

Detroit's reality: Infant corpses found piled up in funeral home

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A series of grisly discoveries at two local funeral homes last week shocked Detroit-area residents and prompted news coverage around the world. Dozens of fetuses and bodies of infant children were found in cardboard boxes, concealed in a drop ceiling or otherwise improperly stored at the Cantrell and Perry funeral homes, which have both been shut down.

State and city authorities have launched a full-scale criminal investigation into the handling of corpses and cremated remains at the two funeral homes, one on the city's east side, the other near Wayne State University. Many questions remain about what combination of gross negligence, profit-gouging and sheer indifference is involved, but one thing is certain: This macabre episode demonstrates the continuing decay of Detroit, the poorest urban center in America, and it gives the lie to the celebratory propaganda in the media about the "revival" of the Motor City.

So far over a hundred fetuses, infant bodies and adult corpses have been found improperly stored, as well as 269 sets of cremated remains. Other funeral homes are being searched. An attorney for the parents of one of the deceased children believes there could be hundreds more improperly disposed bodies.

The first report came on October 12. Michigan state inspectors got a tip that the bodies of infant children and fetuses were improperly stored in the Cantrell Funeral Home on Mack Avenue on Detroit's east side. Police and state investigators uncovered the body of a newborn infant and the remains of 10 fetuses hidden in a drop ceiling.

Last April, the Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA) closed Cantrell after they found 21 improperly stored bodies, "some of them covered with mold," according to the *Detroit News*. As of October, a total of 38 unattended bodies and 269

containers of cremated remains have been discovered at the facility.

After hearing about the Cantrell investigation, parents who had filed a lawsuit a year prior against Perry Funeral Home over similar issues, asked that the police investigate the conditions at Perry. After their child died only three days old in 2014, they had donated the remains to science but had been unable to trace the ultimate disposition of the body. The police raided Perry Funeral Home on October 19, discovering the remains of 63 fetuses or bodies in cardboard boxes or freezers.

There are indications that the funeral home charged Medicaid for the cost of burial when the child's remains were actually stored in a mortuary school connected to Wayne State University. According to LARA, which also suspended the license of Perry Funeral Home, the business "failed to certify and file death certificate for the dead bodies of the fetuses and infants for whom the assumed custody with the appropriate government authority within 72 hours of death."

The WSWs spoke to a Michigan social worker in the hospice field who explained the connection of this horrific scandal with the growth of poverty in Detroit, observing that it is not unusual for a family experiencing a terrible tragedy such as a newborn's death and lacking the resources to bury the child, to donate the body for medical research.

A recent Federal Reserve Board study found that most working-class families in the United States could not pay an emergency \$400 bill without borrowing the money. A child's funeral can cost double or triple that amount, or even more. And workers in Detroit are paid well below the average. According to one recent report, about one in every five workers in Wayne County

(which includes Detroit) make less than \$12 an hour. An estimated 60,000 of those workers have a median wage of less than \$10 an hour.

The social worker further explained: “In order for someone to donate human remains to the University of Michigan or WSU for anatomical testing you have to sign up with the university first. WSU has one of the only testing labs in the region for the remains of children. You also need a funeral home. The funeral home provides transportation of the remains to the university. They also may store them, [for example] ... if it happens over a weekend for a few days. The funeral home will have storage, refrigeration, before the remains are moved.

“They also provide the death certificate. Only funeral homes can provide death certificates for human remains. That’s to inform the government, Social Security, Medicaid, whomever you need to inform that someone has passed away.”

“A lot of the families probably have Medicaid, and Medicaid subsidizes recipients for funerals,” stated the social worker. “One of the things about the funeral homes is they wanted to get that subsidy. From what I could tell it looks like they were defrauding Medicaid.”

In Michigan the state pays the funeral director \$220 for cremation without service, but the rate doubles to \$455 for cremation with memorial service. For burials, the rate is \$475 to the director with a memorial service not counting \$145 to the cemetery for burial.



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