
Funeral Directors

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Significant Points

- Job opportunities should be good, particularly for those who also embalm.
- Some mortuary science graduates relocate to get a job.
- Funeral directors are licensed by the State in which they practice.
- Funeral directors need the ability to communicate easily and compassionately and to comfort people in a time of sorrow.

Nature of the Work

Funeral practices and rites vary greatly among cultures and religions. However, 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 carrying out final disposition of the deceased. 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 comforting and appropriate services.

Funeral directors arrange the details and handle the logistics of funerals. They interview the family to learn their wishes about the funeral, the clergy or other people 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. They also comfort the family and friends of the deceased.

Funeral directors 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 deceased, mourners, and flowers between sites. They also direct preparation and shipment of the body 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 elapse 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 bodies using materials such as clay, cotton, plaster of Paris, and wax. They also may apply cosmetics to provide a natural appearance, 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, funeral home, or at the gravesite or crematory. Some services are not religious, but many are, reflecting the religion of the family. 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 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, in part because memorial services can be held anywhere, and at any time, sometimes months later when all relatives and friends can come together. 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, including submitting papers to State authorities so that a formal death certificate may be issued and copies distributed to the heirs. They may help family members apply for veterans' burial benefits, and they 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 work with those who want to plan their own funerals in advance. This provides peace of mind by ensuring that the client's wishes will be taken care of in a way that is satisfying to the client and to the client's survivors.

Most funeral homes are small, family-run businesses, and many funeral directors are owner-operators or employees with managerial responsibilities. 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 use computers for billing, bookkeeping, and marketing. Some are beginning to use the Internet to communicate with clients who are planning their funerals in advance or to assist them by developing electronic obituaries and guest books. Directors strive to foster a cooperative spirit and friendly attitude among employees and a compassionate demeanor toward the families. Increasingly, funeral directors also are helping individuals adapt to changes in their lives following a death through aftercare services and support groups.

Most funeral homes have a chapel, one or more viewing rooms, a casket-selection room, and a preparation room. Many 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.



Funeral directors explain various details of burial options and arrange funerals.

Work environment. Funeral directors occasionally come into contact with bodies that had contagious diseases, but the possibility of infection is remote if health regulations are followed.

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

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Funeral directors are licensed in all States. State licensing laws vary, but most require applicants to be 21 years old, have 2 years of formal education, serve a 1-year apprenticeship, and pass an examination.

Education and training. 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 few 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 in 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 to maintain their licenses.

Apprenticeships must be completed under the direction of an experienced and licensed funeral director. Some States require apprenticeships. Depending on State regulations, apprenticeships last from 1 to 3 years and may be served before, during, or after mortuary school. Apprenticeships provide practical ex-

perience in all facets of the funeral service, from embalming to transporting remains.

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 also provide good experience. These jobs consist mostly of maintenance and cleanup tasks, such as washing and polishing limousines and hearses, but they can help students become familiar with the operation of funeral homes.

Licensure. All States require funeral directors to be licensed. Licensing laws vary by 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.

Some States require all funeral directors to be licensed in embalming. Others have separate licenses for directors and embalmers, but in those States funeral directors who embalm need to be licensed in embalming, and most workers obtain both licenses.

State board licensing examinations vary, but they usually consist of written and oral parts and include a demonstration of practical skills. People 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. People interested in a career as a funeral director should contact their State licensing board for specific requirements.

Other qualifications. Funeral directors need composure, tact, and the ability to communicate easily and compassionately with the public. Funeral directors also should have the desire and ability to comfort people in a time of sorrow.

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

Advancement. Advancement opportunities generally 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.

Employment

Funeral directors held about 29,000 jobs in 2006. About 20 percent were self-employed. Nearly all worked in the death care services industry.

Job Outlook

Job opportunities are expected to be good, particularly for those who also embalm. Some mortuary science graduates relocate to get a job.

Employment change. Employment of funeral directors is expected to increase by 12 percent during the 2006-16 decade, about as fast as the average for all occupations. Projected job growth reflects growth in the death care services industry, where funeral directors are employed.

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Funeral directors	11-9061	29,000	32,000	3,600	12

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

Job prospects. In addition to employment growth, the need to replace funeral directors who retire or leave the occupation for other reasons will provide a number of job opportunities. Funeral directors are older, on average, than workers in most other occupations and are expected to retire in greater numbers over the coming decade. In addition, some funeral directors leave the profession because of the long and irregular hours. Some mortuary science graduates relocate to get a job.

Earnings

Median annual earnings for wage and salary funeral directors were \$49,620 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$37,200 and \$65,260. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$28,410 and the top 10 percent earned more than \$91,800.

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, and the director's level of formal education. Funeral directors in large cities usually 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 social workers, psychologists, physicians and surgeons, and other health practitioners involved in diagnosis and treatment.

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, 3432 Ashland Ave., Suite U, St. Joseph, MO 64506.

Internet: <http://www.abfse.org>

For information on specific State licensing requirements, contact the State's licensing board.

For more information about funeral directors and their work, see the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* article, "Jobs in weddings and funerals: Working with the betrothed and the bereaved," available in many libraries and career centers and online at:

<http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2006/winter/art03.pdf>