

# **Checklist for Planning A Home Funeral**



By Donna Belk and Sandy Booth

[www.homefuneral.info](http://www.homefuneral.info)

Austin, Texas



## Index

Introduction .....	3
How to Begin .....	4
Service types .....	5
Goals .....	6
Main coordinator .....	6
The legal team .....	7
Team for after-death care of the body.....	9
Team for notifying people .....	10
The ceremony team.....	12
Team for supporting the family.....	14
The Follow-up Team .....	16
Appendix A :Sample Order of Funeral or Memorial Service.....	17

## Checklist for Planning A Home Funeral

Family planned funerals (the body is present) or memorials (the body is not present) can be very small and intimate and take place at the deceased's or another's home. They can also be large and involve a whole community of people, and can take place in a church or civic center. More people are choosing family-planned funerals and memorials because they can be more meaningful and personal. Having a meaningful way to honor your deceased loved one helps with the healing from their loss.

Planning a large funeral or memorial can involve a lot of details. Handling the details can be too much stress for those most deeply grieved. It is helpful to have a person to coordinate the entire event and work with teams of people to get the job done. The checklist below is grouped with the idea of different people in teams working on different aspects of planning and coordinating the funeral or memorial. For those planning a small funeral or memorial you may need only a few items on the list below. Certainly not everything on this checklist needs to be done! It is simply a menu of items you might want to consider. Please feel free to pick and choose what is appropriate for your situation. And remember that you can't do it wrong. If you are honoring and loving that will come across.

### **How to begin**

Find a quiet, safe place to begin your planning. Give yourself permission to laugh, cry, remember, be angry, etc. Remember this is an event that will impact a lot of people within your circle of family and friends, so enlist the help of family and friends to help plan and coordinate the event. There are usually many friends available who would love to help if someone would only tell them what needed to be done. This gives the friends a way of feeling useful, instead of helpless.

Slow down, relax the breath, focus on what is important to you. Don't try to be brave or keep a stiff upper lip. This is the time to be soft and let other people help for it gives others something to do and makes them feel useful.

Put away all thoughts of "doing it right." There is no right way to plan a funeral. If it is meaningful and loving to you, then you can be assured that it is serving its purpose.

The family will need to discuss decisions related to the funeral or memorial. Find a balance between taking care of details and making sure family gets rest.

Some of the initial decisions to be made by the family are

- will the body be cremated, buried or bequeathed to medical science
- what type of funeral or memorial did the deceased want and what do the family members want, and where is the balance between the two
  - funeral service where the body is present
  - memorial service where the body is not present
  - a visitation or viewing
  - a graveside service
  - a combination such as a funeral service for the community and a graveside service just for the family
  - cremation with later commitment (burial of ashes)
- where will the funeral or memorial be held
- will there be a reception or gathering after the funeral
  - held in a home, park, church meeting room
  - provide a meal
- who will be the main person to coordinate the funeral or memorial arrangements
- what is the price range to spend on the entire funeral or memorial

### Service types

- A **memorial** service is when friends and family gather, but the body is not present
- In a **funeral** service, the body is present, and the casket may be open or closed
- A **tribute** can be held at the time someone dies, or years after their deaths. A tribute focuses more on the celebration of the person's life and the impact of their life on others.
- Instead of a funeral or memorial, consider a Celebration of Life, or Life Appreciation Ceremony
- **Committal** services are held at the gravesite before the body is buried, or held when cremated remains are being buried

## Goals

Define the goals you would like for this event. There is no right or wrong way to do it. It should simply fit the person who died and their family and friends. Honor the person who died and yourself without worrying about doing it right, or rules being broken.

Some sample goals you might want to consider are to

- honor deceased's life
- create closeness between family members
- ensure that the deceased's body is treated respectfully
- provide support to one another.

Ask yourself this question: When you leave the funeral or memorial, how do you want to feel? This will help guide you as plans are made.

## Main coordinator

- Decide who will do particular tasks. It is recommended that you write all the decisions down and actions taken.
- Contact the people who will help and organize into teams
  - help at time of the funeral or memorial
  - help in the home before, during and after the funeral or memorial
  - help at time after death with after-death care of the body
  - help with kids related to the deceased so they are not ignored
  - act as a bereavement person at the funeral or memorial

## The legal team

Obtain blank Certificate of Death and permit for final disposition and other forms as needed. These forms vary from state to state. This task alone may take two or three team members depending on if the family is handling the details of the burial or cremation, or using a funeral home.

- Information usually needed on Certificate of Death
  - full legal name
  - legal residence
  - length of time at current residence
  - date of birth
  - place of birth
  - mother's birth name and place
  - father's birth name and place
  - date of death
  - place of death
  - citizenship
  - social security number
  - occupation
  - employment or business history
  - marital history
  - spouse's full name
  - next of kin, addresses, relationship
  - executor's name and contact information
  - attorney's name and contact information
- gather any pre-planning documents with a funeral home or cemetery that might exist
- make arrangements with the cemetery or crematory for final disposition of the body
  - is there a title to burial plot
- it's a good idea to locate documents that may be needed in advance
  - will
  - birth certificate
  - marriage certificate
  - insurance policies
  - bank records
  - deeds to property

- vehicle ownership records
- military discharge papers
- citizenship papers
- tax returns

## **Team for after-death care of the body**

- take possession of the body if it is not at home
  - who will do this
  - who has a vehicle for transporting the body (van, SUV, pickup truck, station wagon), or would you prefer a hospital or funeral home to transport the body
  - where will the body be taken, what room will be used and how will it be set up
- will a coffin be used for moving the body, if so, who will purchase the coffin
- will the body be prepared for viewing
- For step-by-step instructions for preparing the body for viewing see resources at [www.HomeFuneralDirectory.com](http://www.HomeFuneralDirectory.com).

## Team for notifying people

- how will friends, family and the community at large be notified
  - phone call, email, note in the mail
  - all friends need not be notified the same way (For example if some people are going to be invited to the funeral they will need to be notified right away. Other people may not be invited to the funeral and they could be notified by mail.)
- keep a list of the people that have been notified.
- prepare to answer these questions when you call people
  - will there be a vigil or Lying in State (if so, when and where)
  - will there be a viewing (if so, when and where)
  - will there be a funeral or memorial (if so, when and where)
  - if there is a funeral or memorial will they be able to say a few words about the deceased and if so is there a time limit they'll be able to speak
  - are there things friends can do to help (they will probably ask)
  - will flowers be accepted, and, if so, where should they be sent
- does the family want an obituary
  - who is going to write it
  - what are the costs of an obituary as it can sometimes be cost prohibitive
  - will obituary go in a newspaper, or an online obituary
  - would a program at the memorial or funeral be more appropriate than a traditional newspaper obituary
  - is there a photo available of the deceased for the obit
  - information normally included in an obituary
    - schools attended
    - military record
    - special awards and accomplishments
    - accomplishments
    - children and family
    - photograph
    - family history
    - work or professional history
    - religious affiliations
    - civic groups

- hobbies
- charities or special requests

## The ceremony team

- see Appendix A at the end of this document for common progression of ceremony at a memorial or funeral, and different ideas for a memorials
- who will be invited to the funeral or memorial ceremony
- are children invited, will there be people available to help care for children
- will the body be viewed during the ceremony, if so, where will it be located
- will clergy or the church be involved
- speakers
  - who would like to speak
  - does the family want a eulogy
  - poems, readings, verses
  - will others be allowed to speak impromptu at the ceremony
- music
  - who will pick the music and songs
  - any favorite melodies of the deceased that should be included
  - will the music be live (if so, who will perform), or from CDs (if so, who will handle the electronics)
- ceremony program
  - will a program be distributed at the funeral or memorial ceremony
  - if so, who will prepare it, print it and distribute it (information gathered for the obituary can be used in the program)
- ushers or greeters
  - put signs on door to welcome people
  - direct traffic
  - show people where to put coats
  - assist people in finding seats
  - distribute program or memory cards
  - point out guest book, memorial table, etc.
  - take care of food if attendees bring some
- pall bearers (if needed)
- guest register
- memorial table
  - photos of deceased

- objects loved
- notes, letters, cards
- memory book for people to write their thoughts or memories in, small slips of paper can also be used
- photos during the funeral or memorial
  - is a photographer wanted
  - disposable cameras for family and friends to use
- floral arrangements or potted plants
- donations
- determine need for
  - hearse
  - clergy car
  - family limousine
  - pallbearer limousine
  - flower car
- funeral logistics
  - if the body is present at the ceremony, how will it be transported to cemetery or crematory
  - who has a car suitable for transporting the body (station wagon, SUV, pick-up, van)
- reception after the funeral or memorial
  - location, time
  - appoint someone to be with the widow or widower (or those most deeply grieved)
- gatekeeper
  - someone to help the person closest to the deceased who may be in the greatest amount of grief to help handle situations that may come up such as someone asking prying questions, or asking for possessions that belonged to the deceased

## Team for supporting the family

- home coordinator
  - person to ask where things go or what to do so the mourners are not asked to handle the small details
  - create list of things people can do to help such as pick up empty plates or silverware, empty trash, water plants, etc.
  - someone to remain at the home of the deceased if the funeral or memorial will be held at a location other than the home (sometimes people show up at the home instead of the memorial location)
  - household management
    - childcare
    - pet care
    - lawn care
    - house cleaning
    - any small repairs that need to be done (change light bulbs, etc.)
    - errands
      - bank
      - post office
      - grocery shopping
      - bill paying
      - pickup from cleaners
    - final clean up
      - assemble a team of people to clean up after the ceremony or reception
      - have plenty of plastic trash bags on hand
- telephone coordinator
  - taking messages
  - put a message on the answering machine
    - thank callers for their concern
    - announcement of time and location for funeral or memorial service
    - help needed, if any
  - telephone answerer should be prepared to answer questions (print out this information and put it by each telephone in the home)
    - start time of the funeral or memorial service, where it will be held

- can you give me directions how to get there
- where are hotels close by I can stay at
- can someone pick me up at the airport
- what can I bring or do to help
- what are we supposed to wear
- details about the death such as when they died, how they died, who was present, did they suffer (people will ask)
- be prepared to answer tough questions, for example, “Bob always said I could have his bicycle, should I pick that up while I’m there?” A good reply is, “Unfortunately, we cannot distribute any property before the opening of the estate (or “before Bob’s wishes are known”).”
- food coordinator
  - where to store food
  - write down list of people that bring food so thank you notes can be sent later
  - if guests bring food in a dish that is to be returned write their name on masking tape and tape it to the bottom of the dish
  - meal planning for the family before and after the funeral or memorial
  - know what food is on hand and what you may need
  - prepare for visitors (have paper plates, napkins, utensils and cups on hand if the family is expecting many guests)
  - have a backup plan for what to do if there is too much food for the family to handle (donate to meal kitchen, ask guests to take home)
- guest coordinator
  - greet out-of-town guests
  - help make hotel arrangements
  - pick up out of town guests from airports

## The Follow-up Team

After the funeral or memorial contact the following organizations as appropriate

- attorney for transferring assets and probating the will
- accountant, tax preparer, to determine which returns need to be filed
- banks and credit unions, to locate accounts and safe deposit boxes
- insurance agents, to obtain claim forms
- social services, to learn about benefits
- social security, to stop any monthly checks and learn about benefits
- veterans affairs, to stop monthly checks and learn about benefits
- guardian, conservator, and agent under a durable power of attorney, to notify of death and the end of their responsibility
- creditors, to take care of outstanding balances
- utility companies, to change or discontinue service
- employer, to notify of death and learn about benefits
- newspapers, magazines, to stop services
- postal service, to forward mail
- computer accounts, transfer or close internet accounts, on-line subscriptions,

## Appendix A

### **Sample Order of Funeral or Memorial Service**

- Celebrant or officiator's Opening
  - Announcements (turn off cell phone)
  - Welcome
- Song, Prayer or Reading (interspersed throughout ceremony)
- Eulogy by Celebrant
- Personal Eulogies from friends or family, if any
- Rituals such as Candle Lighting (can be placed anywhere in service)
- Closing Remarks by Celebrant (Benediction, Blessing or Prayer if Religious or Spiritual)
- Disposition of the Body
  - Graveside Interment Service (also called committal or burial)
  - Service for cremains (the ashes that remain after cremation of a corpse)

It is best when the family or friends can speak about the deceased themselves through personal eulogies. Often this is not possible for them due to grief and overwhelming emotion. If the Celebrant is delivering the only personal eulogy, then it should contain not just a chronological listing of facts, but personal anecdotes or stories told in the voices of those who told them to you.

### **OTHER RITUALS:**

In addition to the words spoken, suggest ideas for other types of remembrances.

- A candle lighting is the most used, often younger children can participate.
- Some families like to leave notes or mementos in the casket if it is an open casket ceremony.
- Grandchildren or young children could leave drawings.
- If people are uncomfortable leaving something in the casket, have a memory box into which guests can drop a card describing a favorite memory of the deceased.
- Placing flowers on a closed casket.
- Moments of reflection for deceased or ancestors.
- The family can set up, either at the funeral home or the reception, a table with photos and other mementos from the deceased's life. Include photos of other ancestors to show family heritage.

### **SAMPLE FUNERAL ELEMENTS**

#### **Example of Traditional Opening Remarks:**

We have gathered here today to acknowledge the death of \_\_\_\_, whom we have all known and loved. When someone we care for dies, family and friends gather with sorrow in their hearts to grieve and give comfort to one another. We all grieve differently, but at times when death and loss come among us, often the presence of another person's company can bring understanding and support. Just being together, sharing our grief and our love, dissolves some of our loneliness and helps begin the process of releasing our sorrow.

Though we have gathered here today in grief and sorrow, we have also gathered here in celebration. \_\_\_\_ led a wonderful life here among and we are here to share our memories and give thanks for the time we had together. I'm sure each of you feels the ache of loneliness caused by her passing. But rejoice she touched you; that she was a part of your life, and her influence will survive in the unending consequences flowing from her character and deeds.

It may have been her goodness, her wisdom, and her energy. It may have been her devotion to family, her helping hand, and her courage. Or it may have been her loving smile and understanding. Remember these things and let them endure in your own acts and thoughts.

**Sample Candle lighting ceremony:**

This flame symbolizes the eternal light of spirit. This light is there before birth and continues beyond the death of the body. We light this candle in honor of \_\_\_\_\_, a beautiful person whose spirit lights the heavens as it always has on earth.