

by Amy Cunningham, CC

ICCFA Magazine author spotlight



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FUNERAL SERVICE

A poorly done transfer of the deceased in front of family members can effectively ruin the funeral experience for them. Put more time and thought into how your firm handles these first calls and turn these potentially awkward moments into positive experiences.

From perfunctory transfer to a transformative experience

One director’s view on how to make a graceful transfer with grieving family members in the room

The funeral consumers I meet aren’t excessively distressed by today’s funerals costs. More frequently, they are infuriated by the insensitive way funeral firm personnel, in the presence of family, transfer the dead to the funeral home from the beds they died in.

“Two men in dark suits came in and suggested we might want to leave the room. Then we heard the creepy zipping of a bag. Then they all left. It felt like they were in a hurry to get to an appointment, or something.”

You yourself have heard this complaint. Funeral home transfer teams can bow and offer condolences until they’re blue in the face, but if they can’t manage a compassionate, careful collection of a deceased person from the room he or she recently died in with grieving family members looking on, they have botched the funeral, and the funeral home’s owner might spend the next three days trying to redeem the whole firm.

It is hard for such a loaded exchange to look as good or seem as smooth as anyone might desire. But the honesty and transparency of the moment is critical.

Detaching medical equipment from the body, quickly reaching to support limbs that might hang down and look a little frightening in order to get the deceased person onto the funeral home’s stretcher—all of those actions performed in the presence of family can be painfully awkward for the funeral home’s hard-working (sometimes up-all-night) trade service or transfer team. In essence, this is a changing of the guard.

But I think success stems from engaging families *more* in the moment instead of fearing their reactions and trying to shield

them from the transfer’s inevitable imperfections. The relocation of the dead from place of death to the next stop on the journey truly holds the most amazing ceremonial potential.

Some transfer teams see this moment of the funeral as the worst part, when they *could* see it as the best—and take greater pride in it. (Dare I say that many of the families wishing to pay less for a casket would pay more for an improved transfer-from-place-of-death experience?)

We need to adapt to modern families wishing to witness as much as they can, even when what those families are choosing to see is difficult. It is not our job to remove them from an experience in order to “protect” them from it.

Let’s face it, the popularity of cremations without any funeral parlor visitation, combined with the success of the hospice movement and home funeral (or just a requested delay in the pick-up) have created an environment where the time spent at place of death *is* the viewing.

At this modern on-the-spot ceremony, family members may have been singing, praying, crying and exchanging stories at the bedside in the 90 minutes since death occurred. The tributes have commenced before the funeral firm’s arrival.

Hospice workers, hospital chaplains and death midwives are facilitating this new kind of working “wake” immediately after death exquisitely well. And families are navigating the liminal space—the time between death and disposition—as best they can.

Enter the funeral director (or the funeral home’s representatives). Yow. Not an easy moment.

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Give them a moment to gaze at their loved one's face one last time. Wait for the nod. If you're not getting the nod, wait some more. The family eventually will nod when ready, and some transfer teams find they can avoid zipping over the face until safely out in the hall.

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Here are some ways funeral directors and funeral home personnel can support, even uplift, a grieving family at point of transfer. Not all of these suggestions will work for every community, but it's my hope you'll get some useful ideas.

1. Clear your head and fill it with compassion on your way to the home, hospice or hospital. Arrive at the agreed-upon time. Stand at the door of the room where the death has occurred, knock softly, then enter. Slowly offer your hand to family members, extend condolences. You've been doing that with every job, right? What's new is what comes next.

2. Ask what the people in the room called the deceased, and if you may use that name for a moment. Walk to the bed, touch the deceased's shoulder and introduce yourself to the deceased by name and say you are there to help. This is a leap, I know. But hang in there with me.

What is said next is open to personal style and cause of death. One possibility is a moment of silence while staring into the face of the deceased (telegraphing nothing but a calm, confident demeanor in death's presence).

A very brief prayer could follow, if the family is religious and no clergy is present. ("God full of mercy who dwells on high, grant perfect rest on the wings of your divine presence...")

Or, you could reflect out loud on the fact that death is "a labor," and that the deceased has successfully gotten to that labor's other side. Death is not a lost battle.

3. Turn to the next-of-kin and ask if everyone has said their goodbyes for now. (You must be willing to spend more time here if family members have still not completely collected themselves. You may have arrived too quickly, so be prepared to back off. Chances are good that they are ready, but you have no good reason to rush them if they're not.)

Check, of course, for wedding rings and personal belongings. Remove if necessary, and offer to the next-of-kin. (Your lawyers may want you to get personal property documents signed.)



The cot cover (from FinalEmbrace.com) that Cunningham uses for making transfers.

4. Again (now, this is key), address the deceased by name and then say, "Forgive us in the coming minutes if we seem in any way awkward or clumsy as we take you to the funeral home. We are doing our level best, and we promise to continue to do our best as long as we, and the others we work with, are taking care of you."

I have found that even the most secular families appreciate this. Soul or no soul. People care that you care and that you are announcing your caring intentions. Did you notice how the family just took a huge sigh of relief?

5. At this point, turn to the family, and say, "Listen, it's fine at this point if you guys stay in the room, but you need to make a little path for our stretcher here. Or—it's up to you—you might want to wait outside in the hallway."

If you're a bit inexperienced and worried about being graceful with the body, your dream may come true: the family may tearfully retreat to the hallway and let you and your partner manage the lifting in private.

I feel grateful when I work for a family who wants to stay in the room. And, if I've got a do-it-yourself crowd, I might allow some able-bodied family help at the feet, in the lift to the rolling cot, at this point.

Family members may not want to do much in the tight space allowed, save tuck the sheet under. Either way, the offer to work collaboratively is what counts.

6. Now it's almost time to zip, but don't

zip yet. Tell the family, "I'm going to cover and close, but before I do, is there any music you would like to put on?" Any smartphone in the room on speaker creates this splendid opportunity.

Any flowers on the bedside table? Ask the family if they'd wish to have the deceased exit with flowers in hand. Gently tug stems out of the vase, and tuck them in.

7. If a zipped bag is involved, start slowing zipping at the feet. (Different state laws on the bag required and different approaches will reign at this point.) Continue to zip at an excruciatingly slow pace.

This is just like a witnessed casket close. Stay formal. Be elegant. Go slowly. Remember the compassion you brought through the door? Use it now most of all.

8. Stop your zipping at the base of the neck, with face of the deceased still exposed. Look up, and lock your eyes on the faces of the family members, indicating non-verbally: "Is it okay to zip over the face?"

Give them a moment to gaze at their loved one's face one last time. Wait for the nod. If you're not getting the nod, wait some more. The family eventually will nod when ready, and some transfer teams find they can avoid zipping over the face until safely out in the hall.

In any case, you've been extraordinarily helpful in preparing this family for the road ahead.

9. I take my leave with the cot cover pictured on this page from FinalEmbrace.com on top of the stretcher, gliding along to music as we roll down the hall.

When the death has occurred in a residence, the exit may be even more effusive and elaborate. A parting poem? Solo sung by a family member? Absolutely.

Even more terrific things can occur when the whole funeral has been held in the residence and you are now on your way to the crematory or cemetery. Turn up the volume of the music; family members could cast rose petals as you graciously depart.

Children or pets present? Get them involved, too. This is it. This is now. No one will ever be quite the same again. □