



AUSTRALIAN FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION

17 March 2020

Deputy Prime Minister of Australia
Michael McCormack
minister.mccormack@infrastructure.gov.au

Dear Deputy Prime Minister,

Urgent Funeral Industry needs during COVID-19

Thank you for making contact with the Australian Funeral Directors Association (AFDA) on 6 and 16 March 2020 by phone and for our intervening text message communications. Your Chief of Staff Damian Callachor made contact yesterday to confirm that AFDA's requests and suggestions had been received.

We have not heard from the Office of the Chief Medical Officer and our requests have become increasingly more urgent, approaching the point of alarm. Our members provide an essential service to the communities they serve and it is imperative that they are provided with clear guidance from the Government to assist them in continuing to provide these essential services.

Personal Protective Equipment - stockouts

The funeral industry is now in urgent need of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):

- body bags
- gloves
- coveralls
- P2 masks
- protective eyewear
- hand sanitiser.

Stock levels of many of the above items are low or completely out. The absence of P2 masks carries a severe health and safety risk for funeral industry staff. Hand sanitiser is scarce or entirely depleted. Urgent access to PPE is essential to protect both the community and the staff of our members.

National Funeral Guidelines - need for centralised, clear and consistent direction

The funeral industry in Australia needs universal guidelines that apply to all of Australia. Inconsistent approaches among the States and, separately from the Commonwealth, add to the confusion. Consistency around the following topics is requested urgently:

- body handling procedures and infection control (e.g. life of the virus post death)
- embalming
- viewing (safety and social distancing)
- public gatherings indoors and outdoors (e.g. Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust VIC has imposed a limit of 300 people and the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board WA has imposed a limit of 50 people)
- arranging funerals (social distancing)
- repatriation
- self-isolation requirements for relatives/friends of the deceased
- additional body storage capacity
- offering condolences and signing condolence books

*Promoting
professional
funeral standards*

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- post funeral refreshments
- what type of employee leave is self-isolation
- support arrangements for regional and metropolitan funeral homes with severely depleted staff levels.

Periodic updates to the National guidelines would ensure that all funeral directors in Australia are apprised of the most up to date information available which would have the flow on effect that bereaved families in all States and Territories would benefit from clear, consistent and contemporaneous updates too.

Inability to conduct funerals, bury or cremate due to sustained staff absenteeism

Funeral and cemetery/crematorium staff who become positive to the virus (say 40%), are self-isolating (say 20%) or care-giving to another in need (say 10%) will give rise to a severely depleted funeral sector workforce (say 70%). In regional Australia, many local funeral homes are operated by husband and wife. If positive to the virus or self-isolating, the capability to carry out transfers of deceased, funeral services, burials or cremations will be compromised - in some cases completely. Funeral homes in major cities face similar issues if many or all of their staff are absent. If funerals are delayed due to the absence of funeral and cemetery/crematorium staff and the storage of bodies accumulates, Australia will face a funerals crisis.

Last year approximately 160,000 deaths occurred in Australia equating to around 13,500 per month. If 50% of the population contract the virus (12,500,000) and the mortality rate is 1%, there will be an additional 125,000 deaths in a year, totalling 285,000 or 23,750 deaths per month. The sector could not cope with a 78% increase in deaths coinciding with severely depleted staffing levels. How can we mitigate this risk? We believe that some thought needs to be given as to whether the funeral industry needs to be grouped with other essential service providers (such as the medical profession), and whether exceptions or carve outs from the Government's guidance or recommendations should apply to people who work in the funeral industry. Otherwise, the industry could be operating with severely depleted staffing levels when the number of deaths is considerably more than the norm.

PPE profiteering

There have been several recent instances of PPE items in short supply with medical suppliers being sold at exorbitant mark-ups. For example, N95 masks which normally sell at \$31.95 per pack of 20 are now offered at \$715 per pack, an increase of 2,100%.

AFDA assistance

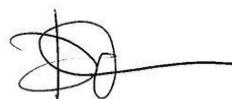
In these times, it is important that the industry, in performing its essential services, has a national and consistent framework for operations. As the funeral sector's peak representative body, we offer to take a leadership role in establishing these guidelines and helping to accelerate responses to all in the industry through simple, consistent, plans and operations. This would allow the government to have comfort in the execution of standard policies and procedures protecting the industry, its employees, the families we serve and the general public. We suggest a single voice at this time would provide comfort and clarity to the users of these services and enable you to reduce duplication across states/territories and industry bodies. We believe as industry leaders we are best placed to advise and implement these actions.

Deputy Prime Minister, AFDA is available to assist with the drafting of National Guidelines, for you to consider and endorse, as required. We look forward to hearing from you, at your earliest convenience.

Yours faithfully,



Andrew Pinder
National President



Dale Gilson
Chief Executive Officer

CC: The Hon Scott Morrison MP Prime Minister
CC: Professor Brendan Murphy Chief Medical Officer