

## Funeral Arrangements

- In Pennsylvania you may name an agent for body disposition if you want someone other than your next-of-kin to be in charge.
- It is legal for a family or designated agent to handle everything without a funeral director. To find a home funeral guide, check: <http://homefuneraldirectory.com/>
- If you will be using a funeral home, prices must be given over the telephone. You must be given a General Price List (GPL) if you visit in person and *before* discussing any services.
- You must be shown a Casket and Outer Burial Container Price List before selecting either.
- You must be given a Statement of Funeral Goods and Services Selected with the total cost before any services are provided.
- Some of the Funeral Consumers Alliance groups do a periodic price survey: [www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)
- **Do not sign any contract for more than you can afford to pay.** There is only \$750 in state funds to assist with costs.

## Autopsy

- If the death was unexpected or the cause of death uncertain, the state will probably require an autopsy.
- If you have questions about the death, you may request and pay for a private autopsy.
- If a viewing is planned, there will likely be extra charges to repair the body for embalming.
- Be sure to pick the funeral home of your choice without pressure to use the coroner's funeral home.

## Organ, Body, and Tissue Donation

- If death occurs in the hospital, you are likely to be asked about organ donation. Only about 1% of the deaths are eligible for major organ donation. The organ procurement organization (OPO) will pay for any extra body preparation needed if you plan a viewing. Decline any such charge you might find on the GPL.
- After-death donation of eyes, skin, and bones may be considered. Ask the hospital social worker or the funeral director about this.

- Whole body donation to a medical school is one way to lower costs although the family must pay for transportation over \$50. After study, the school will cremate the body and return the cremated remains to the family if requested. You should have back-up funeral plans if your body cannot be accepted.
- There are also non-academic companies that accept whole bodies for research and education. Various body parts will likely be shipped around the country and possibly internationally. The state has no laws regulating these companies. Note that this is an entirely different category of body donation from the traditional cadaver donation to a medical school.
- To find the nearest body donation option, the cost if any, and the reasons for body rejection check: [www.finalrights.org](http://www.finalrights.org)

## Embalming and Other Requirements

- Embalming, refrigeration, or a sealed casket is required after 24 hours under the standards for funeral directors in the statutes. No similar requirement is in the public health statutes that would affect home funeral families.
- Airlines prefer that a body be embalmed, but an airtight container may make that optional
- Many funeral homes have a policy that requires embalming for a public viewing. Embalming does not protect the public health. It merely delays decomposition.

## Caskets and Vaults

- Neither is required by state law for burial. A rigid combustible container is required for cremation.
- A casket will not prevent natural decomposition.
- You may build your own or purchase from a casket retailer. Vault dealers rarely sell to the public.
- The purpose of a vault is to keep the ground from caving in. It facilitates maintenance for the cemetery. It has no preservative qualities regardless of how much you spend.

## Burial

- There are no laws that specifically permit or prohibit burial on your own land, but check local zoning. A good practice is 150 feet from a water supply and 25 feet from a power line. There must be two feet of earth on top or 30 inches for a shroud. Draw a map of the land showing where the family cemetery will be and have it recorded with the deed. Cemeteries may be declared "abandoned" or moved for development, unlike other states where burial is a permanent easement on the land.
- If you purchase a lot in a commercial, town, or religious cemetery, you will have the opening and closing costs in addition to the cost of the plot.
- Some cemeteries have restrictions on the kind of monuments or plantings and adornment permitted.
- A permit for disinterment must be obtained from the local registrar, along with a new burial permit. The casket may not be opened without a court order.

The state Board of Funeral Directors has nine members. Two are consumer representatives, five are funeral directors, and two from government.

Cemeteries are supposed to be regulated by the Real Estate Commission.

Some coroners are funeral directors with a potential conflict of interest.

## Cremation

- There is a 24-hour wait prior to cremation.
- A coroner's authorization is required.
- A pacemaker must be removed.
- Some crematories will let the family witness the cremation.
- The cremation process takes about two-and-a-half hours for an average adult. The staff will

remove any metal and pulverize the bone fragments to small particles, similar to white or gray coarse sand, about 5-10 pounds.

- Cremated remains may be kept at home, scattered or buried on private land with the landowner's permission, interred in a cemetery or memorial garden, or placed in a mausoleum niche. If scattering on public land or water, don't ask, don't tell. Park service people are concerned that some may want to create a little shrine at the site and would prefer not to know your plans. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says they must be scattered three miles out to sea. That's because the federal agency has no jurisdiction over the first three miles; the bordering state does. Most states (except for California and South Dakota) have no restrictions on the disposition of cremated remains, and there are no "cremains police" even in those two states. Do as you wish.
- If flying with cremated remains, be sure they are in a non-metal container to pass through the scanner.
- Cremated remains may be sent only by U.S. Postal Service. Use Priority Mail Express with delivery confirmation. FedEx and UPS will not knowingly accept cremated remains.

## Veterans and Their Dependents

- You will need a copy of the DD214 discharge papers for gaining benefits.
- The VA cemetery in Philadelphia is closed to new interments. There is space for both casketed and cremated remains at the ones in Annville, Bridgeville, and Newtown. Interment and marker are free of charge for the veteran, spouse, and certain dependents.
- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides markers for veterans no matter where they are interred. Markers can be upright or flat, and they come in bronze, marble, and granite: (800) 697-6947.
- A free flag can be ordered through the U.S. Postal Service.

- A comprehensive list of veterans benefits can be found here:

<http://www.funerals.org/faq/60-veterans-funeral-and-burial-benefits>

### Prepaying for a Funeral

- If the contract guarantees the price, the interest is supposed to cover funeral inflation. But many investments do not appreciate as fast as the prices climb. You have a right to insist on no extra charges if it is clearly identified in the contract as "price guaranteed." Any substitutions should be of equal **quality** to that described in the contract.
- Third-party items such as the crematory fee or obituary cannot be guaranteed.
- Warehousing can avoid any trust requirements for cemetery merchandise, making a refund impossible.

- If you default on time payments, the funeral director can keep 30% of the contract price.
- The seller gets to keep the interest if you cancel or move; you may not be able to transfer an irrevocable contract if you move.
- Setting aside assets for Medicaid eligibility is the one time it makes sense to prepay for a funeral. There may be a county limit to what you can have in a preneed account. In Bucks County, it is \$14,000. Be sure to ask if you will be getting an annual report of your prepaid funds and let those who will be handling your affairs know that you have prepaid and where.

### Social Security Death Benefit

- There is a \$255 death benefit for a surviving spouse. There is no similar benefit when that spouse dies.
- Dependent children are entitled to survivor benefits when a parent dies.

### Complaints

- Valid complaints include dishonesty, misrepresentation, unprofessional conduct, negligence, breach of contract, and violation of state or federal laws. For how to file a complaint, see: [www.funerals.org/your-legal-rights/complaint](http://www.funerals.org/your-legal-rights/complaint)
- The Board of Funeral Directors: [www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/state\\_board\\_of\\_funeral\\_directors/12496](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/state_board_of_funeral_directors/12496)

Much of the information for this brochure was taken from *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death* (Upper Access, 2011) [www.finalrights.org](http://www.finalrights.org)

Additional information may be found at [www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)

# Your Funeral Consumer Rights in Pennsylvania

## Prepaying the Funeral Home

	Pros	Cons
<b>Pay on Death Savings Account or Bank CD</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ You have total control of the funds.</li> <li>❖ Can easily change plans or use for emergencies.</li> <li>❖ Can make time payments easily.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Asset for Medicaid purposes.</li> <li>❖ You must declare interest on tax return.</li> <li>❖ Penalty to cash CD prior to death.</li> </ul>
<b>Qualified Funeral Trust</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ If irrevocable, it won't be an asset for Medicaid.</li> <li>❖ The trust pays taxes on the interest.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ The funeral home may keep the interest if you move or cancel.</li> <li>❖ There is no guarantee fund to protect against embezzlement.</li> <li>❖ Taxes paid on interest that wouldn't be taxed if you're low-income.</li> <li>❖ Irrevocable contracts cannot be moved, per a court ruling.</li> </ul>
<b>Master or Simple Trust</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ If irrevocable, it won't be an asset for Medicaid.</li> <li>❖ You are supposed to receive an annual report of the interest earned which will serve as reassurance your funeral funds are safe.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ The funeral home may keep the interest if you move or cancel.</li> <li>❖ You will have to declare the interest on your tax return.</li> <li>❖ Can be converted to insurance without your permission. (See below.)</li> <li>❖ No guarantee fund to protect against embezzlement.</li> <li>❖ Irrevocable contracts cannot be moved, per a court ruling.</li> </ul>
<b>Funeral or Life Insurance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Easily portable.</li> <li>❖ If the funeral home is the beneficiary, it won't be considered an asset for Medicaid eligibility.</li> <li>❖ The insurance company pays the taxes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ If you need to cancel, you may not get back more than half you paid.</li> <li>❖ If paying over time, you may pay twice the face value.</li> <li>❖ There may be a 30-day delay in receiving funds for which the funeral home may charge an extra fee.</li> </ul>

Funeral Ethics Organization  
87 Upper Access Rd.  
Hinesburg, VT 05461  
<http://www.funeralethics.org>