

The Attrition Cliff and the Future of Funeral Directing

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Although this article may appear as one of doom and gloom to many funeral directors – perhaps even apocalyptic to some – others may discover a road map to address future labor shortages in the funeral service industry. While the statistical numbers alone may be frightening, the integrity of the profession for the next 50 years is dependent on the active participation of all shareholders in solving the attrition problem. The profession needs to change radically in the next five years to meet consumer demands. Here, I will address the attrition cliff problem and potential long-term effects on the profession, as well as the way funeral services are provided in a community.

Demographics and Statistics

No funeral director will dispute the fact that the profession has changed drastically over the past 30 years. The cremation rate has increased from 9.72 percent in the mid-1980s to the current rate of 40.6 percent (and even higher in some areas of the country). During the same period, the demographics related to who is entering mortuary science programs seem to have shifted. In the 1980s, 40 percent of students attending these programs came from second- and third-generation funeral homes. Currently, fewer than 10 percent of mortuary science students come from funeral home backgrounds.

One of the most positive shifts in educational demographics is the increasing enrollment of women and minorities. According to the American Board of Funeral Service Education, almost 60 percent of students in mortuary science programs are women, and minority enrollment has almost doubled in the past decade. In spite of this positive growth, the number of licensed women and minorities appears to be proportionally underrepresented compared to those who are graduating from mortuary science programs. At any given CEU event, women's attendance still remains at less than 18 percent. This underrepresentation can lead to several possible assumptions, one of which is that gender bias may yet exist within the profession. In the future, researchers need to look at gender bias and how it influences the selection of funeral professionals during the employment process.

Most alarming about these demographics is the attrition rate among mortuary science students. It has been reported that half of all mortuary science students drop out prior to completing their program, which means that of the 2,800 students who enter mortuary science schools each year, approximately 1,400 students graduate. Of these graduates, only half of them will remain in five years, and in 10 years, only 485, or one-third, of the annual graduating funeral directors will remain in the profession. In 2008-09, for example, there was a net increase of just 140 funeral directors and a loss of 10 embalmers nationwide.

The problem with these minimal employment increases is that in the long term, the profession will reach a point at which more funeral directors will be leaving the profession than there are a significant number of seasoned professionals to replace them. Hence, the attrition cliff, which is defined as an employment crisis that threatens a disruption in the practice of a profession. Such crises are brought on by the ignoring of social trends and a decreasing workforce. In the funeral industry, the attrition cliff is a result of rising death rates, an aging population of funeral directors/owners and a decrease in the number of people studying in mortuary science programs.

The funeral profession already has an aging population of funeral home owners, managers and directors, and without a substantial number of available qualified personnel, there will be a pinnacle point reached in many communities throughout the United States. The attrition tsunami in the funeral profession will take place in the next 15 years as a result of an aging population of baby boomers and the lack of funeral care providers.

This imminent crisis in the funeral industry was determined by looking at death rates in the next 15 years, which

are calculated by taking the average life expectancy in the United States and subtracting it from the current year. For example, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, life expectancy in 2011 was 78.7 years; therefore, by subtracting 78.7 from 2011, the result is 1932.3, or the year 1932. According to the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, the number of births in the United States in 2001 was 2,074,042. When predicting an estimate of the number of U.S. deaths, a simple analysis of the birth rates of any given year, compared to the life expectancy rate, will yield an approximate number of how many deaths society will experience in any given year. The number of deaths in 2011 was 2,515,458. (The margin of error could be attributed to the inaccurate recording of births in rural America during the Great Depression.) Using the preceding death rate formula, in 15 years, the death rate will be at 3.3 million.

The problem that arises is the fact that funeral homes are closing at an alarming rate due to economic downturn, mergers and acquisitions and owners who die with no succession plan in place. Over the past 10 years, 2,077 U.S. funeral homes have closed or merged. I predict that if this current trend continues, there will be just 17,000 funeral homes in the United States by 2023, with the most significant shift in the number of funeral homes open in the United States taking place in the next seven years. Funeral homes that are fiscally and personally mismanaged will close first because of the lack of financial and human resources. Next, funeral homes whose owners fail to establish a succession plan that outlines the continuation of their businesses will fall victim to closure by default.

The Collapse of Funeral Practice

In the next 15 years, if the attrition cliff continues, the funeral industry will experience a far greater problem than the rise in the cremation rate. With fewer funeral homes in local communities and a rise in the death rate, the catastrophic crisis the profession will face is that the bereavement needs in local communities will not be met in a timely manner. While it is customary now, for example, to have death occur on a Monday and visitation, services and burial to be completed by Friday, it will not be unheard of in the future for a three- to four-week waiting period for these services to take place. It is feasible to assume, then, that such a wait time could pose a significant increase in the current cremation rate. Consumers may choose methods of final disposition that involve less of a waiting period and less involvement from a funeral provider.

There is a complexity to the aforementioned perceived trends in the funeral industry. The problem is not the increase in the number of cremations but rather the misalignment of the duties and obligations of the funeral professional. Cremation is nothing more than a means of final disposition. The misalignment will be in the funeral director's primary responsibility, i.e., taking the death event and helping the bereaved to connect to a personal grieving experience.

The "mom and pop" funeral homes will enter the annals of days gone by, like storefront funeral homes and horse-drawn funeral coaches. Depending on the size of a community, most will be without a local funeral home and consumers will have to drive 20 to 30 miles to mega-funeral homes that will handle 1,500 to 2,000 deaths a year.

These circumstances will force a radical change in the way funeral directing is conducted on a daily basis. Regarding the lack of licensed funeral directors, states will have to change licensing requirements radically, and there will be an emerging funeral director assistant classification. Like the physician assistant or nurse practitioner who care for patients while under the supervision of a physician, the licensed funeral director assistant would care for the deceased and organize the funeral services and ceremonies under the supervision of a licensed funeral director. In this scenario, the funeral director will be in an administration position and be responsible for funeral home operations and legal paperwork.

Averting the Cliff

The attrition cliff crisis can be averted if those in the profession address the following issues:

- National attention needs to be given to the imminent crisis in funeral directing. The attrition crisis in the teaching and nursing professions was averted by public attention. National organizations need to address attrition in funeral directing on both macro and micro levels. Public advertisements and national news stories should be used to communicate urgency for enrollment in mortuary science programs. In addition, these programs need increased enrollment efforts in the next five years so that between 3,000 and 4,000 students graduate annually to keep up with employment demands.
- Women should be accepted as equals in the profession. Industry stereotypes and biases need to be dispelled and fu-

neral directors need to treat women with the same respect and dignity they give to the families they serve. Successful female funeral directors have made significant contributions to the professionalism needed in the business of deathcare. Even though women have constituted the majority of students in U.S. funeral directing programs for the past 10 years, the ratio of male to female funeral directors has remained unchanged. This statistic suggests that this overrepresented male-dominant profession harbors stereotypes toward women. Part of the attrition problem is that while mortuary science programs are graduating qualified students, women are experiencing employment barriers and obstacles that men do not have to endure. Fairness and equality in the workplace is paramount, and gender discrimination needs to be dispelled.

- Mortuary science program leaders should be more concerned about teaching to the profession than about teaching to the test. The old paradigm of going to mortuary school and learning minimal information about the profession is an antiquated method of learning. Teaching to the test only employs lower-level thinking skills. In this evolving profession, students graduating from mortuary science programs must be able to apply critical thinking skills to issues that arise. These issues require problem-solving skills and upper-level cognitive thinking. Plus, programs need to provide more hands-on experience so that students understand the complexity and demands of the profession. In addition, over the next 10 years, mortuary science programs in the United States need to graduate between 2,500 and 4,000 students annually to keep up with the demand to circumvent the attrition cliff crisis.

- Most importantly, local funeral directors need to sponsor and encourage people to enter the profession. If every funeral director sponsored and encouraged one or two people to acquire the necessary education and training to become a funeral director, then the attrition problem would be addressed on a micro level. One of the problems in the profession is that local funeral homes are not providing sufficient employment opportunities for people to explore mortuary science. In addition, economic compensation needs to reflect the financial needs of the modern family. In spite of changes in the way funeral services are being provided to the consumer, the ability to retain quality employees is dependent on just compensation competitive with other professions, such as nursing. Funeral directing must be feasible and lucrative enough to at least maintain the basic necessities of life.

In conclusion, unless issues related to the attrition cliff in the funeral industry are addressed in the next few years, the proposed problems will become irreversible and funeral directing will again change drastically. Old, male-dominant archetypes need to be replaced with welcoming employment standards that are less discriminatory toward women and more promoting of caring for the bereaved and the dead. All funeral professionals, educators, practitioners, lawmakers and funeral home owners should take immediate progressive action on the attrition cliff problem to avoid a catastrophic crisis that could eventually affect the entire profession. ★

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