State of the Profession Report:

COVID-19 and Funeral Service

Sponsored by eFuneral and Homesteaders Life Company

$30 Value
Foreword

eFuneral and Homesteaders Life Company are pleased to co-sponsor this 2020 "State of the Profession Report: COVID-19 and Funeral Service." The global pandemic has had an immeasurable impact on all of our lives – personally and professionally. Paired with the ever-evolving consumer demand, funeral professionals were forced to adapt by pivoting toward technology while reshaping the way they approach preneed and at-need services in order to better serve their customers and maintain their business’ profitability during the health crisis.

This report gives you an exclusive look into how almost 250 funeral professionals and industry leaders responded to the shifting landscape caused by COVID-19, providing insights on the impact it had on their business model, including:

- Staffing and service restrictions.
- Access to personal protective equipment.
- Adjusted consumer approach to preneed and at-need planning.
- The expedited adoption of emerging technology and digital solutions.
- And much more!

eFuneral and Homesteaders want all funeral professionals to have access to this important information, so we are pleased to make this report available to everyone for free. We are confident that this report will help you navigate through a shifting landscape and become an invaluable resource for the prosperous future of your business.

Luke Frieberg
President
eFuneral Solutions LLC
Funeral service may be considered essential, but when it comes to supplying the profession with personal protective equipment ... not so much.

That was all too clear based on the results of a COVID-19 survey conducted by Funeral Service Insider, a weekly electronic newsletter for death-care professionals, at the end of the first quarter and into the second quarter of 2020. The survey drew responses from 237 death-care professionals – with more than two-thirds reporting trouble getting the PPE they need.

With supply shortages hitting different areas at different times, in some cases firms have done themselves a disservice by not securing PPE when they had the chance, says Dan Isard, managing partner of The Foresight Companies.

“‘We have many owners who did not believe this was happening,” he says. “They waited to secure PPE and are now fighting for PPE the way consumers are fighting for toilet paper. As the price went up 100% to 200%, many just did not want to pay that much for it and continued to shop. Of course, they got shut out.”
John McQueen, vice president of customer experience at Foundation Partners Group, says early on, Anderson-McQueen Funeral & Cremation Centers in St. Petersburg, Florida, (an FPG firm) had difficulty obtaining everything from PPE to hand sanitizer to toilet paper and paper towels. “Fortunately, we have several microbreweries in the area that switched their operations over to making hand sanitizer, which helped,” he says. “However, now we have seen this problem improve significantly as suppliers have been able to ramp up operations to better meet demand in both our professional and personal lives. I do believe that the increased sanitation efforts by all companies, including funeral service, will continue into the long-term future. Governments currently mandate it in many cases, but customers are going to demand it going forward. In fact, I think it is something that firms are going to have to make ‘visible’ to customers, so they see we are doing it to relieve them of their worries.”

Numerous respondents said they have placed orders but have not received product – or that it’s taking longer than usual to receive orders. Items cited most often were hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, masks and gloves. Specific responses included:

- We were challenged as everyone else was at the beginning in getting N95 masks, sanitizer, disinfectant.
- Out of stock, backordered, not qualified as an essential business on Amazon therefore they will not sell PPE to us.
- Our usual supply sources have dried up. We actually got scammed online trying to buy hand sanitizer. A shortage of body bags exists!
- No masks, no pouches. All on back order.
- We are unable to get what we need.
• Orders submitted have been canceled by our source because of a shortage of available supplies.

• We’ve experienced a shortage of masks and gloves. Luckily, we had a backup supply of gloves and have not run out yet. We’ve been using reusable cloth masks when possible to conserve N95 masks for known COVID-19 cases.

• Masks are the biggest problem. Any type of mask is hard to come by.

• We contacted FEMA, the State of Illinois, and the local and county health department. None could help.

• Companies are charging more for items. Disinfectant is so hard to find.

• Funeral supply companies basically have run out of PPE. We’ve had to research other companies that we normally don’t use to get supplies, which are very limited. Our concern now are disposable gowns. When we do order PPE, it is typically three times the amount we would typically pay.

• We are not able to get gloves, N95 masks, gowns or hooded body suits or face shields. Told front-line workers come first.

• Gloves, hand sanitizer, gowns, disinfectant spray, and prep-soap have all been ordered and either not received yet or very limited quantity allowed.

• We are out of body bags with nothing in the pipeline. Our state association has helped with other PPE.

• We were very low on masks until we found an alternative source.

• Many supplies are back ordered. Lucky for us, local manufacturers are stepping up to the plate and manufacturing face masks, shields and cleaning supplies.

• I ordered masks, gowns, foot protection and body bags two months ago and have still received nothing.

• Can’t grab it fast enough when it becomes available.

• Five weeks ago, our normal suppliers ran out. However, we reached out to suppliers from other industries and they have met our needs very well.

• Ironically our normal funeral suppliers weren’t able to supply PPE when we first ordered it. Our state association and other firms in the state found suppliers through other avenues. Most of our masks have come from a beauty supply company, a local distillery started making sanitizer, which we have purchased for use in the building; a local woodworking company started making face shields, which we have purchased. We eventually received additional
Tyvek suits and disaster pouches from our regular suppliers.

- Masks are impossible to obtain. We are on a waiting list with two different companies. Gloves have not been a problem.

- Until FEMA granted my state an allocation of N95 masks, we had only community-made cotton ones. We also only have three impermeable gowns for our three employees, no face shields, and our employee that wears size small gloves cannot find any. We’ve also struggled with obtaining an approved COVID-19 sanitizer as well as traditional sanitizer and cleaning products.

- We have been told funeral directors are not a priority for PPE. We will receive ours once hospitals, nursing homes, first responders and medical workers have an adequate supply.

- Suppliers have none in stock. We have resorted to eBay and the federal government.

- Our County Office of Emergency Management has been reticent to provide PPE to funeral directors. Highly limited quantities even when requested through our local funeral directors association.

- We are considered essential employees, but we are also considered private businesses and are left on our own to find PPE.

- We are more concerned about the ongoing availability. What we have is what we have. We are searching high and low for inventory and when found buying it on the spot.

- Many items we need are back ordered. Our county provided funeral homes with some PPE, which was very helpful.

- Most distributors either cannot get the PPE or disinfectant chemicals requested, or they are severely limiting our quantities requested due to extreme demand.

- We cannot get masks, body bags, specialty embalming chemicals, cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer – everything.

- There is a limit to the number of gloves we can order. We were able to get smaller amounts from several suppliers instead of just one. We had to source body bags from another source, too. So far, we’ve been able to get what we need but with a little more research and expense.

- We are just clutching at strings when emails or random tips come in about a supply of something here or there. My mother, the owner, has been under self-quarantine for almost two months due to lupus. She placed two different orders
from different companies that had 1,000 minimum quantity for face shields and disposable N95 masks that we then just put out to different places who needed donations like hospice care and other funeral homes that might want to buy them.

- Disinfectant and general supplies like bleach are difficult to find. We still don’t have bleach. Suppliers are back ordered, and they are sending partial shipments as they become available.

- All regular supply chains have had their supplies redirected to FEMA, which seems to have forgotten about us.

- I have called all suppliers and they have only gloves.

- We are unable to procure any surgical masks. It’s also difficult to get disinfectants from our normal supplier. We’ve had to get creative and call around to different companies.

Jay Dodds, president and chief operating officer of Park Lawn Corp., says a PPE shortage makes sense as the whole world was pretty much caught off guard. “We were able to find enough to get by, but it was a challenge,” he says. “We will not be caught off guard again, as a lesson learned was to be prepared.”

Ernie Heffner, president of Heffner Funeral Chapel & Crematory in York, Pennsylvania, has been shocked and appalled by the failure of some firms to provide staff with adequate PPE. In one county he serves, the coroner tried to get firms to pool their resources after inadvertently discovering that some firms had zero PPE on hand. “Serving in a world that has universal precaution standards, I was taken aback that any firms would be shamefully operating with such wanton disregard for set standards failing to have proper PPE as standard supplies on hand to protect their staff. Maybe those firms should close their doors,” he says.

Nelson Thulin, director of business consulting services at Johnson Consulting Group, was alarmed when he first heard of PPE shortages, but those concerns were eased once firms that were not as hard hit began to share resources with those in need. “This level of professional cooperation and proactive attention to inventory resolved many of the concerns,” he says.

However, the crisis should prompt funeral professionals to ask themselves whether they have become complacent in their commitment to universal precautions, Thulin says. “Clearly, there are regions of the country in which the increased call volume stressed the normal inventory of PPE, however, for many more the volume likely did not impact the use of PPE as much as a return to a stricter compliance to universal precautions,” he says. “Lesson learned: If you want to maintain a safe work environment and healthy employees, then maintain a strict adherence to universal precautions.”
Dale Clock, co-owner of Clock Funeral Home in Muskegon, Michigan, was one of the funeral home owners who did not have an issue getting PPE. “Any shortages were very short lived,” he reports.

**Concern Is Widespread**

Fifty-three percent of respondents said they were “very concerned” about the COVID-19 pandemic and 31% are “concerned.” Ten percent said they were “somewhat concerned” and only 6% said they were “not very concerned.”

Isard thinks the crisis is having consequences. “We are seeing the average family spending between 7% and 12% less,” he says. “This is due to the inability or the lack of desire to spend money for gatherings (e.g. visitations, wakes, memorial services and funeral service in a chapel or off site). This is money with no cost of goods associated with it, so the loss of revenue affects the bottom line directly.”

As a result, profit margins will go down, Isard warns. “Companies that were budgeting EBITDA of 20% might now be 8% to 13%,” he says. “This impact is very pronounced if a company has a lot of debt and needs this cash flow to cover that debt.”

With changing consumer preferences as a result of the pandemic, the funeral home of 2021 will need to be a different business than it is today, Isard says. “We have gathered together as people, whenever death has taken a member of our family or community,” Isard says. “The fear of death brings us closer. Yet coronavirus does not let us exchange those social expressions when we need them the most.”
For the most part, as the country returns to normal, funerals will too, McQueen believes. “However, there will be some continued or lasting effects from COVID-19,” he says. “We have actively engaged in a variety of new measures that facilitate online or virtual arrangements, and I believe these will continue, but the number of virtual arrangements will subside. In addition, at Anderson-McQueen, we have been conducting webcasts for quite some time – especially with families who chose a package because it was included. However, this number has increased during the crisis period. Another area that was new to us regarding services was Facebook Live. Families have really embraced the use of Facebook Live to stream funerals. I think this will continue, but our challenge will be finding ways to keep us involved and to replace revenues that may be lost due to free livestreams, such as Facebook replacing paid webcasts.”

It is too early to know if the pandemic will have any long-term effects on the profession, Dodds says. “The impact across the profession ranges drastically between ‘hot spots’ and those places that experienced very little change in direct COVID-19 impact,” he says. “The obvious change was with the governmental restrictions placed on funeral attendance. Those progressive firms that were somewhat ahead of the curve with technology options and the attitude of ‘what can we do, versus what can we not do’ seem to have weathered the storm. The bigger impact will be seen in the future as we continue to apply the lessons we learned during this pandemic to our future operational norms.”

As for Park Lawn, Dodds says the company is doing well as its leaders have an attitude of service. “Most have had experience with local disasters like floods, hurricanes, tornados, blizzards, power outages, etc. that tend to bring the best from the profession,” he says. “The firms that are in the hot spots have really had a difficult couple of months, but the business teams have rallied around each other to help keep spirits high.”

Dodds is hopeful that the worst of the pandemic may be over, but he notes there are many unknowns. “Already many states are beginning to ease restrictions, and once we can have attendance levels around the 100-person level, most businesses should be back to somewhat normal operations,” he says. “I do think that technology will play a bigger part of the overall funeral service in the future. Many funeral homes have come up the curve in the use of various applications, and once a funeral professional is comfortable, they are more confident to offer this service to their communities.”

Jennifer Graziano, vice president at Coxe & Graziano Funeral Home with locations in Mamaroneck, New York, and Greenwich, Connecticut, says her firm is trying to strike a balance between handling the volume of cases but not sacrificing service. “It is easy to succumb to a ‘factory’ or ‘mill’ model where families become
a number,” she says. “We have desper-
ately tried to rally against this. We had
never stopped allowing families an op-
opportunity to view their loved one, even
if the deceased suffered a COVID
death. We continued to have private
family viewings for two hour blocks of
time versus the traditional four hours
offered to the public. We continued to
write obituaries, customize memorial
packages and do all we could to as-
sume some semblance of normal.”

As to the long-term ramifications
of the crisis on funeral service, Graziano
thinks they could be profound. “Prior
to COVID, we were facing the era of
simplified grief,” she says. “Families
were more frequently opting to forego
the traditional wake and second-day fu-
neral and replace with a hybrid of wake
and funeral services in one morning.
People were quick to equivocate,
‘Mom’s friends are deceased, no one
will come to a wake’ or, ‘We don’t go
to church, Dad hadn’t gone in years,
why have a Mass?’” She continues, “I
think this boils down to, you don’t
know what you have until it’s lost. I truly
believe few will take for granted the
value of a hug going forward, since we
have long been forbidden to give one.
Not having a chance to properly say
goodbye has caused complicated grief
for so many mourners. I’ve heard sto-
rries of families who dread going to a
grocery store, because they feel they’ll
relive their loved one’s death all over
again, as local town people were never
able to go to a wake and therefore will
offer condolences upon seeing them.
Wounds that aren’t properly healed will

Transporting the Deceased

We asked respondents whether or not
they had suffered any difficulty transport-
ing deceased individuals who had died of
COVID-19 across state or national lines.
While most respondents reported no issues
transporting bodies across state lines, trans-
porting remains to other countries proved
to be a harder task. Responses included:

• We have had issues with shipping inter-
nationally. We held one individual for over a
month as Nicaragua had restrictions pre-
venting us from transporting to their country.

• We transported two corona cases out of
state. In both cases, we first checked with
receiving cemeteries. Both cases were suc-
cessful.

• Initially we were unable to transport to
New Zealand at all. The deceased was
buried in Australia instead. We are currently
in the process of transporting to England
and are having difficulty with flights being
canceled.

• We have had funeral homes in other
states come to pick up embalmed dece-
dents from our care but have not shipped
any remains via common carrier since the
pandemic started.

• We have transported but have not had
any difficulty. The state we transported from
requires we carry a document verifying we
are an essential service who is approved to
be traveling.

• Airlines required a Ziegler case of a
COVID-19 deceased, which added to the
cost.

• We could not get a letter of nonconta-
gious disease, and the consulate would not
let us ship into the country. The family will
have to bury in the U.S.
undoubtedly leave scars. It is my hope that this tragic experience will breathe new life into the way families make funeral arrangements.”

The COVID-19 crisis has had a dramatic short-term impact, Clock says. “For three months, all of funeral service has had to tell our families that they can’t have many of the services they want,” he says. “Nearly all of those families have been understanding because the rest of their lives have been changed, too. Over the passing weeks, funeral service became more creative to allow some ways to have families share their stories and for friends to show their support. I do believe that this crisis will teach families just how valuable gathering together is.”

As for his firm, Clock says it is doing just fine – in fact, more than fine. “From a financial point of view, this has been a blessing in disguise,” he says. “Our firm applied for and received a Paycheck Protection Program loan. Plus, we have long-term mortgages that are SBA loans, which means the monthly payments are being made by the SBA for six months. Between these two sources, we received a cash infusion into the business of nearly 15% of our normal annual income that will not have to be repaid. So even though our average income per call is slightly reduced, the overall monthly income has been good because of a slight increase in volume. My bank accounts haven’t looked this healthy in years. I have heard similar stories from other funeral directors around the country.”

Like McQueen, Clock thinks that once social distancing restrictions are eased, funeral service will largely return to normal. “While we have learned that the use of livestreaming, Zoom meetings, drive-by visitations and others met a need during the crisis, I think the use of these services were in no way superior to or replacements for face-to-face gatherings and hugs from family and friends,” he says. “But cremation will continue to rise in many areas and the public viewing of the body will continue to be of lesser importance. I do not believe the COVID-19 crisis will speed up this change in preferences.”

An obvious change will be an expectation for better sanitation, according to Thulin. “Funeral homes and cemeteries offering catering will need to consider how to alleviate the public’s safety concerns,” he says. “I suspect that other innovations such as remote arrangements and streaming services, which have been available for a long time but not widely used, will continue but at a lesser degree than during quarantine.”

Like the introduction of HIV in the early 1980s, this virus has brought out the best of the profession ... and has also shed light on some of its shortcomings, Heffner says. “Some firms I’m aware of have made heroic efforts to serve their communities from working extraordinary hours to adding additional temporary refrigeration to providing hotel accommodations for staff to minimize the chance of associates taking the virus home and infecting their families,” he says. “Some firms
have experienced significant increases in case volume. Some due to the virus and some due to the refusal of competitor(s) to serve families. One can only imagine that those families will long remember who was there when needed and who was not.”

Tyler Anderson, vice president of business development at Precoa, chooses to focus on the good he’s seen come out of the crisis. “The natural human desire for connection through ceremony and ritual at a time of loss is incredibly powerful, and it has been inspiring to see it arise in so many unique ways,” he says. “Many funeral homes had to quickly pivot to streaming funeral services because of social distancing and stay-at-home mandates, and others even projected services on drive-in movie screens. Some funeral homes also broadcast services on local AM radio stations. People could sit in funeral home parking lots listening to funeral services, which allowed them to simulate the experience of gathering to support their loved ones.”

While these experiences do not replicate the experience of gathering in-person, they have demonstrated how critical it is to connect in times of grief, Anderson says. “With the COVID-19 crisis, the need for connection has become profoundly apparent,” he says.

David Nixon, president and CEO of Nixon Consulting, says the pandemic’s impact has varied. “Some of the rural areas don’t seem to be as affected, but all firms are suffering from the revenue strains in terms of the losses in gatherings,” he says. “The big question is the timeframe ... how long is this going to last?”

Cremation and Services
Since the crisis began, 42% of respondents reported cremation had gone up and 56% said it had stayed about the same. Two percent reported cremation going down.

Anderson-McQueen in St. Petersburg, Florida, is already in an 85% cremation market – and there has been no noticeable increase since the crisis began, McQueen says. But he has heard from FPG’s area vice president for the South region, Martin Wingate, that the area has seen a significant rise in cremation due to COVID-19 in many markets that are traditional burial markets. “Obviously, this change has required some of our teams in those areas to change the way they serve families, but we have been fortunate to have many talented team members who have risen to this challenge and done a great job serving families,” McQueen says.

Anderson-McQueen has seen an increase in the number of ID views by families – whether in person or online – prior to cremation, McQueen says. “Families have told us they were not allowed to see Mom or Dad in the hospital or in the nursing home prior to death because of mandatory lockdowns,” he says. “Therefore, they want to see their loved one and say goodbye before we cremate them.”
Isard, however, says the idea that cremation has gone up as a result of COVID-19 is “nonsense.” He explains, “Direct burial and direct cremation went up, but cremation did not raise. Besides, you can’t even measure an increase until we get to year end. Like any individual month, you could have an increase. Many still separate out cremation as a prejudice. They do not understand that cremation and burial are all funerals. Pricing must be equal for burial and cremation.”

Park Lawn did not see any change to its cremation rate during the first two months of the pandemic, Dodds says. “We are tracking exactly where we were over the preceding 12 months. This surprised me a bit, I felt that we might see an increase in our cremation rate due to the restriction on funeral services. To this point we have not seen a change in disposition due to the pandemic,” he says.

Clock notes his firm was already at 70% cremation and little has changed since the onset of the pandemic. “Out of the over 100 cases that we have handled since this started, we have only had three families that chose to cremate instead of bury because of this crisis,” he says. “The main difference is that we have only had private family gatherings/viewings/graveside services instead of public services. Several families have opted for no embalming because they couldn’t have a public visitation.”

Heffner says his six locations saw an 8.5% spike over budget in its companywide cremation rate (59% budget versus 64%) in April. However, the firm’s year-to-date cremation rate was exactly on budget at 59%, he notes.

Based on JCG’s Performance Tracker analysis of over 12,000 contracts reported in April, that portion of the profession saw a significant increase in direct cremation as a part of overall cremation case mix – 72.9% versus 56.9% last year, Thulin says. Comparatively, traditional burial and graveside service registered significant
changes: 2019 traditional burial (25%) and 2019 graveside service/immediate burial (4%) versus, 2020 traditional burial (16%) and 2020 graveside service/immediate burial (11%). Overall sales averages went from $3,839 (2019) to $3,486 (2020), he says.

“I am not surprised that 42% of firms experienced increased cremation volume during COVID,” Graziano says. “I found our cremation numbers to be commensurate with the normal percentages despite the adjustment for the increased volume. I was surprised, however, to see the amount of burials and entombments we had during the COVID crisis. I would have expected higher cremation rates at our firms.”

Nixon points out that during The Great Recession of 2007-2009, cremation ticked up at a greater pace than usual and never went backward. “Everyone has to look at their business model and see how they can sustain themselves,” he advises.

Survey respondents reported many families have signaled an intent to hold a memorial service at a later date when COVID-19 restrictions have been eased – with 26% of respondents saying that more than 75% of families have expressed such a wish.

That mirrors what Anderson-McQueen is seeing as well, McQueen says. “We are now seeing families who could not initially have services due to lockdowns begin scheduling services further out,” he says. “Much of this has occurred because our team members are reaching out proactively and encouraging them to “get something on the calendar” to ensure we have the timeline they desire and to make sure the family and the community has a chance to grieve the loss.”

Park Lawn is also seeing a large number of services scheduled for the future, Dodds says. “It seems interesting that when people are not allowed to have a public funeral, they tend to want it even more!” he says. “Alan Wolfelt, in a recent article, talks about grieving families, says they need to have a minimum of three ceremonies to foster healing. Whether they are private or public, they represent a time for family and friends to process their grief through mourning. We have developed package offerings to share with families that give them the ability to have a public gathering in the future. Permanent placing of the urn or memorial unveilings are a couple of the events that we offer for public ceremony.”

“We have a drawer full of case files of families that have said they want to do a service when restrictions are lifted,” Clock says. “We will start contacting them as soon as we can have functions. I’m sure that some of those folks will choose not to do anything. We will be keeping very accurate data on all of that so we can analyze all of it later.”
Like all service decisions, the degree of family involvement will determine the extent of the services and – in this case – the follow through, Thulin says. “Funeral homes will need to remain engaged with the families during this time of separation between the death and the service. I would suggest tying the future service event to a date which will enhance the purpose and meaning of gathering together again. Birthdays, anniversaries, family reunions or other meaningful traditions.”

It was Graziano’s intention to work with every family on planning a later memorial, but she knows not every family will choose that option. “I think some might see this delayed mourning as a reverse direction on their journey of grief,” she says. “For those who are trying to move forward, a delayed service may present a setback. However, I do believe that grief must be dealt with and those who refuse to do so will pay the price down the road. There will be an unconnected triggering event that calls them to relive the pain and agony of the loss they didn’t deal with. Therefore, our firm will attempt to reach out to every family that came in during the COVID crisis and offer assistance with planning a memorial.”

But firms should not consider future planned services to be money in the bank, Isard warns. “I suspect we are going to be competing with hotels, catering halls, private clubs and others in the hospitality business. For most funeral homes, we are not equipped to fight that fight with that competition,” he says.
Heffner adds, “We’ve already experienced preneed fulfillments choosing to have prepaid monies refunded for ceremonies that would need to be deferred to a later date. So if those who have prepaid are electing refunds, how reasonable is it to expect those who have not prepaid will act differently? This may also be a reflection of record unemployment rates and consumer confidence in general.”

**Preneed**

Asked about preneed, 58% of respondents report it going down, 32% say it has stayed the same and 10% say it has gone up.

Park Lawn has seen a small drop in appointments due to customers not walking in to prearrange or not wanting to meet in their home considering shelter in place orders. “Our sales counselors have been working very hard in continuing to see customers (online) in addition to holding seminars via a technology application,” Dodds says. “The big takeaway is that although preneed has slowed, the backlog has grown considerably. The pandemic is a trigger event that gives the counselors a great segue into a conversation about end-of-life planning.”

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, what has happened to the number of families prearranging?

Answered: 230  Skipped: 7

![Bar chart showing the number of families prearranging]

“The number of prearrangements has been down,” Heffner says. “Assuming this is universal reality for the profession, then no market share is being lost or gained as a result of current levels of preneed activity or lack thereof. What this means for the financial health of firms moving forward is that firms are not currently backlogging additional liability for the future.”

“It is certainly understandable that many may be cautious of pressing the preneed button, but for those who delay too long, it will have an impact eventually,” Thulin says. “For those firms which believe in their preneed programs as an essential part of their full-service commitment to the community rather than simply
a sales program, they will embrace this time as an opportunity due to the public’s heightened awareness for the need to plan.”

Any funeral home with an active preneed program has likely seen a decrease in prearrangements since March, Anderson says. “This decline will have a material short-term impact in sales volume and should have a minimal long-term impact on the financial health of a funeral home,” he says. “That said, if a funeral home does not have a robust preneed program and is not positioned to weather the challenges presented by COVID-19, they may certainly see longer-term headwinds because of the decline in prearrangements.”

But this decline should be temporary, Anderson emphasizes. “Over the past four weeks, we have seen an upward trajectory in preneed sales that we would credit to the quick implementation of remote appointment options and several proactive strategies,” he says. “These include sustained marketing that has been adapted to the sensitive COVID-19 environment, and focused training efforts so advance funeral planners could seamlessly transition from in-person appointments to remote appointments and back again.”

Dean Lambert, senior vice president of marketing and communications at Homesteaders Life Company, says, “The most significant opportunity for engagement will emerge due to the focus on personal well-being and economic health of the household. People will be thinking about healthy living and making decisions that result in financial stability. There is no reason why funeral home messaging cannot be focused on both, and consumers who prearrange agree it is an excellent decision. If you do not have an active preneed outreach and your team members are not 100% in sync on the business benefits of securing funded advance funeral plans, the time to achieve this is now. This includes overcoming the fear over a consumer having control over the shopping and planning experience (meaning, you definitely need to have a funeral planning storefront on your website).”

**Staffing and Salaries**

About 13% of respondents said that they laid off staff as a result of the crisis – with part-time and unlicensed staff seemingly being the most affected.

Several respondents noted that they had made efforts to limit or eliminate exposure to elderly staff or those with pre-existing conditions. Responses included:

- We reduced part-time associates from 20 hours a week to seven hours per week.
- Funerals are limited to 10 people and we do not need as much staff.
- We are a small rural firm. All of our employees are retired. I do not want them to contract the COVID-19 because of me. I am the only licensed staff member and the owner.
• We’ve outsourced all of our first calls for safety, and so we laid off our first-call driver on a temporary basis. With the expected downturn in revenue because of gathering restrictions, we asked for volunteers to furlough and three people raised their hand because they were older and concerned about their own safety.

• All part-time staff have been let go as of now because we are having few services.

• We’ve laid off two administrators.

• Clerical staff was all furloughed.

• People are working less but no layoffs.

• Layoffs were multitiered. First, to get people to stay home for their safety. Second, with limited services, there isn’t a need for as many staff members. We also want to limit the number of people in our buildings to avoid contamination and/or cross contamination among our facilities.

• All support staff has been laid off.

• Part-time staff – there is not enough for them to do. We have kept full-time staff at this point, but we are considering as we go. Not being able to offer full services and visitations ...

• Since we are not having traditional services, our part-time associates are not being utilized at this time.

• Not actually laid off, but our elderly staff was given the option to stay at home. We have since had a number of the staff come back to work on an as-needed basis if they feel safe against the coronavirus.

• Most of our part-time drivers and greeters are not working because of simplified services. We had to lay off a secretary and part-time maintenance worker for
a month due to being unable to have services. Direct cremation with no service or merchandise has exploded. I cannot pay my bills with only direct cremation.

- We have laid off staff over 60 years of age and with pre-existing medical conditions. We’ve had to split funeral director crews to prevent cross-contamination.

- 10 part-time staff members, nonlicensed.

- Part-time workers over 65. We are concerned for their safety.

- Not technically a layoff. Part-time employees just aren’t needed for the direct dispositions we are having. Additionally, many of our part-time employees are of an age that requires I keep them away from exposure to the virus. All full-time people are still working, although less.

“We have not laid off any of our funeral home staff during this crisis,” McQueen says. “However, since our services have been reduced significantly, we have not had the need to call in our part-time staff. With regards to full-time staff, we have worked diligently to reduce or eliminate any unnecessary overtime during this period. However, I do believe as the country reopens and people start resuming services, we will see an increase in the need for additional staffing and those levels will return to normal.”

Commenting on layoffs, Isard says it is “shortsighted.” He adds, “I am not saying that people didn’t do this. I know they did. However, why would you lay off staff when the mortality rate is going to be the same or more as the same time last year? These jobs do not need to come back as they never left.”

Heffner says, “If there were layoffs, I would expect the jobs and hours to be back if they haven’t returned already. I believe layoffs may have been premature and am aware of some cases in which layoffs were rather quickly rescinded.”

About 8% of respondents said they had instituted some type of pay cut at their firm. Numerous respondents noted that hours for part-time staff have been significantly reduced. Others noted that they were able to reverse pay cuts as a result of getting a Paycheck Protection Program loan. Other responses included:

- Owners and family members in management roles voluntarily taking 20% income reduction.

- Bonuses were taken away.

- Owners have gone unpaid and senior staff have taken cuts.

- An across the board pay reduction: a couple dollars an hour.

- We’ve all taken a small pay reduction to preserve our business.
One respondent noted, however, that his firm has actually increased pay for staff, awarding them hazard pay. Other firms have followed a similar course.

“Each company must do what they feel is appropriate for them and their circumstances to remain viable,” says McQueen, who is not aware of pay being cut among any staff at FPG. “Before reducing the pay of those on the front lines, we have taken steps to reduce or eliminate any unnecessary expenditures. When it came to expenses, my father always said, ‘If you watch the pennies, the dollars take care of themselves.’ In some ways, this crisis may be good for all of us as we look at what expenses we have and are those expenses necessary. It’s a prudent thing for all of us to do, professionally and personally, when times are tight. Our goal should be maintaining many of these reductions when things get back to normal. If we can do that, the financial strength of our companies and families will be tremendous, making us all stronger and more resilient.”

Park Lawn has had a similar experience as others when it comes to staffing, Dodds says. “Due to the low number of people allowed to participate in the funeral service, we simply did not need the staff,” Dodds says. “I do see these staff members returning as attendance is allowed back on funeral services. We appreciate our part-time staff members as they allow us to flex up during our peak times and they have always been a critical component to our model.”

“These figures align with what we have seen,” Thulin says. “Due to the restrictions on mass gatherings, many of the part-time staff had their daily activities reduced or eliminated. The jobs and hours will likely come back, but to what degree?”

Commenting on pay cuts, Isard calls it “a terrible move.” He adds, “Why implement a pay cut and have people work at 100% of the previous month?” he asks. “This is because many funeral home owners/managers did not adjust their
prices accurately. They needed to amend pricing in March and April as they saw families change their spending.”

Cutting pay should be done with caution – if at all, Thulin says. “We worked with our clients immediately to apply for Paycheck Protection Program money as well as other disaster relief funds, and as a result, very few if any instituted any pay cuts,” he says. “I would caution owners from doing anything that may damage employee loyalty. Prior to COVID-19, easily one of the greatest concerns expressed by owners was the difficulty of recruiting and retaining quality staff members both licensed and not. This problem has not gone away: It has simply taken a back seat temporarily. The savvy owner will be looking for high potential employees who may have had their loyalty tested by their current employer.”

Decisions about pay should not be driven by the virus but around business fundamentals, Dodds says. “We consistently review our staffing needs as our revenues increase or decrease,” he says. “We have a target range for allowable staffing as a percentage of revenue, and we review this according to trends and not try to make a knee-jerk reaction over a short-term period. Our people are key to our operations since we are in a relationship-driven business, so staffing decisions are key drivers of our business.”

“Our part-time folks have not gotten many hours because of the reduction in services,” Clock says. “We had one employee that stayed home for four weeks because he has some underlying medical issues and chose not to expose himself to anything. We continued to pay him and he has now returned to work.”

As with layoffs, Heffner is aware of some firms that instituted pay cuts only to quickly rescind them. “I initially perceived pay cuts to be a premature, knee-jerk reaction and the rather quick turnabout by some seems to indicate they realized the error of making pay cuts,” he says. “Conversely, we recently paid bonuses to our associates in appreciation for how they have been professionally serving and their ongoing commitment to helping families during these extraordinary times.”

Graziano’s firm took a similar approach as Heffner. “We were fortunate to have no pay cuts during this time of crisis,” she says. “Alternatively, we were able to render significant bonuses to compensate our directors and support staff for the increased work during these past few months.”

While layoffs and reduced hours are regrettable, the fact that it did not happen at an even more profound level shows “the closeness of funeral service,” Nixon says.

**Livestreaming**

About 59% of respondents said that they have begun offering or expanded their offerings of livestreaming options as a result of COVID-19. An additional 21%
said they haven’t done so yet but are “working on it.”

When asked to comment on whether they have adjusted the pricing of livestreaming or package offerings with a livestreaming option as a result of COVID-19, many respondents said they have incorporated it into a basic service charge or offered it at no charge.

Some respondents noted they are taking advantage of free options, such as Facebook Live or YouTube – and so they are not charging families. Other responses included:

- We immediately put packages together that offered videotaping and posting of the services, providing a second service at no additional cost, and a private viewing at no cost.
- We stopped charging families for the cost of streaming when funerals are held at our locations, absorbing an approximately $200 per funeral charge from our livestreaming supplier.
- We came up with a new package: Private graveside service with memorial service at a later date.
- We didn’t charge for it before and we are not now.
- We are offering this as a value to have services. Most families are not interested in paying for it.
- We offer livestreaming services as well as recorded services in our Limited Gathering compliant packages. We also include livestreaming services as a line item on our General Price Lists.

Have you started offering or expanded your livestreaming options as a result of COVID-19?

Answered: 233  Skipped: 4
• Our supplier, funeralOne, reduced our cost, so we reduced the fee and in some cases have provided webcasting free of charge.

• It has always been a value-added service.

• I work in a small community with limited internet access, so livestreaming is not a viable option as an alternative to gathering. I’ve drawn on my background in hospice and worked directly with families on other ways to feel connected, supported, and recognized as grieving in our community – usually through coordinated activities requested in the obituary.

• It is a new service we are offering, so we have had to charge for it to pay for the equipment used.

• We are no longer charging for it due to the fact we can only have 10 people per service.

• We did not have it before and are currently not charging for it due to the crisis. We are discussing if and when we will charge for it and if it will be built into our service fee, priced separately or if we’ll create a new media package for it via something like Tukios.

“Our funeral homes would fall into the 60% you reference as we have continued offering these services and expanded them with other alternatives for both services and arrangements.” McQueen says. “For the 20% who are working on it, I commend them for getting on board as these options are going to become expected ones by customers going forward.

More families will ask for these services in the future as a result of seeing them offered during this crisis, McQueen says. “For the 20% that have not done anything, I am not shocked as we always have those that continue to wait on ‘new’ things,” he says. “Some may recall my talk for the Funeral Service Business Plan Conference several years ago when I shared Simon Sinek’s ‘Law of Diffusion’ where he talks about the innovators, the early adopters, the early majority, the late majority, and the laggards as it relates to the iPhone. The laggards are the ones who are still using a rotary phone. There will always be a percentage of individuals that will not move forward with something new until they have no other option.”

Clock notes that like others, he’s increased the use of livestreaming and Zoom arrangements, visitations and services. “I have also observed what other funeral homes are doing and watched a number of services from other funeral homes on YouTube and other streaming services. In my opinion, the vast majority of these videos are very, very weak in the terms of production and quality (including the ones from my firm),” he says.
The typical setup is a single camera showing the front of the room and then maybe a closeup of the speaker, Clock says. “That view rarely ever changes for the entire video. The sound quality is usually weak and hard to understand. There is usually one microphone, so if someone from the audience wants to share they can’t be heard. There is no post production to add another camera angle or slideshow video and musical selections played on the in-house sound system rarely come across on the livestream. To adequately produce a superior video of a service will require multiple camera operators, superior sound systems tied into the video software and several hours of post production. The public is used to watching the 6 o’clock news where there are multiple cameras, video clips, attractive hosts that can speak well and look directly into the camera. Funeral service is not ready to devote the resources necessary to make that happen.”

Because of all that, Clock believes livestreaming will fade away once gathering restrictions are eased. “The only new technology that may become commonplace is the use of Zoom-type services during the arrangement conference and maybe a dedicated Zoom kiosk in the visitation room for families to talk and see out-of-town friends and relatives,” he says. “We have had several Zoom visitations and prayer services and they were OK. But like ‘Saturday Night Live’ and other comedy sketches about Zoom, they were filled with folks that didn’t quite know how to work the equipment and the software.”

Heffner shares that in 2007, he signed a three-year contract that enabled his firm to offer high-quality livestreaming to client families. “We had a charge for that service. In 2010, after three years of experience, we did not renew the contract as few clients perceived sufficient value in the offer (read we lost money on the investment),” he says.

More than 10 years later, however, there are more livestreaming options – many at no or little cost, Heffner says. “Fortunately for our company and clients we serve, we have associates on staff younger than me who took the initiative to implement livestreaming and then train all our FDs,” he says. “As a result, whether ceremonies were at our facility, a church or graveside, all ceremonies, at the election of the client family, could be livestreamed. Some families have declined to utilize this no-additional-cost option, but those who have elected for us to do this seem to have appreciated the option. I expect we will continue to offer this long after the pandemic passes.”

Livestreaming has been around a long time, but the demand has not been what one might expect, Nixon observes. “Magically, you get a pandemic and it’s your best friend,” he says. “I don’t think it is going to go away, but it won’t be used at the level we are seeing now. Obviously it needs to be in our back pocket because we don’t know how long this is going to last. I hate to be a downer, but we could
have another event like this. If we have learned nothing else, it is that we need to be better prepared.”

Livestreaming should be an offering every funeral home is focusing on right now, Isard concludes.

“This is just evolutionary,” he says. “In 1900, funeral homes built chapels. To have music, some of the progressive firms bought pianos and organs and had people play background music or perform music as part of the service. Then along came the record player. Many had recorded music. As the sound systems and amplifiers got better, many of the better funeral homes improved on their ability to supply recorded music. The same is being done when it comes to video. The funeral home of the future will have a broadcast production ability the likes of many churches or they will lose the gatherings to churches."

Sick Employees

Less than 6% of respondents reported a member of their staff falling ill with COVID-19 or a suspected case of the virus.

Clock says that a few folks at his firm were exposed to those with COVID-19 and had to quarantine themselves for a few weeks, but no one got sick. “In my 35 years in funeral service, I have never known a funeral director that has gotten sick from any infectious disease,” he says.

“Going into the pandemic, we had no idea what to expect on this subject,” Heffner says. “We did discuss the what ifs and the potential pressures on those not infected in order to continue serving our community. If the entire profession was impacted by 6%, it seems we should feel fortunate that it was that low. Though not infected, the virus did impact a few our PT associates due to concern for pre-existing medical conditions.”

Whether employees have become sick largely depends on location, Thulin says. “There are firms which had nearly their entire staff infected, and tragically some of them died,” he says. “Other firms reported very few known COVID-19 related deaths and therefore their exposure may not have been much more than the average person.”

Navigating Restrictions

When respondents were asked how their firm is navigating restrictions on gatherings in their respective states, at least one confessed to outright ignoring guidelines.

“We ignore all unconstitutional ‘orders’ of any kind,” the respondent said.

Most reported the public being disappointed but understanding of restrictions, but some said mourners were flouting state laws.
None of the funeral directors have had the (guts) to stop this, one person complained. There are two options: Either get in your car or we are not having a service. PERIOD.

Another person said, We are in Oklahoma, and it's a struggle to restrict the numbers at gatherings when the local law enforcement is involved in the gathering themselves. We really need law enforcement to help enforce these restrictions.

Some respondents said they are in states that allow 50 or more people to gather or that have eased restrictions but are abiding by the 10-person rule. Others suggested restrictions have not gone far enough.

I am the general manager of our 11 locations. Prior to becoming a funeral director, I was a medical technologist and microbiology specialist at a large reference laboratory in Chicago, one respondent shared. I have also trained extensively with the United States Public Health Service as a consultant and mortuary specialist. I know the risks of gatherings and put signs calling for social distancing, good hand hygiene, no hugging or hand shaking in all of our locations weeks before stay-at-home orders were put into place.

In South Dakota, there are currently no state-mandated restrictions, but we are following CDC guidelines on gatherings, one respondent said.

Another person said, We are welcoming the restrictions they have in place in Michigan, and we would encourage this to be a nationwide standard. In my opinion, any type of service where the family is present should be suspended. Public health has to be the primary goal here above all else.

There also seemed to be a wide variation in whether or not to include funeral home staff in the overall number or not.
“In Texas, we have gone to doing more graveside services,” one respondent said. “We are restricting families to having seven family members to each service, since we have one clergy and two funeral staff at each service. This way we have 10 attendees.”

Another noted, “Ohio has a limit of 10 people. We aren’t counting the employees as part of the 10, but allowing the family to have 10 people, though all families so far have been under even that number.”

Numerous respondents reported “rotating” people in and out to abide by guidelines, which for many states is 10 people. Others reported using multiple chapels with 10 people each as a way to abide by restrictions – although it is not clear if authorities would approve of such tactics.

“In Pennsylvania, we are limited to 10 people,” one person said. “We have tried to do a group of 10 and then they leave and another group of 10 comes after we clean the facility.”

Another person reported, “Our restriction is no more than five in a group in New Mexico. We have staggered viewing periods for the immediate family and have gone to only graveside services at one of our locations. The weather has cooperated on all our services, so far. The gatherings have been from nine to 20 persons at the graveside.”

“We are under the 10-people rule, so we have cycled people through the four different chapels of our funeral home, so we have been able to accommodate 40 people in separate rooms with our closed-circuit TV system showing the service in each room,” one person said.

Another said, “We are limiting our visitations and funerals to 10 individuals at a time. No congregating in the parking lot. Individuals must stay in their vehicles until the next 10-person rotation. We also have a Bose system that we put outside that allows the individuals in their vehicles to hear the service.”

“Family only, 10 at a time, rotating as we can – three leave, three can come in,” another person said. “Cemetery services are larger as open spaces allow better distance spacing.”

“In Iowa, we have been limited to 10 people,” another said. “We have done arrangement conferences in our facilities with fewer than 10 people as well as conducted arrangements via Zoom meeting. We have had some staggered viewings where fewer than 10 people enter the funeral home to view the deceased. We have had prayer services with immediate family that were delivered several times by the clergy to keep the numbers under 10. We have had graveside services with social distancing and with fewer than 10 people. We also livestream any of these events the family would like us to.”
Some respondents said while they were doing their best to abide by the rules, they were not always successful.

“We are staying within the 10 people guideline for the most part,” one person said. “But that number does grow at times, and we do our best to practice social distancing. All services and viewings have been private/invite only with no times or dates publicly published. We are exploring some different possibilities like memorial drive-bys at this time.”

Another respondent said, “In Wisconsin and Minnesota, we’ve restricted church services and private family viewings at the funeral home to nine. With private family viewings, we’ve done nine at a time with time in between ‘shifts’ to disinfect. Even then we’ve only had between 15 and 20 people. When we’ve had private graveside services, we get the cemetery’s approval to have slightly more than nine people when necessary but always abide by social distancing guidelines.”

“We are in Ohio and are informing families that we will gladly offer a graveside service, however, in accordance with the governor’s guidelines, no more than 10 people may attend,” another respondent shared. “We are offering casketed viewings to the families, on the condition(s) that it is family only, no more than 10 people come at a time, and if need be, we are spacing the groups of 10 out at two-hour intervals.”

Other responses included:

- We have handled this terribly. It seems the left hand is not working with the right. A couple drives up in a single car and I have to keep them six feet apart?!

- We are a trade service, but for pre-cremation viewings we are requiring embalming and only four people at a time in our viewing room.

- In Wisconsin, we have had a gathering restriction being nine people or less. That was met with resistance at first, but people are now more accepting of it. We are doing a lot of private viewings, many cemetery services, livestreaming, Zoom setups and videotaping.

- Illinois has a limit of 10 people. Families are frustrated and most understand. Many are planning celebration of life services when restrictions are lessened or removed.

- Victoria, Australia, has a limit of 10 mourners plus funeral staff. We provide a FAQ and form for families to sign stating they agree to abide by these restrictions and that funerals will not start if more than 10 mourners are present. We require families to provide us with a list of the 10 mourners prior to the service.
• Almost all families do not want gatherings of any kind. They are waiting for the memorial service!

• Our arrangements are generally done over the phone or via video conference or if in person at our funeral home, only one person can come in to arrange the funeral. Our funeral arranger keeps his or her distance at the other end of the table. At funerals, our staff maintain a safe distance, mourners from different households keep their distance from each other, and at burials, we lower the casket prior to the family arriving and then only our funeral conductor remains for the burial service.

• Families told us what they wanted – we didn’t have to mandate anything. They knew what was going on and exhibited self-responsibility.

• No church, chapel services at all. Graveside committal services are held. Depending upon the cemetery, five to 10 people at the site with 6-foot social graces enforced by the cemetery. Some cemeteries lock the entry to monitor the service attendance.

• As of now, number restrictions are lifted for gatherings in Tennessee, but limiting numbers for gatherings is still recommended. We communicate those suggestions to families. Families have been very agreeable to suggestions.

• In Washington state, we’ve suspended viewings and visitations at our facility, and we deliver or ship urns and personal effects rather than having the public enter our facility.

• We are limiting it to 10 family members at our cemetery. No chairs or anything that would be hard to disinfect. We are not lowering the body in the presence of the family to reduce contact of our employees with the family. We are limiting at-need arrangements and sales to two family members.

• California has been up and down: We were at 250, then 50, then 25, then 10, then zero and now we’re back to 10. We are offering a 10-person service at the chapel or graveside, and we have come up with some creative enhancements like an honor procession involving all who would like to participate through the city and through the cemetery as well as livestreaming the service to parked cars within the chapel parking lot.

• We are doing graveside services with 10 people or less. If the family wants a service in our chapel, it is eight people or less including clergy. We are not doing open visitations. If the family wants to view, we limit that to 10 people for one hour or less. Everyone entering the funeral home must wear a mask, and we ask that they bring their own if at all possible. When making arrangements, we are using phone/email – or if it’s a nice day – we make them on our front porch in the
rocking chairs. When making arrangements, we ask for three or less folks to come in together.

- Social distancing has been self-regulating. The funerals are streamed and we have had remote speakers using Facetime on cell phones. At the graveside services, we have spaced the seating and given distancing instructions, which for the most part have been honored.

- Indiana has a restriction of no more than 10 people under the same roof or in a gathering. We have had drive-thru visitations and then immediate family of eight to 10 people for the services inside.

- Ohio is limiting to 50 people at one time. We have made all services private. Visitations were public in the beginning, but nobody from the public were showing up. We are offering recording of services for the families.

- We are following the guidelines established by the state of Indiana. We have them printed and highlighted in order to share with each family making arrangements. All families have been very understanding and often have already come to the realization that services and gatherings will be private.

- Washington allows for immediate family only, in any number, up to 49, as long as they maintain social distancing. This is too many to control, so we set a limit of 15 for chapel services and 20 for graveside services. We are monitoring compliance and will reduce those numbers further if social distancing cannot be maintained.

- Wisconsin has limited our gatherings to under 10. Family traveling from out of state into ours is asked to self-quarantine 14 days prior to contacting. We are asking to not meet in person with those traveling in from out of state but to meet electronically. All seem to understand.

- We took half the chairs out of our chapel and at the graveside. We started livestreaming services.

We also asked respondents to share a tip or word of advice on navigating the crisis. Numerous respondents emphasized the importance of communicating with families and staff – as well as abiding with restrictions in your state. Comments included:

- Our Hugs from Home has been well received. The livestreaming has been much appreciated by families as well.

- Don’t put out blanket statements to the public, we offered general guidelines then upon arranging with each family we determined the needs and discussed what was possible.
• Keep your team and client families updated regularly as restrictions change. Accept that it is not achievable or desirable to make changes to your policies or procedures in the usual paced and thorough way. It is better to make changes quickly then step them back if unintended consequences become apparent than to move too slowly.

• Communication is key – with staff, client families and the public.

• Take orifice spray and cotton on home and nursing home removals to address mouth, nostrils and hands prior to transfer to stretcher.

• Stay calm. God is still in control. He isn’t wringing His hands, trying to figure out what to do. Obey the guidance we’re being given by the experts.

• Pray without ceasing!

• Be patient, be kind and be safe. Families have really liked being able to sign paperwork on our porch.

• We have set strict guidelines for our staff. We have only one staff member in the office at a time and are working staggered shifts. We are a smaller firm and this works well and we are able to sanitize all areas before the next employee comes in.

• Sanitize everything all the time.

• Initially families suggested that they would forgo the funeral and have a memorial later on. We have lately discussed with them the reality of that ever taking place. After the discussion, most of our families chose to go forward with the streamed funeral.

• We rented a refrigerated truck to store casketed remains until the cemeteries and crematories could accompany us.

• We are lucky that we don’t have an overwhelming number of deaths, which has given us the ability to slow down and take extra precautions with every case. Don’t try to do things on the time frame that we are accustomed to – everything is just taking longer to process.

• Take a deep breath and relax. Let your families know that you are doing everything humanly possible to address their needs and that even though scheduling of immediate needs may take a little bit longer, they can be reassured that their loved one and them are front and center.

• Make your own supplies if you can.

• Keep your staff safe! Without your staff, you cannot operate. I am constantly
making sure everyone has the PPE they need and making sure we have plenty of it. If you are having problems getting the PPE needed, check with Amazon. I was able to secure an Amazon Business Account. Because we are critical infrastructure workers and deemed front-line responders, we do qualify to be able to purchase PPE on their website. Instead of telling the families the gloom and doom of not being able to do something due to the pandemic restrictions, tell them what you can do! They are all aware of what is going on in the world, and they know we cannot do many things.

• The best tip I can give is to explain to families from the start what we are allowed to do by local, state and federal guidelines and stick to that. If you waver, even a little, it can get out of hand quickly and you will have more people show up than you are allowed or can handle.

• Leverage local authorities to help manage the social distancing expectations of the customer and community.

• Funeral folders are important items to our communities, so we have begun offering printable documents. People are used to picking up several copies of the obituary/funeral folder at public viewings/visitations. They aren’t able to do that now. Livestreaming is also very helpful. Our firm uses FuneralVue, which gives families the option to purchase a DVD. Facebook Live is also an option, but it is more limited.

• The internet is no substitute for meaningful connection. Encourage community engagement, letter writing, phone calls, and other activities that can help the family feel actively connected in the socially distant time of grief.

• We provide families with extended time for viewing, scheduling 10 at a time.

• We have secured the Scott AV2000 masks from our local fire department. With a 1/4 turn adaptor and p100 filters, they become a full-face respirator.

• Follow what the federal, state or local government officials are declaring. We should all be playing by the same rules.

• Have a written policy for families and stick with it. You will always have people that want to bend/break the rules.

• Communication is the key. We have printed our state and county guidelines and given them to families.

• Stay strong, stand firm in your decisions. Require masks for all staff when they leave their desks, and masks and gloves when attending services.

• Upfront honesty and transparency with a family from the beginning is key.
No last-minute surprises ... we make sure each family that calls is aware of how we are handling things and the options we have and giving each family that wants a service the opportunity to at a later date ... no charge.

• We have suggested during our private family viewings that family members Facetime/videochat friends and family who were not able to attend because of COVID restrictions. They may not be here, but they would be able to see everything. And we are highly suggesting memorial services at a later date, which most families are agreeable with.

• Be careful, move with purpose and don’t rush.

• Times like these emphasize the need to price your services appropriately and not excessively burden merchandise.

• We have found DocuSign to be incredibly helpful for doing as many things as possible virtually. We have had some pushback from boomers and older generations, but I also just had a widowed, lives alone 93-year old man complete absolutely everything digitally for a prepaid prearrangement, from initiating the start of the conversation via our website forms to completing all vitals, signed paperwork and payment without a single complaint. So really who knows? I think I’m realizing it’s more about how helpful but firm you are when discussing doing things digitally with someone who objects for mostly no reason other than that’s not how it’s been done before this.

• Stay in touch with all of the funeral directors in a Facebook group. It helps tremendously.

• Focus on what we CAN do for people, not what we CAN’T do.

• Our families have been so wonderful and understanding and have appreciated all of the ways we have helped them to still honor their family member during this time of restrictions. They have appreciated all of the creative things we have suggested and also appreciate the opportunity to do something at a later date.

• Be the calming and steady place for families. Families are looking at you to be the expert and turning families away or forcing them into limited services is not serving a family.

• Reassure the families that you hate the fact of what is going on with the virus and the restrictions of funerals as well and that you are going to do everything you can to take care of their loved one and them.

• We provide Clorox wipes and hand sanitizer throughout the lobby and chapel. On graveside services, we provide a portable mic wrapped with a protective cover and provide hand sanitizer.
• Do not get caught treating this pandemic like the HIV cases of the early ‘90s. Take the necessary precautions when doing removals and preparation work. Embalmers I have spoken with that have worked with COVID-19 cases have said delayed embalming seems to minimize some risk by denying the disease a new host after the death of the current host. Do not deny families the mourning process by panicking and taking their loved one from them and dumping it at the cemetery with no family there. These families are, in most cases, not permitted to go to the nursing home/hospital to see their loved one when they pass. So, give them every opportunity to safely see their family member. Be the calm in the storm, remember, we are funeral directors. Lead the families with compassion and firmness.

Several other respondents, however, were irate at restrictions being placed on funeral service and the public at large, arguing that fear is being overblown and our constitutional rights are being taken away. Comments included:

• There is no real crisis – only a perceived crisis by the populace who have been programmed with social conditioning to behave out of fear.

• Vote your governor out of office. They have become little tyrants. I fear loss of my liberty and my livelihood far more than I fear this disease.

Final Thoughts
Funeral professionals who continue to focus on the family’s needs and believe in the value of funeral service will thrive in any environment, Dodds says. “What we offer to our communities is an ability for them to mourn and that is a basic human need,” he says. “Funeral professionals are the final responders; we take that title with a high degree of seriousness and will be there when we are called.”

Heffner points out that even with the pandemic, nothing has changed his mission or purpose. “We do what we’re supposed to do,” he says. “Take care of dead people and the devastated, grieving loved ones left behind. We do it to the best of our ability while complying with whatever government guidelines are in place to protect our staff, our clients and our community.” He adds, “For any reason other than a pre-existing medical condition, for those individuals who would unprofessionally discriminate against consumers by denying professional services – i.e., handling of and/or embalming of virus cases – find another livelihood. Professional end-of-life care is not a profession of convenience nor should it be an elective hobby. Imagine if the AMA suggested it would be acceptable for medical professionals to refuse to serve COVID-19 patients for any reason other than a pre-existing medical condition.”
Graziano observes that while it is understood that funeral professionals do what they do for money, there is an added depth and dimension to the job rivaled by no other profession. “What went on during these past few months was tragic,” she says. “It wasn’t simply a matter of dollars and cents. The emotional toll on funeral directors and staff is real and likely they will suffer in some capacity going forward. The emotional impact should not be overshadowed by financial gain. While the crisis had the positive effect of raising awareness to our industry, which is often misunderstood and overlooked; funeral directors need time to process what has happened, and find healing.”

Lambert says things will not return to the way they were anytime soon – if they ever do. “They say it takes 30 days to change behaviors into habits, and most people have been forced to live in a world of home-based activities for far longer than that,” he observes. “Consumers have been compelled to do more online shopping and change the way they interact with one another for a prolonged enough period of time that makes it unlikely they will make a complete return to old ways.”

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