

What to Expect When a Loved One Passes Away in the District of Columbia

When a loved one passes away, it can be a very emotional and confusing time. When you make funeral arrangements, the funeral director will review with you what you can expect during the process. Even so, you may find yourself later wondering when you will receive the death certificates and/or cremated remains. For deaths occurring in Washington D.C., this process can take longer than you might think.

The District of Columbia has a complicated set of rules regarding cremation and death certificates, rules designed to assist medical investigations. These laws extend the time needed by the funeral director to carry out your wishes because of the steps the funeral home must follow:

- 1.** The funeral director must **obtain information for the death certificate**. This includes facts about the place, time, and pronouncement of death. It also includes vital statistics, such as your loved one's address and parentage. Usually this step is taken care of at the arrangements conference.
- 2.** Next, the **attending physician signs the death certificate**. Death certificates can be signed electronically at some nursing homes and hospitals, but usually the funeral home staff must take the certificate to the doctor to have it physically signed. At this time the doctor will also provide a cause of death. Depending on the doctor and/or health care facility, this step can take anywhere from a day to a week.
- 3.** If cremation is the chosen method of disposition, this **provisional death certificate is then taken to the D.C. Medical Examiner**, who will investigate the cause of death. This step usually takes about two days, but it can take more. And if the Medical Examiner rejects the cause of death listed by the doctor, steps 2 and 3 must be repeated (which again can take several days).
- 4.** For those that have chosen cremation, next the death certificate must be **stamped by the Medical Examiner's Office** with its approval to perform the cremation.
- 5.** At this point, the funeral home can **perform the cremation and obtain certified copies of the death certificate**. These copies are obtained from the D.C. Department of Health. This step typically takes two to three days. You will be notified once this final step is complete.

As you can see, this is a lengthy and complicated process. It is not unusual for two weeks to pass from the start of step 1 through the end of step 5.

Your funeral director will call you if this process is taking longer than expected. However, you can always call or email the funeral home for an update.