

# Funeral Directors

(0\*NET 11-9061.00)

## Significant Points

- Funeral directors must be licensed by their State.
- Job opportunities should be good, particularly for those who also embalm; however, mortuary science graduates may have to relocate to find jobs.

## Nature of the Work

Funeral practices and rites vary greatly among cultures and religions. Among the many diverse groups in the United States, funeral practices usually share some common elements—removing the deceased to a mortuary, preparing the remains, performing a ceremony that honors the deceased and addresses the spiritual needs of the family, and final disposition of the remains. Funeral directors arrange and direct these tasks for grieving families.

Funeral directors also are called morticians or undertakers. This career may not appeal to everyone, but those who work as funeral directors take great pride in their ability to provide efficient and appropriate services. They also comfort the family and friends of the deceased.

Funeral directors arrange the details and handle the logistics of funerals. They interview the family to learn what family members desire with regard to the nature of the funeral, the clergy members or other persons who will officiate, and the final disposition of the remains. Sometimes, the deceased leaves detailed instructions for his or her own funeral. Together with the family, funeral directors establish the location, dates, and times of wakes, memorial services, and burials. They arrange for a hearse to carry the body to the funeral home or mortuary.

Funeral directors also prepare obituary notices and have them placed in newspapers, arrange for pallbearers and clergy, schedule the opening and closing of a grave with a representative of the cemetery, decorate and prepare the sites of all services, and provide transportation for the remains, mourners, and flowers between sites. They also direct preparation and shipment of remains for out-of-State burial.

Most funeral directors also are trained, licensed, and practicing embalmers. Embalming is a sanitary, cosmetic, and preservative process through which the body is prepared for interment. If more than 24 hours elapses between death and interment, State laws usually require that the remains be refrigerated or embalmed.

When embalming a body, funeral directors wash the body with germicidal soap and replace the blood with embalming fluid to preserve the tissues. They may reshape and reconstruct disfigured or maimed bodies using materials, such as clay, cotton, plaster of paris, and wax. They also may apply cosmetics to provide a natural appearance, and then dress the body and place it in a casket. Funeral directors maintain records such as embalming reports, and itemized lists of clothing or valuables delivered with the body. In large funeral homes, an embalming staff of two or more, plus several apprentices may be employed.

Funeral services may take place in a home, house of worship, or funeral home, or at the gravesite or crematory. Services may be nonreligious, but often they reflect the religion of the family, so funeral directors must be familiar with the funeral and burial customs of many faiths, ethnic groups, and fraternal organizations. For

example, members of some religions seldom have the bodies of the deceased embalmed or cremated.

Burial in a casket is the most common method of disposing of remains in this country, although entombment also occurs. Cremation, which is the burning of the body in a special furnace, is increasingly selected because it can be less expensive, and is becoming more appealing. Memorial services can be held anywhere, and at any time, sometimes months later when all relatives and friends can get together. Even when the remains are cremated, many people still want a funeral service.

A funeral service followed by cremation need not be any different from a funeral service followed by a burial. Usually cremated remains are placed in some type of permanent receptacle, or urn, before being committed to a final resting place. The urn may be buried, placed in an indoor or outdoor mausoleum or columbarium, or interred in a special urn garden that many cemeteries provide for cremated remains.

Funeral directors handle the paperwork involved with the person's death, such as submitting papers to State authorities so that a formal certificate of death may be issued and copies distributed to the heirs. They may help family members apply for veterans' burial benefits, and notify the Social Security Administration of the death. Also, funeral directors may apply for the transfer of any pensions, insurance policies, or annuities on behalf of survivors.

Funeral directors also prearrange funerals. Increasingly, they arrange funerals in advance of need to provide peace of mind by ensuring that the client's wishes will be taken care of in a way that is satisfying to the person and to those who will survive.

Most funeral homes are small, family-run businesses, and the funeral directors are either owner-operators or employees of the operation. Funeral directors, therefore, are responsible for the success and the profitability of their businesses. Directors keep records of expenses, purchases, and services rendered; prepare and send invoices for services; prepare and submit reports for unemployment insurance; prepare Federal, State, and local tax forms; and prepare itemized bills for customers. Funeral directors increasingly are using computers for billing, bookkeeping, and marketing. Some are beginning to use the Internet to communicate with clients who are preplanning their funerals, or to assist clients by developing electronic obituaries and guestbooks. Directors strive to foster a cooperative spirit and friendly attitude among employees and a compassionate demeanor towards the families. A growing number of funeral



*Funeral directors explain, arrange, and handle the details of funerals with clients.*

directors also are involved in helping individuals adapt to changes in their lives following a death through aftercare services or support group activities.

Most funeral homes have a chapel, one or more viewing rooms, a casket-selection room, and a preparation room. An increasing number also have a crematory on the premises. Equipment may include a hearse, a flower car, limousines, and, sometimes, an ambulance. Funeral homes usually stock a selection of caskets and urns for families to purchase or rent.

### **Working Conditions**

Funeral directors often work long, irregular hours, and the occupation can be highly stressful. Many work on an on-call basis, because they may be needed to remove remains in the middle of the night. Shiftwork sometimes is necessary because funeral home hours include evenings and weekends. In smaller funeral homes, working hours vary, but in larger homes employees usually work 8 hours a day, 5 or 6 days a week.

Funeral directors occasionally come into contact with the remains of persons who had contagious diseases, but the possibility of infection is remote if strict health regulations are followed.

To show proper respect and consideration for the families and the dead, funeral directors must dress appropriately. The profession usually requires short, neat haircuts and trim beards, if any, for men. Suits, ties, and dresses are customary for a conservative look.

### **Employment**

Funeral directors held about 24,000 jobs in 2002. Eleven percent were self-employed. Nearly all worked in the death care services industry.

### **Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

Funeral directors must be licensed in all States. Licensing laws vary from State to State, but most require applicants to be 21 years old, have 2 years of formal education that includes studies in mortuary science, serve a 1-year apprenticeship, and pass a qualifying examination. After becoming licensed, new funeral directors may join the staff of a funeral home. Funeral directors who embalm must be licensed in all States, and some States issue a single license for funeral directors who embalm. In States that have separate licensing requirements, most people in the field obtain both licenses. Persons interested in a career as a funeral director should contact their State licensing board for specific requirements.

College programs in mortuary science usually last from 2 to 4 years; the American Board of Funeral Service Education accredits about 50 mortuary science programs. A small number of community and junior colleges offer 2-year programs, and a few colleges and universities offer both 2-year and 4-year programs. Mortuary science programs include courses in anatomy, physiology, pathology, embalming techniques, restorative art, business management, accounting and use of computers in funeral home management, and client services. They also include courses in the social sciences and legal, ethical, and regulatory subjects, such as psychology, grief counseling, oral and written communication, funeral service law, business law, and ethics.

Many State and national associations offer continuing education programs designed for licensed funeral directors. These programs address issues in communications, counseling, and management. More than 30 States have requirements that funeral directors receive continuing education credits in order to maintain their licenses.

Apprenticeships must be completed under the direction of an experienced and licensed funeral director. Depending on State regulations, apprenticeships last from 1 to 3 years and may be served

before, during, or after mortuary school. Apprenticeships provide practical experience in all facets of the funeral service, from embalming to transporting remains.

State board licensing examinations vary, but they usually consist of written and oral parts and include a demonstration of practical skills. Persons who want to work in another State may have to pass the examination for that State; however, some States have reciprocity arrangements and will grant licenses to funeral directors from another State without further examination.

High school students can start preparing for a career as a funeral director by taking courses in biology and chemistry and participating in public speaking or debate clubs. Part-time or summer jobs in funeral homes consist mostly of maintenance and cleanup tasks, such as washing and polishing limousines and hearses, but these tasks can help students to become familiar with the operation of funeral homes.

Important personal traits for funeral directors are composure, tact, and the ability to communicate easily with the public. They also should have the desire and ability to comfort people in a time of sorrow.

Advancement opportunities are best in larger funeral homes—funeral directors may earn promotions to higher paying positions such as branch manager or general manager. Some directors eventually acquire enough money and experience to establish their own funeral home businesses.

### **Job Outlook**

Employment opportunities for funeral directors are expected to be good, particularly for those who also embalm. However, mortuary science graduates may have to relocate to find jobs.

Employment of funeral directors is projected to increase more slowly than the average for all occupations through the year 2012, as the population and the number of deaths increase. The need to replace funeral directors who retire or leave the occupation for other reasons will account for more job openings than will employment growth. Typically, a number of mortuary science graduates leave the profession shortly after becoming licensed funeral directors to pursue other career interests, and this trend is expected to continue. Also, funeral directors are older, on average, than workers in most other occupations, and should be retiring in greater numbers between 2002 and 2012.

### **Earnings**

Median annual earnings for funeral directors were \$43,380 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$33,540 and \$58,140. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$24,950, and the top 10 percent more than \$84,060.

Salaries of funeral directors depend on the number of years of experience in funeral service, the number of services performed, the number of facilities operated, the area of the country, the size of the community, and the level of formal education. Funeral directors in large cities earn more than their counterparts in small towns and rural areas.

### **Related Occupations**

The job of a funeral director requires tact, discretion, and compassion when dealing with grieving people. Others who need these qualities include members of the clergy, social workers, psychologists, physicians and surgeons, and other health-diagnosing and -treating practitioners.

### **Sources of Additional Information**

For a list of accredited mortuary science programs and information on the funeral service profession, write to:

► The National Funeral Directors Association, 13625 Bishop's Dr., Brookfield, WI 53005. Internet: <http://www.nfda.org>

For information about college programs in mortuary science, scholarships, and funeral service as a career, contact:

► The American Board of Funeral Service Education, 38 Florida Ave., Portland, ME 04103. Internet: <http://www.abfse.org/index.html>