

## Viewpoint

By Lee Webster

# Defining Home Funeral Guides

It's not lost on most people I speak to about home funerals that the term is the mirror opposite of what they are used to hearing. Funeral homes, after all, were designed to be exactly that — homelike, but away from home, mimicking the intimacy of family and friends together after a death.

When home funerals started popping up in places they hadn't been for decades, funeral directors confessed to being a bit baffled, and some took it personally. A common response was, "We have a homelike setting right here. Families can bring whatever they want. We can do home funerals right in our funeral homes, right?"

Unfortunately, no. For those who want a relaxed, family-centered vigil in their own home, nothing will substitute. Still, some find it comforting to keep a loved one home for just a brief time and then partner with a professional for the rest of the necessities. For many, the idea of inviting a professional into the home is less about saying no to their help and more about saying yes to absorbing the reality in their own time and in their own way.

### Why Home Funeral Guides?

So why home funeral guides? After all, they're not professionals and

they're probably strangers, too. What is it that appeals to families about home funeral guides? And why would families need them? How do home funeral guides fit into the growing movement of end-of-life volunteers and consultants that include advance directive planners, end-of-life guides and doulas, celebrants and more?

The simple answer is that most Americans have lost touch with the practical realities of caring for their own dead. They seek someone who is versed in the law and can teach the finer points of natural, noninvasive body care without all the conventional funeral fanfare. But among the more compelling reasons to call a home funeral guide may be the desire for a more integrated, authentic experience, one which home funeral guides are uniquely qualified to contribute to at the invitation of the family.

Char Barrett, the first president of the National Home Funeral Alliance and a licensed funeral director with 12 years of experience providing home funeral

services, has witnessed first-hand what a home funeral guide delivers that a licensed funeral director can't or won't.

"Home funeral guides fill a niche in after-death care that is structurally difficult for most funeral directors to meet," she said. "The very premise of a home funeral is that it takes place within the comforting, familiar and deeply personal space of a family's home. This is the space within which home funeral guides excel, because their orientation is that of guiding families, in the reality of their homes, through all of the messiness of life when death is on the doorstep."

Barrett went on to describe the obstacles some families face. "There may be tight spaces, young children or pets under foot, dirty dishes in the sink, a needy distant relative on the phone and piles of unattended papers and mail that need to be swept aside just to have a place to meet and discuss plans for a home funeral," she said. "Many times these meetings are conducted within a context of high



**Clockwise from left: Veteran funeral guide Donna Belk leads a training session. (Photo credit: Ellen McDonald) As a celebrant, Belk officiates services that honor the deceased. During a training session, family members learn how to transport a body and prepare the body for burial. (Photo credit: Beyond Hospice)**



anxiety and emotions, not to mention fatigue, where the dying (or recently dead) loved one lies in a hospital bed nearby. Being present to the family's reality while also delivering knowledgeable guidance is where a home funeral guide delivers his or her highest value."

Out of legal and functional necessity, funeral directors operate from a very different professional and business-like aura when they are in charge. In contrast, home funeral guides lend a less formal, more organic feel to the experience, keeping the responsibility – and privilege – of caring for their own squarely in the family's hands. As Barrett observed, "Merging these two worlds is where home funeral guides can be a valuable bridge supporting a family in need."

### What Are Home Funeral Guides?

Elizabeth Knox, who served as NHFA president from 2012 to 2014, said it best: "Home funeral guides are not warmer, fuzzier funeral directors." It has never been the intention for guides to take the place of professionals – that would defeat the purpose entirely.

Home funeral guides are educators, first and foremost. Guides focus on relaying the legal regulations of their state and region to families as they navigate the steps, including body care, paperwork, transportation, and other aspects that the family may choose to undertake themselves. Guides may charge for educational or consultative services, but the majority of their time is volunteered.

The NHFA got out in front of this

conundrum early on, developing the NHFA Code of Ethics, Conduct and Practice and working with the Federal Trade Commission on the publication *Essentials for Practicing Home Funeral Guides*. The booklet clearly delineates what guides can and cannot charge for, and under what conditions they are subject to The Funeral Rule.

Families call guides when someone dies because they know they will get the information that empowers them so they can act quickly when necessary. They also call for the simple reason that this is a person with experience who will know what has to happen next. Home funeral guides do a lot of hand holding and confidence building. The families, after all, are themselves both the givers and receivers of all that occurs during a home funeral.

## **The National Home Funeral Alliance**

How do home funeral guides come by the knowledge they need in order to reliably serve families? This is where the National Home Funeral Alliance comes in.

The NHFA was formed in 2009 as an organization intent on unifying home funeral guides to provide opportunities for learning from one another and to give home funerals a public voice. It became obvious from the start that the primary mission was to empower and educate families to care for their own dead, either on their own or with the support of others, including sympathetic funeral directors.

As an educational nonprofit, the NHFA began the work of disseminating information to the public, home funeral guides and other related professionals. The board of directors and volunteers around the United States and in several countries maintain a dynamic website, publish books, send out regular newsletters to members (membership is free), hold in-person and online conferences, and partner with sister organizations to provide the most up-to-date legislative and educational home funeral information available.

The website includes directories of all the many providers in the home-funeral arena, including seasoned instructors who have experience in the field. These instructors find a common ground for exchanging information and ensuring that it is accurate and accessible to all, offering multi-day intensives, one- or two-day workshops, and practicums around the country.

## **Strengthening Relationships with Other Caregiver Professionals**

The directories also include a listing of home funeral-friendly funeral directors who are willing to support families from a distance or in the home, much like early funeral practice. Many of them are trained as home funeral guides and even celebrants; others collaborate with home funeral guides,

doing the necessary paperwork and event planning at the office while the guide checks in on the family at home as needed. “How Funeral Directors Can Support Home Funeral Families,” another NHFA publication, has a section dedicated to the role of home funeral guides in partnership with licensed funeral directors.

Barrett has long held a vision for these two important roles coming together. “Combining the knowledgeable presence of a home funeral guide along with the valuable services licensed funeral directors provide creates a win-win for both, as well as the family being served. Home funeral guides can cross the threshold of a family’s home, building a relationship of trust that, once established, often allows them to introduce the various services needed from a home funeral-friendly funeral director. In this way, once a home funeral guide builds a trusted relationship with a home funeral-friendly director, they become a referral source bringing families to the funeral director by way of the needed services delivered in the home.”

## **Distinguishing Roles in Pre-death and After-death Care**

As families seek to change the way they meet the challenges inherent in planning for and managing the death of a family member, they are also looking for guidance and support in fresh ways that span the dying and funeral periods. It’s important to understand the various players and how they relate to one another, what responsibilities each shoulders, and how they stand to benefit families.

Home funeral guides are well aware that the active role they play is from the moment of death to disposition. But some end-of-life care providers train for both pre-death and post-death care, with an intention of meeting families’ needs with a seamless home-based continuum of care. The clincher is that they are subject to different rules on either side of the veil, to two very different systems and regulating agencies, all of which require clarity for all practitioners.

Death is not only the great denominator, it’s the great divider, at least as far as systems go. Pre-death providers, such as those calling themselves end-of-life guides, death midwives and death doulas, fall loosely under a medical model, along with physicians, nurses, social workers, therapists, counselors, and others, who are generally regulated through licensure, with some paraprofessionals sanctioned through certificate programs. While the patient is alive, all manner of services can be offered. Many end-of-life doula programs are self-certifying in the absence of medical certification programs. Some academic-based certifications are beginning to be offered in U.S. colleges and universities, primarily through nursing programs, but these certifications do not cover after-death care.

Once the patient becomes the deceased, the system shifts, and those providing services that involve after-death care fall under mortuary regulatory boards and state statutes. No certification exists for home funeral guides, and the desire for validation through certification has been a sticky wicket since the beginning. For many reasons, the NHFA does not support certification, chief among them the potential of a ripple effect that could curtail the rights of families to care for their own dead. Creating a certification for home funeral guides might also imply that it is necessary to hire someone to help, the very thing home funeral families and advocates are rejecting.

“There is no centralized board certifying end-of-life doulas, guides or any other role representing ‘pre-death’ non-medical care,” said Deanna Cochran, founder of Quality of Life Care, a training program for end-of-life guides. “There are some people creating innovative pre-death services geared toward providing practical, emotional and spiritual support that are adjunctive services – from massage to Reiki to acupuncture to legal and financial services – who want to focus on helping people at the end of life. If they choose

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to get further training, there are a plethora of end-of-life programs that offer certification, but beware that these are in-house certificates of course completion from that organization, not from a third party trust provider or recognized agency or regulatory board.”

## What We Call Ourselves

Along with identifying distinct roles, another major challenge the end-of-life movement currently faces is the disparity between what practitioners call themselves and how they are perceived by the public and professionals.

Donna Belk, a veteran home funeral guide and trainer and hospice volunteer of many years who founded Beyond Hospice, an online training course that spans end-of-life exploration and home funeral training, saw the pitfalls of not making terms and job descriptions clear early on.

“What we call ourselves in our varying roles directly impacts our acceptance by those we seek to serve. Some terms seemed intent on shocking rather than reassuring, and some simply didn’t seem to explain what the service was that was being offered,” she explained. “I wanted to be sure that the people who call me and other home funeral guides know exactly what we bring to the table, and how it differs from other services.”

Belk developed a diagram of terms and bounced it off practitioners in all areas before the NHFA published the white paper “Clearly Defined: Matching Our Terminology to Our Intentions,” along with the visual. End-of-life guides and death doulas are now getting on board with honing in on terms and titles that best serve them and their patients in a similar effort to what the NHFA adopted years ago.

“The names that we have called ourselves as pre-death practitioners may vary, but the goals were always the same – to help both patients and families have the best end-of-life experience possible,” said Suzanne O’Brien, a longtime hospice and acute oncology nurse who started DoulaGivers. “Coming together with a collective term for end-of life caregivers that embodies the scope of work will help educate both the public and medical professionals on the value that we have in supporting people in the end-of-life phase.”

## Transparency Is Key

While the instance of families choosing to include either end-of-life guides or home funeral guides or both are still modest, it behooves the savvy funeral director to be aware of the possibility. The key to best serving families may lie in maintaining transparency and collaboration. And for those funeral directors considering adding home funeral guides to their service menu, think about the signal it sends to families of trust and going the extra mile. •

*To learn more, visit [homefuneralalliance.org](http://homefuneralalliance.org)*