

Dead, in the red

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Services report a rising number of people who can't afford to bury their dead

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A name in this story has been changed to protect the subject's identity.

Grief was the first emotion to seize Sarah Jones after her sister died from advanced cancer earlier this year.

Financial worry was the second.

From her trailer in rural Oregon where she lived with her brother-in-law, Jones called 211info with a nightmarish concern. The funeral home holding her sister's body had just told Jones she had twenty-four hours to come up with the \$500 necessary for cremation. Otherwise, the funeral home said, they would put her sister's body in cold storage and, eventually, a numbered pauper's grave—a typical, legal process for indigent dead.

Like 14 million other Americans, Jones and her brother-in-law are unemployed. In the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, many Americans are facing the painful fact that they cannot afford to bury their loved ones.

"There's not many alternatives out there for people in her situation," says Deborah Willoughby, special projects coordinator for 211info who received Jones' call. "If a community organization has \$500 to spare, they're going to use it to house and feed folks, not spend it on cremations."

The issue of indigent deaths is becoming a "huge problem throughout the country," says

Dr. Mary Ann Sens, president of the National Association of Medical Examiners.

This year, the number of indigent funerals for Multnomah County is already more than twice that of last year, and up more than 30% from 2009, according to the Multnomah County Medical Examiner's Office.

In Oregon, the number of indigent funerals is higher than ever — 317 so far this year, according to the Oregon Public Health Division. In fact, indigent funerals rose sharply after 2008, the year when the economy tanked, and the number has continued to rise. Across the country, reports have come to light of increasing numbers of indigent funerals and families struggling with funeral costs.

"The number of indigent burials is getting higher and higher," says Jackie Byers, research director for the National Association of Counties. While Byers doesn't have nationwide statistics, she says she's been seeing more reports of counties running out of money for indigent burials sooner than in past years.

"There's been an increase in families that are just struggling and can't afford to put together the money to bury their loved ones," says Sens. She believes the issue is most critical in large cities, speculating that rural communities may pull together and bury kindred better. She also believes the issue is more common when it's a distant family member, "like a cousin whom nobody's seen in a long time."

For the staff at 211info, who serve as call-in, resource librarians for the city, Jones's plea was not unusual. 211info received 69 death-related calls

for assistance this year, and staff members say the number of "cremation calls," asking for financial help cremating a loved one, is increasing.

Willoughby describes a failure in systems.

"Traditionally, adult children will contribute to the

"More and more, we are getting calls from caregivers who've just seen an elderly client die. They are grieving, trying to manage the estate, and wondering about their future without a paycheck. On top of all that, they are at a loss for how to bury the body,"

DEBORAH WILLOUGHBY
SPECIAL PROJECTS COORDINATOR FOR 211INFO

funeral, grandma will bring the casserole, family and friends will divide the estate. But nowadays, people don't always have these systems. In this economy, people are more transient and often live in communities where they don't know anybody."

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The economy may not be solely responsible.

"There's been better publicity around the indigent

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