Funeral assistance program's suspension leads to more stress, more scrambling by families

Thousands of low-income families across the state have opted for cremations and skimpy or no funeral services since the suspension of the state’s longstanding funeral and burial assistance program, funeral industry officials say.

In Cook County, it appears that more families of indigent individuals are leaving their loved ones’ remains unclaimed at the county morgue. That situation, according to a county spokesman, has transferred almost $40,000 in costs for cremations from the state to Cook County government since July 1.

And Sangamon County Coroner Cinda Edwards said she worries that the situation in Cook will be replicated in Springfield, on a much smaller scale, when families of the deceased can’t come up with any money for final expenses and no state assistance is available.

Edwards said her office has paid for three cremations since Dec. 1, and her limited budget doesn’t provide for such spending.

The funeral and burial assistance program had cost the state $6.4 million to $9 million annually. The long gap in the program’s operation during a state budget impasse now in its 10th month has resulted in more stress for grieving families trying to scrape together money, funeral directors told The State Journal-Register.

“I think it’s just really sad,” said Spencer Leak Jr., vice president of Chicago-based Leak & Sons Funeral Homes.

James Gilkesson, a funeral director at Simons Mortuary in Peoria, said: “You have a lot of unemployment. You have a lot of people who need assistance, and it’s not there.”

Funding for the program was included in the fiscal 2016 budget passed by Democratic majorities in the Illinois House and Senate and vetoed by Gov. Bruce Rauner, a Republican.

Senate Bill 2046, which would restore funding for higher education and many human services, including the funeral and burial program, was passed with no Republican votes this month and sent to Rauner’s desk.

But the governor has indicated he likely will veto the bill because one of his aides said the legislation isn’t tied to “revenue, spending reductions or savings-generating reforms.”

‘Teeny, tiny drop’

Chris Butler, president of Butler Funeral Homes and Cremation Tribute Center in Springfield, agreed with other funeral directors that the program should be reinstated.

Butler said funeral homes weren’t using it to make a profit.

Funeral homes, he said, often drastically cut their prices to satisfy families whose loved ones qualified for the $1,103 the state would pay for a funeral for a public aid recipient and the $552 that would be paid for a burial or cremation.

The list price of those services can be many times higher than those amounts.

But the program, Butler said, helped families stretch their personal funds and be more satisfied with the products and services they received.

“There is a basic desire to have some sort of farewell,” he said.

Added Stephanie Deitz, who operates funeral homes in East Peoria and Washington and is president of the Illinois Funeral Directors Association: “Funerals are just a teeny, tiny drop in the budget for the state budget.”

Fewer than half of states have statewide assistance programs for indigent funeral and burial expenses, but Illinois is the only statewide program not operating because of budget disagreements, according to Jessica Koth, spokeswoman for the Wisconsin-based National Funeral Directors Association.

The Illinois program, which has operated for decades, served about 6,600 families in fiscal 2014, according to the Illinois Department of Human Services.

The majority of those families were in the Chicago area, but several thousand were downstate, including 120 in Sangamon County, a total of 92 in Peoria and Woodford counties, 22 in Macoupin County, 20 in Montgomery County, 24 in Morgan County and 14 combined in Logan, Menard and DeWitt counties.

In 2015, Rauner suspended payments to vendors in the program for several months when he also suspended funding for other human-service programs.

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governor then reinstated the funeral and burial payments, along with funding for human-service programs, through the end of fiscal 2015.

“Due to the Democratic majority’s failure to pass a balanced budget, no payments have been made since July 1, 2015,” said Marianne Manko, spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Human Services. The department is under Rauner’s control.

The funeral and burial program wasn’t funded in Rauner’s proposed budgets for fiscal 2016 or 2017 “in order to preserve core services for the state’s most vulnerable citizens,” Manko said.

471 cremations

There’s been some discussion among supporters of the program about the possibility of replacing it with private life insurance that would be funded through state funds funneled to recipients of Medicaid and other public aid programs, according to Rep. Anthony DeLuca, D-Chicago Heights.

But that solution hasn’t gained traction in the legislature amid the challenge of establishing collateral and the fact that enrollment in public-assistance programs can change during a person’s life based on fluctuating income, DeLuca said.

In Cook County, the medical examiner’s office since July 2015 has paid $77,119 to cremate 471 people for whom no private arrangements were made by relatives, county spokesman Frank Shufan said.

About half of those cases represent an increase in cremations related to the lack of state funding available to funeral homes and families for those expenses, Shufan said.

“Given the budget impasse and continuing atmosphere in Springfield, we do not have any expectation funding for indigent burial or cremation will be reinstated anytime soon,” he said.

Many of the African-American families served by Leak’s business would prefer burials but are opting for cheaper cremations, sometimes with no funeral services, when they learn about the lack of state funding.

About 10 percent of the 3,000 families Leak serves each year had benefited from the state program, he said.

Nowhere to turn

Because the program wasn’t available, Chicago resident Jeannetta McNair said she had to borrow $700 to cremate her brother, Springfield resident Jesse Triplett, 52, after his death March 23 in Springfield.

Triplett, a former musician, was single, lived alone and was receiving Social Security disability benefits when he died at Memorial Medical Center from complications of asthma, she said.

McNair, 46, a widow, said she was laid off from her disciplinary job at a Chicago elementary school last summer when the Chicago school district was cutting costs. She now works as an Uber driver.

McNair said she wasn’t able to get any money for Triplett’s final expenses from her two remaining siblings. She said she was able to use the state assistance program at the time of her husband’s death and a sibling’s death 10 years ago or more, but when she called the state this time, she was turned down.

“It would have been a great help,” she said, adding that her brother had no life insurance.

McNair said she considered abandoning her brother’s remains at Springfield’s Ruby Funeral Services and Chapel, but the owner worked with her to cut the price of a cremation by half.

Learning that a program designed to help struggling relatives had been suspended upset her, she said.

“Anything that helps us is getting cut,” McNair said. “It’s like it’s not meant for us to survive.”

She said she would have preferred to have a funeral service for her brother, as well as an obituary in the newspaper, but those things were out of reach financially.

For no charge, she and a few relatives were able to go into the funeral home’s basement and view her brother’s body, which was under a sheet.

“I felt just like crap,” she said. “But I did the best thing that I could do. I just know the state won’t help us, period.”

— Contact Dean Olsen: dean.olsen@sj-r.com, 788-1543, twitter.com/DeanOlsenSJR.