

Senate Bill 2139

Chair Weisz and members of House Human Services Committee, my name is Nic Stevenson. I have had the privilege of serving as a Funeral Director in the state of North Dakota for nearly 20 years and I am currently serving on the North Dakota Funeral Directors Association board. Please consider my testimony in support of Senate Bill 2139.

As a funeral director we are committed, some would say dedicated, to serve our community. We are there to help whenever a death occurs, weather anticipated or unexpected, young or old, we are there to serve the families of our community in some of their greatest times of need. Part of this commitment is serving all families, even if they do not have the means of paying for their loved one's services. When this occurs, we work with our counties under the indigent burial policies to seek financial assistance. This assistance is very limited and sometime nominal compared to the services that we are asked to render to these families; and yet we understand that and we know that it is our duty to care for all members of our communities.

With the Department of Health & Human Services restructuring into human service zones it has removed the obligation from the counties to take care of these indigent burials and in turn placed it on each zone. The North Dakota Funeral Directors along with the Department of Health & Human Services has worked to update the process of indigent burials so that it can be standardized throughout the state. We support Senate bill 2139 and recommend the committee's approval of the amendments.

Several years ago, legislation was passed to allow funeral homes to move forward with the means of disposition when no next of kin could be contacted. This bill will allow Funeral homes along with the county coroner and Human Service Zone director to be legally authorized to fulfill the intent of that law and take care of final disposition for individuals that do not have any next of kin. This also removes the potential liability from the funeral home, county coroner and Human service Zone director for fulfilling the requirement of this bill.

Cremation is the most popular means of disposition in our state at 59% and this rate is projected to grow each year. Cremation is approved by over 95% of the religions in North Dakota and would not create a hardship to the majority of our residents. To update the reimbursement amount for indigent services for direct cremation, we surveyed the current reimbursements agreed upon from the counties across the state. The recommended \$3,500.00 falls in the middle of what counties across North Dakota

currently provide. We also surveyed 34 funeral homes across the state and found that the average cost of direct cremation with no service is \$3,868.00. Because of these two factors, we support the recommended \$3,500.00 reimbursement for indigent services for direct cremation.

The original intent of this bill was that all families eligible for indigent funds must choose cremation. We do recognize the Department of Human services' desire to have a religious exemption to the recommendation of cremation as the preferred means of disposition. The state of North Dakota defines means of disposition as cremation or burial. This means that each funeral director is required to be in custody of the deceased until either the deceased is buried in a registered cemetery or the deceased is cremated. Cremation allows the family to then take custody of the cremated remains, where as burial requires the engagement of the funeral home until the burial is completed. For burial to take place there is a need for embalming, cosmetics/dressing, casket, vault, cemetery plot, excavation of grave, transport to the gravesite, equipment for the graveside service, permanent marker as well as the necessity of the licensed funeral director to complete all of the listed requirements. Because of these added items for those families that choose burial for religious exemptions, we recommend that the reimbursement amount be \$8,500.00. We surveyed 34 funeral homes throughout the state and found that the average increase in cost of a traditional burial service with all listed requirements is \$13,115, which is \$9,157.00 more than the direct cremation cost. Because of this we feel that the \$5,000.00 increase for indigent burial services to \$8,500.00 versus the \$3,500.00 for direct cremation is reasonable and warranted.

Averages of 34 North Dakota Funeral Homes	2023 Averages	SB 2139 Proposed Amounts
Direct Cremation with No Services - State Average	\$ 3,868.00	\$ 3,500.00
Traditional Burial Services with minimum requirements to complete – State Average	\$ 13,115.00	\$ 8,500.00
Increase in cost moving from Direct Cremation to Traditional Burial Service – State Average	\$ 9,247.00	\$ 5,000.00

Because of these reasons outlined, the North Dakota Funeral Directors Association recommends that the committee approve Senate Bill 2139 with the proposed amendments.

Respectfully,

Nic Stevenson

North Dakota Funeral Directors Association