



National Indian Health Board
**NATIONAL TRIBAL
COVID-19 RESPONSE**

910 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE | Washington, D.C. 20003 | 202-507-4070 | www.nihb.org

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Considerations for Tribal Funeral and Burial Ceremonies During the Time of COVID-19

Context

The National Indian Health Board (NIHB) offers a humble apology in advance for speaking on such a sensitive topic and in such a manner as a written document. We ask for understanding as NIHB's intention is to provide information that will benefit Tribes and allow them to make informed decisions that will be best for their communities and citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The unprecedented nature of the current pandemic requires that precautions be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among Tribal communities and protect the future generations. Many Tribes and Tribal leaders have requested guidance on how to address traditional burial practices and ceremonies in light of the pandemic, and NIHB worked with a group of traditional and Tribal leaders to respectfully offer these considerations. NIHB composed these considerations recognizing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Guidelines (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, and these considerations may be revised as new information becomes available.

Cultural Sovereignty

NIHB recognizes the authority and sovereign right of Tribes to make and execute their own laws and policies, and to safeguard sacred, cultural practices as an expression of that sovereignty. In this vein, NIHB encourages all Tribes to establish their own set of guidelines for their Tribal citizens based upon the wisdom of their elders, spiritual leaders, and traditional practitioners who have the knowledge to apprise elected Tribal leaders on these matters, while taking into account the guidance that has been issued by the CDC, WHO, states, and other reputable entities. It is at the discretion of Tribes to use these considerations, as they deem appropriate and applicable.

As Tribes examine their own traditional funeral and grieving practices and how to maintain those vital ceremonies, it may require a level of cultural flexibility that has not been previously exercised. American Indian and Alaska Native people have demonstrated over hundreds of years our abilities to be resilient and adapt to changing situations – often not of our own design. Tribes with the counsel of their spiritual leaders will once again need to determine what level of cultural flexibility is permissible and acceptable that will still allow for respectful honoring of the deceased while maintaining the safety of the surviving family and community members. And there is no single guidance that will satisfy all of these needs – thus emphasizing the need for individual Tribal action.

Risk of Transmission

The risks for the spread of COVID-19 being discussed and presented here are those associated with person-to-person transmission through airborne droplets (like from a coughing person) or those droplets left on

exposed surfaces. There is currently no known risk associated with being in the same room at a funeral or visitation service with the body of someone who died of COVID-19. These considerations should be examined regardless of the person's cause of death.

People who have died from COVID-19 can be viewed, buried or cremated without creating additional risk to the living or the environment. However, it would be prudent to check for any additional Tribal, state, local, or territorial requirements that may dictate the handling and disposition of the body of individuals who have passed from certain infectious diseases. A person should avoid touching the body of someone who has died of COVID-19, before the body is prepared for viewing.

Considerations for Tribal Leaders and Community Members

Below are points to consider when planning burial or funeral ceremonies for our community members. These points should be exercised before, during and after all ceremonies and associated activities (including but not limited to receptions, wakes, rosaries, feasts, burials, graveyard services, memorials, vigils, family visits, potlatches, giveaways, and viewings). Please consult with cultural, spiritual, and religious leaders, as well as elected leaders and family members to plan what is safe, possible, and acceptable to exercise.

CDC Guidance for Funeral and Burial Services

- Educate community about who is at higher risk of getting very sick, such as Tribal elders and those with diabetes and serious heart or lung conditions.
- Limit the number of people at a gathering to 10 or fewer.
- Clean and disinfect the location where these activities are held – both before they begin and after they conclude; and designate times for such cleaning if the ceremony continues over a period of time or if multiple groups participate sequentially.
- Provide plenty of handwashing sinks with soap and water or ensure there is hand sanitizer for all.
- People who are sick should remain at home and not engage in burial and funeral practices.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Practice social/physical distancing by planning for and maintaining at least 6 feet of distance between people.
- After any contact with a body of a person who has passed away from COVID-19, a person should wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.

Questions to Consider

- Can a ceremony, ritual, memorial, or any part of the funeral practice be held at a later time when the risks related to COVID-19 have partially or completely subsided?
- Can a portion of the activities be held with immediate family, and then held later with the larger community?
- Can any part of the funeral practice be respectfully broadcast via the internet or social media, or any other manner to invite remote or distanced participation, as a way to include the community (such as an automobile gathering or parade)?
- Is it appropriate (and if so, how) to encourage members of more vulnerable groups (i.e., the elderly, those with diabetes or heart conditions) to not attend such gatherings?
- Are there programs in place at the Tribal or local level that can offer assistance with funeral and burial ceremonies and processes (including, but not limited to, financial assistance; assistance with securing PPE for spiritual leaders, officiants, participants, and attendees; offering onsite services to help assure a safe gathering; conducting discreet, onsite temperature screening to attendees; and help with aligning the ceremony with official Tribal or local policies or guidance)?

Additional Considerations

- Aligning with the CDC recommendations, anyone assisting in preparing the body of a person that passed away from COVID-19 at any stage, should wear proper personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect face, body and eyes from potential exposure. Afterwards, these people should properly wash their hands, properly dispose of gloves, wash their clothes (if no protective gowns were used), and disinfect the area and any equipment used.
- Maintaining healthy physical distance during funeral and burial ceremonies means that physical contact such as handshakes, hugging, and kissing should be avoided or limited.
- Because children often struggle with maintaining physical distancing requirements, and this could be true during funeral or burial ceremonies, as well, consider requesting that children not attend such funeral and burial ceremonies and associated activities.
- Those living in other areas should consider not traveling to another community to attend a funeral or burial ceremony or associated activities.
- To safeguard the health of family members as well as traditional practitioners, spiritual or religious leaders, a minimum number of people should be involved in preparations. Others can observe without touching the body and staying at a safe distance.
- Those tasked with transporting a body, carrying a casket, placing the body in the grave or on a funeral pyre should make sure that the body is properly protected and that they themselves wear proper PPE, and wash hands with soap and water immediately after such activities are completed.
- As food plays a critical role in many of our funeral and burial ceremonies and associated activities, special attention should be paid to the safe handling, preparation, serving, transporting, sharing, and consumption of food. In addition to being mindful of how and by whom food is prepared, consider limiting the number of people involved in handling any food.
- Be cognizant of these considerations if you are hosting any ceremonies or receiving community members in your home or on your property. This includes assuring that seating for all attendees meets physical distancing requirements.
- During any giveaways, be sure that all items are properly cleaned or disinfected, or delay a giveaway until such a time as all the risk of transmission is considerably diminished.
- Consider notifying people of the risks of COVID-19 that may be present when attending a gathering such as a funeral or burial ceremony or associated activity.

Resources

- Frequently Asked Questions: Funeral and Burial Services for American Indians and Alaska Natives, CDC, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/tribal/faq-burial-practice.html>
- COVID-19 and Funerals, CDC, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#funerals>.
- World Health Organization. (2020). Infection Prevention and Control for the safe management of a dead body in the context of COVID-19: Interim guidance, 24 March 2020.
- State of Minnesota. (2020) COVID-19 Funeral and Mortuary Science Guidance, 19 March 2020.
National Funeral Directors Association COVID-19 Situation Update, <https://www.nfda.org/covid-19>

This document was created by the National Indian Health Board, members and staff of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and traditional practitioners and Tribal leaders serving in an advisory and review role to NIHB and the ACHP.

