March 20, 2020

Coronavirus Advice from Homeland International

To all of you; our teams, colleagues, and friends from across the world.

You will have heard about Coronavirus by now and even if your own country has little or no known cases, you are probably trying to prepare your organisation should the virus impact your team or your community.

We believe there has not been too much information shared between the funeral director community anywhere in the world, some organisations have released information however we felt it was necessary to share what we have been doing to potentially support you.

As a company (CPJ Field) with over 35 funeral homes in the UK, a global repatriation division (Homeland International) and a senior leadership team with extensive experience within the sector, we hope this information will help in one way or another.

Of course, our countries all have different rules and regulations and your own companies will have your own guidelines and procedures, however we hope this below information when applied with your own standards and laws is of assistance to you. The work we all do to support people is very much the same with some minor differences, so most of this should help you should you need to rely upon this advice at any time. This information draws upon our own internal procedures, advice from the World Health Organisation (WHO), Public Health England and any other reputable source providing the world with information.

What we’ve been doing

Recognising the important part that we play in our communities, and the importance of being able to continue to serve bereaved families to the very best of our abilities, we have moved swiftly to put measures in place that we hope will provide us with resilience in the coming weeks.

Here’s a brief overview of some of the actions we’ve undertaken so far, you could implement these within your own organisations if necessary:

- Provided guidance on personal hygiene and ways to reduce personal risk of infection
- Provided guidance on handling of deceased people, appropriate Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and have confirmed this in a formal “Standard Operating Procedure” to assist in business as usual
- Liaised extensively with Public Health England, and our many partners (hospitals, coroners etc.) to ensure that any particular risk is identified and communicated early so that mitigating steps (such as PPE) can be put in place
- Taken a proactive move to ensure access to stock of consumables (both PPE and funeral stock)
- Paused face to face community activity to reduce the risk of infection to our attendees

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- Tested our plans that will enable colleagues from across the business to work from multiple locations if necessary
- We are in touch with our Local Resilience Forum to understand what local measures are in place for additional capacity (mortuaries etc) and powers that might be required or implemented.

This is just an overview, and our work continues to ensure that we remain on the front foot.

This is a time of uncertainty for us all, and it is increasingly likely that we will start having to support families who are facing the untimely loss of a loved one due to this disease. In so doing, there will scarcely be a more important time for us to step forward.

**Repatriation**

Much of the repatriation process will include what we have already spoken of in yesterday’s email and what we will cover in our more practical emails for the rest of the week, however the flight is where it becomes difficult. Each country and each airline will be permitting different things, have different rules and will all act slightly differently. If a family are to contact you for a repatriation then we are led to believe that the short-term solution will be local cremation and return of ashes if or when possible. This however is not set in stone, we would advise you speak with: local authorities, embassy representation, airlines and receiving funeral directors (to check import protocol) before advising a family what is and isn’t possible.

In reality, there has been little shared about funerals, some countries have gone as far as banning funerals for the foreseeable future without actually issuing any advice to funeral directors about what is happening. Repatriation therefore has even less information released and therefore each case should be managed on a case by case basis. We have reached out to the International Air Transport Association (IATA) for any advice they can issue, however there has been nothing new issued at this time specifically for Coronavirus. We can draw upon similarities from the Ebola Crisis, whereby human remains could still be transported by flight with careful consideration. Please see below:

“Human remains (HUM), except cremated, must be packed in a hermetically sealed inner containment, which may be constructed of a flexible material or may be a rigid coffin of lead or zinc. The inner containment must then be packed inside a wooden or metal coffin. The wooden or metal coffin must be protected from damage by an outer packing and covered by canvas or tarpaulin so that the nature of its contents is not apparent.” Claude Thibeault MD, IATA Medical Advisor – October 2015

This of course is still only possible at the discretion of the local authorities in the country of death, the embassy, the airport and airlines and the receiving county’s authorities. These will all need to be contacted to check the situation. Please also be wary that the situation can change greatly each day, so you may start a repatriation case and then not be able to complete the case so be clear when setting expectations.

Homeland International are of course on hand to support you with any repatriation cases, even those that may have connections to the coronavirus. We have experience with managing these types of cases and as always remain available to you to support you through the process.

We are led to believe flight bans and border closures could be introduced and this will have a significant impact on repatriation cases. It is important to make clients and families aware that
flights could be cancelled at late notice and that costs could fluctuate greatly due to the current situation. As always, some countries may be able to coordinate repatriation by road if there are flight reductions or cancelations. This then comes down to government agreements between the transit countries as to whether they will allow the deceased person and the funeral service/repatriation team to enter the country (and then leave the country also). Our usual advice on funerals when back home is even more important at this time, funeral services should not be fully booked until the deceased person is in the care of the receiving funeral directors in the home country.

As more of a practical set of guidelines, we have compiled the below information to support our own teams internally. Again, although based upon funerals in the UK and our own company protocol, there may still be parts of this which assist you.

FOR ALL FIRST CALLS:

When we’re asked to provide a removal for the infectious status of the deceased person and others at the location (reference to Coronavirus) should be given by the caller or client, if this information is not forthcoming then they must ask.

• “Has the person who has died or anyone present or any of their friends and family recently had contact with anybody affected by the Coronavirus?”

If the answer is “yes” then ask -

“Please could you make sure only one person is present to meet our colleagues when they arrive to collect the deceased person?”.

• “Have you or the deceased person been experiencing any of the following symptoms, fever, cough or flu like symptoms?”

If the answer is “yes” then ask -

“Have you been in touch with the emergency services or health authorities?

If “yes” ask what were they told?

If “no” then encourage them to do so.

ON ARRIVAL AT THE LOCATION OF THE REMOVAL:

As a member of the duty team attending to the removal of a deceased person when there is reason to believe that Coronavirus may be present take the following actions –

• Before entering the property ensure you are wearing the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

• Carry out a dynamic risk assessment

• Before you move the body place a mask or covering over the month and nose of the deceased person. This will reduce the risk of air expelled from the lungs when moving the body.

• Avoid touching surfaces (wherever possible) in and around the property.

• Do not touch your own face prior to removing PPE and cleaning your hands either with alcohol hand-sanitising gel or washing them in warm water with soap for at least 2 minutes.
• Ensure contact with other people present (i.e. family etc.) is kept to a minimum.
• As soon as you remove any PPE place it in a clinical waste bag and seal it as soon as reasonably possible.
• Ensure correct PPE is worn when transferring the deceased person from the ambulance to the mortuary.

ON ARRIVAL AT THE MORTUARY (PUBLIC OR FUNERAL HOME):

Following the removal, the following procedures should be followed at the resting destination for deceased:
• Ensure that the mortuary register is completed and include (in bold capital letters) that the deceased person may have Coronavirus. Mark the body bag / removal sheet in red as a potentially a Coronavirus case and the date of removal.
• Prior to removing your PPE, the outer surface of the body bag must be decontaminated with antibacterial wipes. This may require at least two individuals to carry out this task.
• Disinfect any aid to manual handling (trolley/stretcher etc.) used to carry the body prior to being loaded back onto the removal vehicle.
• Prior to leaving the mortuary remove all PPE and placed in clinical waste bags which are sealed ready for disposal.
• Used body bags must be disposed of as clinical waste.
• A “deep clean” of the ambulance both load space and cabin is to be completed and the vehicle restocked with PPE and other consumables (alcohol wipes, hand sanitiser etc.) as required.

Funeral home:
• Ensure mortuary register is marked clearly in red.
• Body bag is marked as above

Public Mortuaries:
• Phone ahead and warn porter service if applicable.
• Phone call into the mortuary staff in the morning informing them that a potential COVID-19 case will be placed in their mortuary overnight.
• Mark body bag and record in mortuary register.
• The bag isn’t to be opened in the fridge rooms
• No stripping of the body unless the police or coroner’s officer request, otherwise it be done by the mortuary staff when required. Check with mortuary staff as they will be setting aside separate areas for potential coronavirus cases

Embalmimg
This information has been supplied by the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA).

According to the CDC, bodies of those who die of confirmed or suspected COVID-19 can safely be transported and embalmed. The new guidance for funeral home staff emphasizes:

Transporting bodies in a body bag and disinfecting the bag with a product that contains EPA-approved emerging viral pathogens claims.

The guidance offers PPE recommendations for transfers and embalming, depending on the circumstances funeral home personnel expect to encounter. It is always better to don more PPE and be safe than sorry. All PPE should be doffed (taken off) and disposed of properly.

Additional guidance on PPE can be found on the CDC website.

Disinfecting contaminated surfaces using products with EPA-approved emerging viral pathogens claims is of utmost importance.

The guidance also notes that if “washing the body or shrouding are important religious or cultural practices, families are encouraged to work with their community cultural and religious leaders and funeral home staff on how to reduce their exposure as much as possible. At a minimum, people conducting these activities should wear disposable gloves. If splashing of fluids is expected, additional personal protective equipment (PPE) may be required (such as disposable gown, face shield or goggles and facemask).”

If you have any questions or you need support with a case, do not hesitate to let us know and we will do everything possible to support. It is important at times like these that we collaborate with one another and as a community of professionals lend support to others to ensure all people are well cared for. This may not be relevant to your country now, but we would advise you keep this advice to hand should it become necessary for you to react at short notice.

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