Selected Independent Funeral Homes, founded in 1917 as National Selected Morticians, remains one of the leading death-care associations in the world—and it has stepped up to serve its members during the coronavirus crisis.

Membership to the association based in Deerfield, Illinois, is by invitation only, and it recently had 455 main North American members and 62 international firms representing more than 1,300 total locations and several thousand staff members. The association also has more than 50 preferred partners in its network.

We recently caught up with Rob Paterkiewicz, who has served as the association’s CEO and executive director for more than 12 years, to chat about how his team is weathering the crisis and how the association continues to serve its members amid the pandemic.

**First, how are you and the Selected staff weathering this crisis?**

We’re good, thanks for asking. Busy but good. We have been 100% remote since the 16th of March as our governor was one of the first to order shelter-in-place. Most of the staff already had full remote access and an at-home office setup, so the switch was quick and successful for us. There are still a handful of staff who stop in the office for essential duties like mail and order fulfillment a few times during the week. We just got word today that we need to stay home till the end of April, so it looks like this is the new norm for a while.

We are a tight-knit team, so while we are all fully able to...

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“We’ve known for some time how powerful technology can be in serving bereaved families,” says Thomas Parmalee, executive director of Kates-Boylston Publications, which is coordinating the Think Tank. “The coronavirus crisis has made it even clearer just why technology is so essential.”

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work remote, there is a tremendous amount of connectivity still going on. Like most associations now, we are in a triage mode trying to keep the association’s business in full operation and protected while tending to the new demands and challenges COVID-19 has delivered. The volume of emails and messages is astronomical and can be a bit overwhelming, so we try as a team to connect on video calls often to talk through things and support each other.

What is the main concern you are hearing from your members now?

There are a wide range of concerns we are hearing, including how to help families navigate through the limits on services, access to personal protective equipment and how to assure staff that they are protected at the facility, on call and once they return home, and of course how will the firm survive all these challenges. Right now, the focus is how to participate in the SBA Disaster Assistance Loans and the Paycheck Protection Program.

Tell us about the Selected Member Sharing Center – and how successful has it been so far?

This is such a “Selected” thing really. Our members never hesitate to jump in and help another member out when there’s a need. The association is the same way; it’s what defines our culture. As we started hearing about shortages of supplies and other PPE, we figured the best way to help was to create a platform so members could share their needs with everyone and know they were heard. This sharing center also offers members the ability to identify if they have excess supplies or resources to offer.

As bad as this situation is, what good have you seen come out of it?

I’d have to say the heightened sense of cooperation and genuine willingness to help. I’ve reached out to members to ask them for their assistance with some things, and it is clear they are busy and overwhelmed with concerns and questions. Yet every one of them has taken time to help and give of themselves. Our staff is in the same mode; each one has taken on more work, often outside of their regular area of focus, to ensure no need is unmet.

Is the federal government and various state governments giving funeral service the support it needs right now, and if so, what more needs to be done – and in what areas?
At this point I am not hearing significant complaints from members related to federal or state support. Certainly, the stimulus approval will be helpful, but I suspect there will need to be more available. I think the obvious area in need of better support across the board is access to PPE through the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other agencies. Funeral service is on the list, but so far down that most firms have no access, especially in urban areas.

Other than the Sharing Center, what is Selected doing to lend aid to its members at this time?

We are completely focused on keeping every level of communication open with and between our members. We built a COVID-19 resource area on our site, which we populate daily with tools and important information, including sharing announcements from several of our Preferred Partners who are offering complimentary access to certain tools and services to help our members meet the needs of their families.

Because we heard from so many members on their need for protective masks and their inability to find or purchase them, we investigated potential sources and ultimately secured one we felt confident working with to make a sizeable bulk purchase. So now we are preparing to fulfill orders from about 200 member firms to help them get through this crisis. I am hopeful that our suppliers will soon be able to fulfill orders again, though.

As an association, what has been the toughest hurdle to navigate as a result of the pandemic?

The uncertainty of all this is brutal. We have faced crisis events before like 9/11 and the recession in 2008, but those were specific events that had a beginning and an end. This is worldwide and it’s anyone’s guess how long it will go and what ultimate impact it will have. Associations are small businesses as well and the cancellation of meetings and events will likely cause many associations to file for bankruptcy or perhaps go out of business.

Do you think this pandemic will have any lasting impact on how funeral service is conducted? If so, how?

I do believe this event will have a lasting impact. On one hand, anything that accelerates a lack of services and gathering of family and friends is sure to hurt us. This trend was already underway across the country, but now because of the outbreak, it is being forced upon us all. What is interesting to me is all the media coverage of these restrictions on funeral gatherings and the difficult impact they are having on families who have lost a loved one. You must wonder if taking something away like this might actually cause society to realize how much they miss it and need it. You don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone, right? Well maybe, just maybe, taking away the ability to gather and grieve together might result in more families choosing this option when it finally returns.

I feel all funeral homes need to push this conversation in their communities, with local media and with the families they are serving now. Part of today’s arrangement conversations should include discussion on how the firm will help bring the family and community together once the all-clear is given on gatherings. This is where the reception facilities and the event-planning talent of the staff should be fully promoted and utilized.

How difficult of a decision was it to cancel the Spring Management Summit and what was the reaction from members?
The need to cancel our summit was obvious based on everything that was unfolding. The difficulty was that the state of Florida had taken very little precautionary steps to protect its citizens and visitors so we were put in the position of having to cancel everything while the state and our host facility carried on as if the event should still be held! We hate to cancel a member event like this, but our members and sponsors fully understand and support our decision. We are already looking ahead to the 2021 summit.

What meetings do you have planned in the immediate coming months, and what strategy are you taking in terms of holding (or not holding) those meetings?

Our next significant member meeting will be our Annual Meeting in Montreal this September. We are watching everything closely, of course, but are in full planning mode to ensure a successful event. Between now and then, there were several member roundtable meetings scheduled, and many have been canceled or postponed. We are scheduled to move into our new office at the end of May and host a summer board meeting and open house event in mid-July. Obviously, that is a significant concern for us right now as contracts have been signed and construction is well underway.

Has this crisis had a financial toll on the association – or are you fearful it will take a toll?

The inability to host our Spring Management Summit hurts, and we anticipate our members will have significant challenges and distractions to address throughout this year, which will obviously divert their attention away from engaging in membership programs. This is just the reality of this crisis, though, and we can’t dwell on it. We’ve got to continue to find and offer ways to help our members so they can continue to help their communities and families as they always have.

How can funeral professionals support Selected at this time?

This is our time to support them. I would say they all need to hang in there, do what they do best and help their families and staff get through this. Selected is here for them, offering resources and connections and support.

Do you have anything else to add or share?

Stay safe and keep your distance!

Visit https://www.selectedfuneralhomes.org to learn more about Selected Independent Funeral Homes.

Take Our COVID -19 Survey

Funeral Service Insider recently launched a COVID-19 survey to determine how funeral professionals are responding to the coronavirus crisis. Please take the survey.

The latest edition of “The Funeral Director’s Guide to Statistics” is a must-have for death-care professionals seeking to understand the changing dynamics of the marketplace.

The 2020 edition, sponsored by National Guardian Life Insurance Co., features the most up-to-date statistical information in the industry, and provides readers with tools and knowledge to better understand buying trends, what services families want most and more.


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Sincerely,

Thomas A. Parmalee

Thomas A. Parmalee, Editor
tparmalee@kbpublications.com
[www.linkedin.com/in/thomasparmalee](http://www.linkedin.com/in/thomasparmalee)