the Anchorage ME's office for further investigation into the cause of death.

If the body is shipped to Anchorage, the ME will cover the cost of the transport of the board via air transportation and vehicle to their office. The weight of the shipment is

noted for the records, as the ME will only pay for that amount of weight to be shipped back to the village. The ME's office attempts to have next of kin complete the Authorization for Release of Remains form as soon as possible so that they know whether the body will be returned directly to the site of death for the funeral, or whether an Anchorage funeral home will take possession of the body. If they do not have this form completed within 10 days of receipt of the body, they will ship the body to a funeral home (selection is on rotation basis among all Funeral homes).

The completion of this form is a critical step for the family member. This decision will dictate what actions the ME's office takes with respect to the body from this point forward. If the ME's office knows that a funeral home will take the body next, they do not worry as much about the condition of the body when it leaves their offices, as they know professionals will take over and prepare the body for viewing and transport before the family sees the body. The ME's office also knows that their responsibility for the physical body ends at the point the body is taken by the funeral home, so all they need to do is calculate the cost they would have incurred to fly the original body weight back to the region using a reasonable flight schedule (not the high priority cost), and that is the maximum that the state pays as reimbursement to the funeral home for the transportation charges. Thus the extra costs associated with transport to the funeral home and from funeral home to airport, costs for the extra shipping weight of the casket, and increased body weight from embalming, and the death certificate preparation fees are borne by the family, in addition to the costs of the embalming and body preparation.

Only if the family indicates that they will be taking possession of the body directly from the ME will the ME's offices take a little more care in the presentation of the body when it leaves their office. They will make all of the flight arrangements for delivery of the body for the family. They will also get the family to complete the one page Death Certificate information form and complete the information needed to file the death certificate with the Vital Statistics Bureau. They will attempt to cool the body in advance of the flight if they have made the flight arrangements. The family will not be billed a dime, unless they have asked for extra tests to be performed, or need the body to go to a location other than the place of death.

For a family without cash resources, you would think that this would not be a difficult choice. However, many families select the funeral home option because they don't understand what their real choices are.

- 1) The ME's "Authorization for Release of Remains" form uses words that strongly encourage use of the funeral home option.
 - a. They tell the family that they do not do anything to improve the looks of the body, nor do they take any responsibility for the condition of the body after the investigation.
- 2) There is no financial information shared with the family to help them understand the financial differences between the two choices.

C. How can the situation be improved?

1) Minimize when the body must be sent to Anchorage

- a. Supply better diagnostic and testing technology in region that will supply the evidence that the ME's office and its investigators require to make a cause of death determination.
- b. Supply secure video conferencing capabilities to enable the ME in Anchorage to visually inspect the bodies.
- c. Consider more carefully the impacts on families of this disruptions and make better judgments about whether the information could be acquired in a different way.

2) Provide better, clearer communication to families regarding the choices they have.

- a. Improve the Authorization for Release of Remains form so that it does not steer native families to selecting the funeral home option.
- b. Use Tribal administrators to assist in located next of kin to facilitate the 10 day limit to remove remains.
- c. Hold dialogues with local tribal and village health corps to share the process and procedures and enable them to communicate messages for the ME's office
- d. Provide financial information to families about the options they have.
- e. Change ME policy so that families can have bodies returned to place of burial and not only place of death and enable families to pay any cost differences (if any)
- f. Consider changes in practices regarding condition of body for shipment to ensure best possible outcome for body transfer.

D. Challenges in getting Death Certificates

When a loved one dies unexpectedly or outside a medical facility, someone must complete a certificate of death within three days and file it with the state registrar. AS18.50.230(a).

Under current law, licensed Doctors, Registered Nurses and EMT personnel can be involved in the declaration of death under various circumstances. But many villages lack such personnel. Thus there are delays associated with getting death certificates issued in rural Alaska.

Without a death certificate the family cannot apply for death benefits from Public Assistance office. This monetary assistance is often the very thing the family needs to pay for the cost of the funeral home services.

Bill pending by Rep Herren that would allow Tribal officials to declare death and complete the death certificate form with input from ME's office or other medical official.