

Alaska Public Health Alert

Guidance for the Safe Handling of Bodies of Deceased Persons with COVID-19

April 7, 2020

Summary

The purpose of this alert is to provide guidance for the safe handling of bodies and deceased persons with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

Key Points

- There is currently no known risk associated with being in the same room at a funeral or visitation service with the body of someone who died of COVID-19 (see associated [CDC FAQ](#)).
- The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks, which is not a concern after death.
- Those in direct contact with persons who died with COVID-19 (suspected or confirmed) should wear the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) to avoid exposure to infected bodily fluids, contaminated objects, or other contaminated environmental surfaces. See the associated [CDC FAQ](#) for additional guidance.

Guidance for Funeral Home Workers

- Funeral home workers should follow their routine infection prevention and control precautions when handling a decedent who died of COVID-19.
- Embalming can be conducted.
- Decedents with COVID-19 can be buried or cremated.
- See the associated [CDC guidance](#) for additional information.

Funerals in Communities with Funeral Homes

- Funerals should be limited in size to 10 (ten) or less people in compliance with the White House release of "The President's Coronavirus Guidelines for America – 30 Days to Slow the Spread." On March 29, the President extended his "15 Days to Slow the Spread" guidance – including the recommendation that organizers not plan public gatherings of more than 10 people - through April 30.
 - The National Funeral Directors Association recommends limiting attendance to select family members and livestreaming the service for those who cannot attend.
 - Services could also be recorded and the video shared with whomever the family deems appropriate.
- Anyone who is ill or who is at increased risk for severe illness (e.g., elderly, immune-compromised) should stay home.
- Funeral homes should urge funeral attendees to follow social distancing mandates, and encourage hand and respiratory hygiene. Ensure that soap dispensers are filled in restrooms, offer alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol to guests and employees, maintain vigilant environmental cleaning, and have extra tissues on hand.
- [Per CDC](#): "People should consider not touching the body of someone who has died of COVID-19. There may be less of a chance of the virus spreading from certain types of touching, such as holding the hand or hugging after the body has been prepared for viewing. Other activities, such as kissing, washing, and shrouding should be avoided before, during, and after the body has been prepared, if possible. If washing the body or shrouding are important religious or cultural practices, families are encouraged to work with their community's cultural and religious leaders and funeral home staff on how to reduce their exposure as much as possible. At a minimum, people conducting these activities should wear disposable gloves. If splashing of fluids is expected, additional personal protective equipment (PPE)

may be required (such as disposable gown, faceshield or goggles and N-95 respirator).”

Funerals in Communities without Funeral Homes

- In situations where funeral homes or proper facilities for preparing a body for viewing are not available, untrained community members should not handle deceased persons with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. Decedents should only be handled by persons wearing adequate PPE.
- Prior to transport, the body must be sealed in a body bag liner and then placed inside either a body bag or second zippered body bag liner. The Department of Health and Social Services’ State Medical Examiner Office recommends either bio-seal heat-sealed body bags or self-adhesive body bags. The outer bag should be cleaned with an EPA-approved emerging viral pathogen claim, as directed, prior to transporting on common carrier.
- PPE should be used at all times when handling a decedent whether the body is in a body bag or not.

Resources

- The White House: [The President’s Coronavirus Guidelines for America – 30 Days to Slow the Spread](#)
- National Funeral Directors Association: [Coronavirus Guidance for Funeral Directors](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [CDC FAQs COVID-19 and Funerals](#)
- Please contact the Medical Examiner’s Office with further questions: 907-334-2200