

Funerals and tangihanga – information for funeral directors

2 April 2020

Funeral directors provide essential services and will continue working during Alert Level 4. However, gathering together for funerals and tangihanga is not permitted at this time.

We are regularly updating our advice and guidelines to be accurate, relevant and responsive to the changes in our situation.

We will be issuing further guidelines on what to do during Alert Levels 3, 2 and 1 over the coming weeks.

These guidelines will be reviewed regularly and may change as we move through the national emergency Alert Levels.

What happens at Alert Level 4

To stop the spread of COVID-19, gathering together for public funerals and tangihanga is not permitted while New Zealand is at Alert Level 4.

This applies to all deceased persons, regardless of when and where they died, or the cause of death. It includes public gatherings at burials, cremations, memorial services, funeral wakes, processions or receptions and social gatherings, both indoors and outdoors.

Why?

We must protect people's health and ensure our health system can look after New Zealanders who become sick.

Bereaved families and whānau from all cultures and backgrounds will find this time challenging. This makes it even more important to show each other kindness, care, manaakitanga and aroha.

Only registered funeral directors may handle deceased persons

A registered funeral director must be engaged to carry out the functions of burial or cremation and transporting a deceased person in New Zealand.

Funeral services

During Alert Level 4, public funeral services are not permitted. Families or communities must not carry out funerals.

Funeral directors are encouraged to carry out burials and cremations as quickly as possible. Where this is not possible, you may want to offer your families and whānau other options, including:

- holding the funeral or tangihanga after the Alert Level 4 restrictions ease. Bear in mind that we don't know when that might be and there could be practical or cultural reasons why this is not an option
- live streaming or providing photos of the service and/or burial
- cremating the deceased and burying the ashes at a later date, holding a memorial service later when restrictions on gatherings are lifted and it is safe to do so.

Viewing of bodies

There will be an opportunity for family and whānau who have been in the same isolation bubble as the deceased to go to the funeral home to view the body.

Other family, whānau, friends or others in separate isolation bubbles cannot go to the funeral home for viewing.

Viewing of bodies must only take place in a funeral home managed by a funeral director registered with their local authority. Funeral homes have been identified as a controlled environment during Alert Level 3 and 4.

The number of people who will be able to view the body will be negotiated with the funeral director and will depend on the size of the funeral home.

Funeral home staff must work within the physical distancing protocols as outlined by the Ministry of Health. The funeral director must ascertain the size of any one 'bubble' participating in a viewing and may have to split the 'bubble' to accommodate physical distancing, depending on the size of their funeral home facilities.

A funeral director or member of the funeral home staff must be present in the funeral home at all times and meet physical distancing rules while any viewing is in progress.

The funeral director's premises must be sanitised after a viewing has taken place.

The deceased may not be transported from the funeral home for viewing purposes at any time.

Funeral directors may also allow religious rituals for the care of the body to occur. However, these must be carried out in the presence of an embalmer who will give direction to anyone present on the correct Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) requirements. Activities such as kissing, washing or touching the body must not occur before, during or after the viewing.

For example, Muslims have two fundamental requirements for funeral and burial, ghusl (ritual washing) and janaza (prayer over the body), that must be carried out by Muslims and within their strict rules for handling of the body. In this example, funeral directors may wish to work with their Muslim communities to identify Muslim males and females who can prepare the body of the deceased for correct funeral and burial, under the supervision of the embalming staff.

Funeral directors must keep a register of all persons entering the funeral home for the purposes of any viewing or religious/cultural rituals which take place. This register must include:

- exact day and time the viewing took place
- full names of all viewing
- current physical address of the viewers' isolation bubble.
- email addresses
- mobile phone numbers.

If families break these rules the funeral director should contact the police for support.

Viewing for the purpose of coronial identification is still permitted during Alert Level 4.

In addition, family and whānau who have been in the same isolation bubble as the deceased may go to the cemetery or crematorium for the burial. It is important that they have their own transport within their isolation bubble (i.e. nobody from another bubble can drive them or attend the burial).