

# Funeral Planning

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A funeral is one of the most expensive purchases you or your family will ever make. A traditional funeral, including a casket and vault, costs about \$6,000. Add flowers, obituary notices, acknowledgment cards and limousines and your total can run well over \$10,000, but it doesn't have to. Being a wise consumer and knowing your rights can save you and your family thousands.

Statistics show that nearly half of all American consumers have never arranged for a funeral. Yet, when a death occurs, consumers must make important and expensive decisions under tight time constraints and emotional conditions. Like any other expensive purchase, consumers need information to help them make funeral choices that suit their personal needs.

Most people use the same funeral home generation after generation, merely because they've used it before. If you're interested in getting a good value, this isn't the best way to do it. There is a wide variation in price for essentially the same thing. For example, the price for a simple cremation can range from \$750 to \$3,035. Full-service funerals can range in price from \$3,025 to \$5,270.

## Planning

Thinking ahead can help you make informed and thoughtful decisions about funeral arrangements. It allows you to choose the specific items you want and need and compare the prices offered by several funeral providers. It also spares your survivors the stress of making these decisions under the pressure of time and strong emotions.

You can make arrangements directly with a funeral establishment or through a funeral planning or memorial society - a nonprofit organization that provides information about funerals and disposition but doesn't offer funeral services. If you choose to contact such a group, recognize that while some funeral homes may include the word "society" in their names, they are not nonprofit organizations.

One other important consideration when planning a funeral pre-need is where the remains will be buried, entombed or scattered. In the short time between the death and burial of a loved one, many family members find themselves rushing to buy a cemetery plot or grave - often without careful thought or a personal visit to the site. That's why it's in the family's best interest to buy cemetery plots before you need them.

You may wish to make decisions about your arrangements in advance, but not pay for them in advance. Keep in mind that over time, prices may go up and businesses may close or change ownership. However, in some areas with increased competition, prices may go down over time. It's a good idea to review and revise your decisions every few years, and to make sure your family is aware of your wishes.

Put your preferences in writing, give copies to family members and your attorney, and keep a copy in a handy place. Don't designate your preferences in your will, because a will often is not found or read until after the funeral. And avoid putting the only copy of your preferences in a safe deposit box. That's because your family may have to make arrangements on a weekend or holiday, before the box can be opened.

Here is a summary of the steps in planning for a funeral:

## Planning for a Funeral

1. Shop around in advance. Compare prices from at least two funeral homes. Remember that you can supply your own casket or urn.
2. Ask for a price list. The law requires funeral homes to give you written price lists for products and services.
3. Resist pressure to buy goods and services you don't really want or need.
4. Avoid emotional overspending. It's not necessary to have the fanciest casket or the most elaborate funeral to properly honor a loved one.
5. Recognize your rights. Laws regarding funerals and burials vary from state to state. It's a smart move to know which goods or services the law requires you to purchase and which are optional.
6. Apply the same smart shopping techniques you use for other major purchases. You can cut costs by limiting the viewing to one day or one hour before the funeral, and by dressing your loved one in a favorite outfit instead of costly burial clothing.
7. Plan ahead. It allows you to comparison shop without time constraints, creates an opportunity for family discussion, and lifts some of the burden from your family.

## Prepaying

Millions of Americans have entered into contracts to prearrange their funerals and prepay some or all of the expenses involved. Laws of individual states govern the prepayment of funeral goods and services; various states have laws to help ensure that these advance payments are available to pay for the funeral products and services when they're needed. But protections vary widely from state to state, and some state laws offer little or no effective protection. Some state laws require the funeral home or cemetery to place a percentage of the prepayment in a state-regulated trust or to purchase a life insurance policy with the death benefits assigned to the funeral home or cemetery.

If you're thinking about prepaying for funeral goods and services, it's important to consider these issues before putting down any money:

- What are you are paying for? Are you buying only merchandise, like a casket and vault, or are you purchasing funeral services as well?
- What happens to the money you've prepaid? States have different requirements for handling funds paid for prearranged funeral services.
- What happens to the interest income on money that is prepaid and put into a trust account?
- Are you protected if the firm you dealt with goes out of business?
- Can you cancel the contract and get a full refund if you change your mind?
- What happens if you move to a different area or die while away from home? Some prepaid funeral plans can be transferred, but often at an added cost.

Be sure to tell your family about the plans you've made; let them know where the documents are filed. If your family isn't aware that you've made plans, your wishes may not be carried out. And if family members don't know that you've prepaid the funeral costs, they could end up paying for the same arrangements. You may wish to consult an attorney on the best way to ensure that your wishes are followed.

## The Funeral Rule

Most funeral providers are professionals who strive to serve their clients' needs and best interests. But some aren't. They may take advantage of their clients through inflated prices, overcharges, double charges or unnecessary services. Fortunately, there's a federal law that makes it easier for you to choose only those goods and services you want or need and to pay only for those you select, whether you are making arrangements pre-need or at need.

The Funeral Rule, enforced by the Federal Trade Commission, requires funeral directors to give you itemized prices in person and, if you ask, over the phone. The Rule also requires funeral directors to give you other information about their goods and services. For example, if you ask about funeral arrangements in person, the funeral home must give you a written price list to keep that shows the goods and services the home offers. If you want to buy a casket or outer burial container, the funeral provider must show you descriptions of the available selections and the prices before actually showing you the caskets.

Many funeral providers offer various "packages" of commonly selected goods and services that make up a funeral. But when you arrange for a funeral, you have the right to buy individual goods and services. That is, you do not have to accept a package that may include items you do not want.

According to the Funeral Rule:

- you have the right to choose the funeral goods and services you want (with some exceptions).
- the funeral provider must state this right in writing on the general price list.
- if state or local law requires you to buy any particular item, the funeral provider must disclose it on the price list, with a reference to the specific law.
- the funeral provider may not refuse, or charge a fee, to handle a casket you bought elsewhere.
- a funeral provider that offers cremations must make alternative containers available.

## What Kind of Funeral Do You Want?

Every family is different, and not everyone wants the same type of funeral. Funeral practices are influenced by religious and cultural traditions, costs and personal preferences. These factors help determine whether the funeral will be elaborate or simple, public or private, religious or secular, and where it will be held. They also influence whether the body will be present at the funeral, if there will be a viewing or visitation, and if so, whether the casket will be open or closed, and whether the remains will be buried or cremated.

Among the choices you'll need to make are whether you want one of these basic types of funerals, or something in between.

### **"Traditional," full-service funeral**

This type of funeral, often referred to by funeral providers as a "traditional" funeral, usually includes a viewing or visitation and formal funeral service, use of a hearse to transport the body to the funeral site and cemetery, and burial, entombment or cremation of the remains.

It is generally the most expensive type of funeral. In addition to the funeral home's basic services fee, costs often include embalming and dressing the body; rental of the funeral home for the viewing or service; and use of vehicles to transport the family if they don't use their own. The costs of a casket, cemetery plot or crypt and other funeral goods and services also must be factored in.

### **Direct burial**

The body is buried shortly after death, usually in a simple container. No viewing or visitation is involved, so no embalming is necessary. A memorial service may be held at the graveside or later. Direct burial usually costs less than the "traditional," full-service funeral. Costs include the funeral home's basic services fee, as well as transportation and care of the body, the purchase of a casket or burial container and a cemetery plot or crypt. If the family chooses to be at the cemetery for the burial, the funeral home often charges an additional fee for a graveside service.

### **Direct cremation**

The body is cremated shortly after death, without embalming. The cremated remains are placed in an urn or other container. No viewing or visitation is involved, although a memorial service may be held, with or without the cremated remains present. The remains can be kept in the home, buried or placed in a crypt or niche in a cemetery, or buried or scattered in a favorite spot. Direct cremation usually costs less than the "traditional," full-service funeral. Costs include the funeral home's basic services fee, as well as transportation and care of the body. A crematory fee may be included or, if the funeral home does not own the crematory, the fee may be added on. There also will be a charge for an urn or other container. The cost of a cemetery plot or crypt is included only if the remains are buried or entombed.

Funeral providers who offer direct cremations also must offer to provide an alternative container that can be used in place of a casket.

## Choosing a Funeral Provider

Many people don't realize that they are not legally required to use a funeral home to plan and conduct a funeral. However, because they have little experience with the many details and legal requirements involved and may be emotionally distraught when it's time to make the plans, many people find the services of a professional funeral home to be a comfort.

Consumers often select a funeral home or cemetery because it's close to home, has served the family in the past, or has been recommended by someone they trust. But people who limit their search to just one funeral home may risk paying more than necessary for the funeral or narrowing their choice of goods and services.

Comparison shopping need not be difficult, especially if it's done before the need for a funeral arises. If you visit a funeral home in person, the funeral provider is required by law to give you a general price list itemizing the cost of the items and services the home offers. If the general price list does not include specific prices of caskets or outer burial containers, the law requires the funeral director to show you the price lists for those items before showing you the items.

Sometimes it's more convenient and less stressful to "price shop" funeral homes by telephone. The Funeral Rule requires funeral directors to provide price information over the phone to any caller who asks for it. In addition, many funeral homes are happy to mail you their price lists, although that is not required by law.

When comparing prices, be sure to consider the total cost of all the items together, in addition to the costs of single items. Every funeral home should have price lists that include all the items essential for the different types of arrangements it offers. Many funeral homes offer package funerals that may cost less than purchasing individual items or services. Offering package funerals is permitted by law, as long as an itemized price list also is provided. But only by using the price lists can you accurately compare total costs.

In addition, there's a growing trend toward consolidation in the funeral home industry, and many neighborhood funeral homes are thought to be locally owned when in fact, they're owned by a national corporation. If this issue is important to you, you may want to ask if the funeral home is locally owned.

## **Funeral Costs**

Funeral costs include:

1. Basic services fee for the funeral director and staff
2. Charges for other services and merchandise
3. Cash advances

## **Calculating the Actual Cost**

The funeral provider must give you an itemized statement of the total cost of the funeral goods and services you have selected when you are making the arrangements. If the funeral provider doesn't know the cost of the cash advance items at the time, he or she is required to give you a written "good faith estimate." This statement also must disclose any legal, cemetery or crematory requirements that you purchase any specific funeral goods or services.

The Funeral Rule does not require any specific format for this information. Funeral providers may include it in any document they give you at the end of your discussion about funeral arrangements.

## **Caskets**

### *For a "traditional," full-service funeral:*

A casket often is the single most expensive item you'll buy if you plan a "traditional," full-service funeral. Caskets vary widely in style and price and are sold primarily for their visual appeal. Typically, they're constructed of metal, wood, fiberboard, fiberglass or plastic. Although an average casket costs slightly more than \$2,000, some mahogany, bronze or copper caskets sell for as much as \$10,000.

When you visit a funeral home or showroom to shop for a casket, the Funeral Rule requires the funeral director to show you a list of caskets the company sells, with descriptions and prices, before showing you the caskets. Industry studies show that the average casket shopper buys one of the first three models shown, generally the middle-priced of the three. So it's in the seller's best interest to start out by showing you higher-end models. If you haven't seen some of the lower-priced models on the price list, ask to see them - but don't be surprised if they're not prominently displayed, or not on display at all.

Traditionally, caskets have been sold only by funeral homes. But with increasing frequency, showrooms and websites operated by "third-party" dealers are selling caskets. You can buy a casket from one of these dealers and have it shipped directly to the funeral home. The Funeral Rule requires funeral homes to agree to use a casket you bought elsewhere, and doesn't allow them to charge you a fee for using it.

No matter where or when you're buying a casket, it's important to remember that its purpose is to provide a dignified way to move the body before burial or cremation. No casket, regardless of its qualities or cost, will preserve a body forever. Metal caskets frequently are described as "gasketed," "protective" or "sealer" caskets. These terms mean that the casket has a rubber gasket or some other feature that is designed to delay the penetration of water into the casket and prevent rust. The Funeral Rule forbids claims that these features help preserve the remains indefinitely because they don't. They just add to the cost of the casket.

Most metal caskets are made from rolled steel of varying gauges - the lower the gauge, the thicker the steel. Some metal caskets come with a warranty for longevity. Wooden caskets generally are not gasketed and don't have a warranty for longevity. They can be hardwood like mahogany, walnut, cherry or oak, or softwood like pine. Pine caskets are a less expensive option, but funeral homes rarely display them. Manufacturers of both wooden and metal caskets usually warrant workmanship and materials.

***For cremation:***

Many families that opt to have their loved ones cremated rent a casket from the funeral home for the visitation and funeral, eliminating the cost of buying a casket. If you opt for visitation and cremation, ask about the rental option. For those who choose a direct cremation without a viewing or other ceremony where the body is present, the funeral provider must offer an inexpensive unfinished wood box or alternative container, a non-metal enclosure - pressboard, cardboard or canvas - that is cremated with the body.

Under the Funeral Rule, funeral directors who offer direct cremations:

- may not tell you that state or local law requires a casket for direct cremations, because none do;
- must disclose in writing your right to buy an unfinished wood box or an alternative container for a direct cremation; and
- must make an unfinished wood box or other alternative container available for direct cremations.

**Burial Vaults or Grave Liners: (NOTE: Newton, NH requires a vault for full and cremation burials)**

Burial vaults or grave liners, also known as burial containers, are commonly used in "traditional," full-service funerals. The vault or liner is placed in the ground before burial, and the casket is lowered into it at burial. The purpose is to prevent the ground from caving in as the casket deteriorates over time. A grave liner is made of reinforced concrete and will satisfy any cemetery requirement. Grave liners cover only the top and sides of the casket. A burial vault is more substantial and expensive than a grave liner. It surrounds the casket in concrete or another material and may be sold with a warranty of protective strength.

State laws do not require a vault or liner, and funeral providers may not tell you otherwise. However, keep in mind that many cemeteries require some type of outer burial container to prevent the grave from sinking in the future. Neither grave liners nor burial vaults are designed to prevent the eventual decomposition of human remains. It is illegal for funeral providers to claim that a vault will keep water, dirt or other debris from penetrating into the casket if that's not true.

**Veterans: (NOTE: There are no National Cemeteries in Newton, NH)**

All veterans are entitled to a free burial and a grave marker in a National cemetery.

Visit the Department of Veterans Affairs' website at [www.cem.va.gov](http://www.cem.va.gov). To reach the regional Veterans office in your area, call 1-800-827-1000.

**The Funeral Rule:**

The Funeral Rule is a law enforced by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States. It is designed to protect consumers while they arrange funerals and consider options for disposition of a body. Under the Funeral Rule, funeral directors have certain obligations to consumers, and consumers are entitled to certain rights. Despite the Funeral Rule, some unscrupulous members of the profession do take advantage of consumers, and the FTC encourages consumers to report such incidents so that they can be investigated.

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/menus/consumer/shop/funeral.shtm>

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/products/pro19.shtm>