

Funeral homes

Continued from Page 1A

funeral homes fare on inspections.

The board's website says: "With the exception of egregious or continuing violations, deficiencies noted during routine inspections rarely lead to formal disciplinary action."

State regulators short-handed

Chad Dresselhaus, executive director of the state agency, acknowledged Oregon's the inspection rate is low.

When fully staffed, it will have seven state employees including two inspectors. But for several months in late 2018 and early 2019, the agency did not have an inspector.

An inspector resigned in September 2018 and the agency was unable to hire a replacement until recently, Dresselhaus said.

A second inspector position was approved by the 2019 Legislature for the board's biennial budget. With two inspectors, he expects Oregon's inspection rate to climb.

"We are hopeful that we will be able to satisfy the statutory requirement of inspecting all licensed facilities within a two-year period," Dresselhaus said.

The inspections are supposed to encompass looking at the premises and records of funeral homes, crematoriums and cemeteries.

Another reason the agency's inspection rate is low is due to a "fairly high profile situation" involving revoking the license of Eternal Hills funeral home and cemetery in Klamath Falls, said Dresselhaus, who declined being interviewed and answered questions in writing.

Regulators also spent time fielding questions from consumers and creditors because the cemetery is going through an involuntary bankruptcy, Dresselhaus said.

In addition to revoking



The sun sets over City View Cemetery. KELLY JORDAN / STATESMAN JOURNAL

the licenses of Eternal Hills, the funeral home and cemetery were fined more than \$100,000 in 2017 for a series of violations.

Complaints from small to large

Mortuaries, crematories and cemeteries can face sanctions ranging from reprimands to fines to losing their license, depending on the severity of the offense.

Some violations — cremating a person without the proper authorization and mixing up cremated remains — did show up in a Statesman Journal review of two years' worth of board actions from 2017 to 2019 against funeral home and crematory operators.

In one case, the board reprimanded Canby Funeral Chapel after allowing a friend of an individual to arrange their cremation.

The funeral home had tried to contact a surviving family member. When not successful, they did not try to locate another contact and allowed an unauthorized person to sign the form allowing cremation, records show.

The dead person's daughter found out about her mother's death 10 days after the cremation.

In another case, Cascade Cremation Center in Tualatin was reprimanded after switching the cremains of two people in 2016 due to a labeling error. Records show the company voluntarily disclosed the mistake to the board.

Managers for Canby Funeral Home and Cascade Cremation Center could not be reached for comment.

A variety of violations were found during a 2013 inspection at Eternal Hills in Klamath Falls including unsanitary conditions, shoddy record-keeping and misleading business practices. In a 2016 summary of violations at Eternal Hills that went back for years, inspectors noted that bodies were embalmed without proper authorization and the operator could not provide required paperwork when state regulators requested it. An inspector also discovered cremated remains, including bone fragments, in a vacuum cleaner.

Consumer advice

The state board has a 12-page checklist for inspections. It includes whether advertising is accurate, if pricing is clear and available, the effectiveness of refrigeration equipment and whether remains are properly identified.

Although consumers can't view the inspection reports, they can request from the state mortuary board a list of funeral homes and professionals that have faced disciplinary action dating back to 2007. The list, however, doesn't provide details on what the board alleged the funeral home did.

The information is not currently online because the mortuary board is updating its website. But you can submit a public

records request and get a copy of the disciplinary document free of charge because the information usually is available online.

Consumers also can look up a facility or individual practitioner by name or city and make sure they are licensed.

And consumers may find information by searching the Justice Department's consumer complaint database to see if complaints have been filed. Keep in mind, however, that those complaints may be referred to the mortuary board, or be resolved in favor of the funeral home.

Mike Nicodemus, vice president of cremation services for the National Funeral Directors Association, said there are pitfalls to avoid, and things to look out for when selecting a funeral home.

Because rules for mortuaries and crematories vary from state to state, Nicodemus said he encourages owners to be proactive and do their own checks instead of waiting for state inspectors to show up.

Thirty-seven states require crematory inspections while 13 have no inspections.

"I always tell as many crematory and funeral homeowners that are listening. 'Don't leave inspections up to the state,'" said Nicodemus, a funeral home director in Salem. "You do them on your own. You be your own consumer advocate. You go in as the owner. Check the paperwork."

Openness is crucial when working with clients, he said. Operators of a well-run facility will be comfortable showing people around.

A funeral home that isn't upfront about its practices, services and prices may be one to avoid, Nicodemus said.

A Federal Trade Commission rule requires funeral providers to show clients a price list identifying all the goods and services offered and their costs.

"I tell them ... answer all questions openly and honestly," Nicodemus said. "Show them your facility. Show them how you do things."

Funeral director's perspective

Miles Johnson, owner and director of Johnson Funeral Home in Salem, said he focuses on flexible pricing options for families. This includes listing all options so people can pick and choose what they need for a funeral service.

Elsewhere in the industry, Johnson said it's common to offer a package of services. He said a package approach can be helpful for some consumers, but it's not for everybody because some people may end up paying for items they don't need.

Johnson originally trained for a career in construction. But after realizing he wanted to focus on serving people, he went back to school and became a funeral home owner and director, opening the Salem business with his wife in 2015.

"It's my dream job," he said. "I love serving peo-

ple in their darkest time and helping them navigate treacherous waters."

Funeral homes differ on how much they charge. Some homes are more high-end than others. But as long as the prices are transparent for consumers, that's fine, Johnson said.

He encourages people to check with several places before making a final decision.

"Call around and don't go on price alone," Johnson said. "Get a feel for the person you're going to be dealing with."

He also recommends dealing directly with a funeral home rather than using online brokers selling funeral services that act as a middleman.

Families also can save money and stress with pre-planning, which involves paying in advance to lock in the price and putting wishes in writing. This can help families avoid being taken advantage of while grieving, Johnson said.

As for state inspectors, Johnson's funeral home hasn't had a visit yet. During the licensing process, he sent the agency photographs and had a teleconference with mortuary board staff before opening. But he didn't have an in-person visit.

"It's not a knock against them," he said. "They're busy. If they called me today and said they wanted to see me, I'd say I can't wait."

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