

Indigent Burial Program Concerns

Honorable members of the Metro Council, my name is Ben Kresse and I'm a Theology teacher at St. Xavier high school. I am here on behalf of the Saint Joseph of Arimathea Society. There are 5 high schools, and 3 retired groups who have attended over 1,400 burials for the indigent in the past 13 years. We pray for our brothers and sisters who have died poor and alone and we carry them to their final resting place.

I am also here to speak on behalf of the marginalized who have died in our city but were denied a dignified and compassionate burial at Meadowview Cemetery.

For the first 11 years, under the direction of Buddy Dumeyer the Chief Deputy Coroner, the Indigent Burial program became a model, not only for our city and our state, but also for our country. Buddy's motto has always been, "**Leave people in a better place than when you found them.**" He developed the program with the assistance of SJOAS that has allowed grieving families to tell their final stories, to pray and to say goodbye. He helped them to bring closure to an often strained relationship and to heal from a broken heart. When no family was present we become their family. This I believe is what being a compassionate city is about.

I wish I could say that this care for those who are poor and alone at the end of their life continues to this day, but sadly, once Buddy retired things began to change.

This summer the Courier Journal wrote an article about disagreement between the coroner's office and the Metro Council over the cut in their budget. The article shares the email from the coroner's office to this body suggesting that the burial program would be curtailed if the funding cuts took place because of the strain on their resources. It also stated your unequivocal response that doing away with the burial program was not an option and serious consequences would take place if such actions were taken by the coroner's office.

I am here to update you on our understanding of the indigent burial program since the budget passed this summer.

- Within days of receiving your response the Deputy Coroner who oversaw the indigent burials was reassigned to a death investigation role at the coroner's office.
- The burial program was turned over to 2 clerical workers who still have their regular duties to attend to.
- The coroner's office stopped making the prayer programs for the burials and turned this task over to Owen's Funeral Home.
- Their office no longer meets with families to go over their situation so they could explain their situation so proper evaluation can be made. It's now done over the phone.
- While their office continues to notify members of the Saint Joseph of Arimathea Society of a funeral, they no longer help assist with the rotation schedule for the schools.
- The coroner's staff no longer attend the burials.
- **In the past 2 ½ months there have been a total of 5 burials. Normally, there are between 25-30 burials in a 2 ½ month period.**

We understand the difficult challenges facing the coroner's office to operate within the new budget constraints and it makes sense for the schools and Owen's funeral home to take care of aspects of the program that had been done through the Indigent Burial program, but we do not agree with changes in the program that prevent the poor, the marginalized and those who qualify from receiving this service.

We are asking the Metro Council members to investigate our concerns:

- What are the reasons for the precipitous decline in indigent burials for the past 3 months?
- Where are the bodies of the deceased who should have been offered a funeral, whether this be a cremation or casket burial?
- Is the coroner's office following city guidelines for who qualifies for an indigent burial?
- Is the coroner's office following city guidelines for those who can and cannot be cremated?
- Are families being unduly coerced into accepting cremations rather than a casket burial?
- Are these families being invited to a prayer service and to have their loved one's cremations interred at Meadowview Cemetery (if cremation is chosen)?
- What steps have been taken by the coroner's office for future burials once Meadowview Cemetery is full?
- What oversight is there for the funds being collected for the *Be a Memory Maker* (501C3) program to help pay for headstones?

It has been made clear that the coroner's office is very interested in relinquishing the duties of the Indigent Burial Program.

Finally, we are asking the Metro Council to seriously consider:

- Finding a new home for the Indigent Burial Program with an agency that will facilitate the program in a pastoral way that brings a sense of dignity, respect and compassion to those who are poor and most vulnerable.
- Adequately fund this position to ensure the agency can afford to hire someone for this new position.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this very important matter before the Council.

Respectfully,

Ben Kresse

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