

Hundreds of bodies and other remains hidden in Detroit funeral homes

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Last week, state authorities raided two Detroit funeral homes following the shocking revelation that hundreds of bodies and cremated remains had been hidden or stuffed away for months if not years. The scandal has brought to light not just the devastating increase in poverty in Detroit, but the fact that increasing numbers of people throughout the United States cannot afford to bury their loved ones.

In the former Motor City, lawsuits have been initiated by parents and family members against the Cantrell Funeral Home where the remains of 11 infants, including 10 fetuses, were found hidden in a drop ceiling. An earlier raid in April uncovered the cremated remains of 269 people as well as bodies covered with mold in a garage. A raid at the Perry Funeral Home near Wayne State University similarly revealed the remains of 63 fetuses or infants. Both funeral homes have been closed down by the Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA).

While the Detroit situation seems to involve elements of fraud and outright criminality, the underlying crisis is the poverty of residents. With an average cost for a funeral with cremation at \$6,800 and burial at \$10,000, the phenomenon of unclaimed bodies and burial crises is nationwide.

An Associated Press article published in February stated that bodies of the deceased are piling up across the country as public resources for burials for the poor dwindle. “About 15 states provide some funding for unclaimed body burials or cremations,” states the AP, “while the rest have pushed the cost to local governments, said Scott Gilligan, general counsel for the National Funeral Directors Association.”

West Virginia’s indigent burial program has run out of money every year since 2004. The state has paid for more than 10,000 indigent burials since 2011.

Indiana’s appropriations do “not meet the current demands on the program” stated a spokesman for the Family and Social Services Administration. The \$1,100 reimbursement provided to funeral directors in Massachusetts to bury the indigent and unclaimed has stayed the same over the past 35 years, AP noted.

GoFundMe, one of the largest fundraising sites internationally, reported that there was a 13 percent increase in campaigns they described as memorials in 2017. “For many people, who have no other place to turn, we become the most important company to them,” Rob Solomon, the chief executive of GoFundMe, told the *New York Times*.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Angie Vinton, the head of the volunteer-run Metro Detroit Share which offers a funeral assistance program. The demand is so great in the city that there are five such private all-volunteer agencies. Vinton pointed to the high mortality rate in Detroit, one of the worst in the US with 12.7 deaths per 1,000 live births. This is twice the national average of 5.9 per 1,000 live births, an expression of the growth of extreme poverty.

The depth of the social counterrevolution against the living standards of workers in Detroit, once called the “Paris of the Midwest,” is indicated by the shocking fact that the rate of child death in Detroit is now higher than that of Botswana (12.5 deaths per 1,000 live births).

Vinton said it was extremely difficult to “wrap my head around” the current crisis in Detroit, but emphasized that “those who are in lower income populations lack access to care. They lack access to transportation to get support services, and the financial means to cover costs.”

She noted the challenge which poor pregnant women face in securing access to prenatal care, which is

strongly correlated with infant survival. “At the support meetings we run in Taylor and West Bloomfield, a lot of times people really don’t have transportation So, if people don’t have a car, or insurance or gas, how do they get there? If you don’t have insurance to cover it, you get frustrated and say you aren’t going to do it.”

If you have the loss of your child, she explained, then “dealing with the hospital, dealing with the funeral home,” is an issue of both education and resources. “So, if you lose an infant, many people think they are facing a \$10,000 bill and they might ignore it because they don’t know there are other options. If they don’t have the means to come up with thousands of dollars, what else are they going to do?”

In 2014, during the bankruptcy of the city with an appointed emergency manager who overtook the elected government, 200 unclaimed bodies were reportedly piling up in the county morgue, largely because families did not have the money to bury them.

The poverty rate in Detroit continues at 34.5 percent, nearly three times the national rate of 12.3 percent. The US child poverty rate stands at 21 percent, with one of every five children living below the poverty level. The child poverty rate in Detroit is a staggering 48 percent, which means that one out of every two children does not have the means to live without want, according to the official, abysmally low standards.

Vinton stated that, aside from volunteer organizations, the only help available to a bereaved family is a \$145 government stipend for a deceased infant one month old or less or \$600 for an older child. Vinton added that the application for that tiny stipend was so complicated as to be prohibitive.

Poverty in Detroit is a microcosm of that in the nation. But gross social disparity is greatest in the home of Wall Street. New York City’s massive potter’s or paupers’ field on Hart Island just east of the Bronx is one of the largest cemeteries in the world. Known as the Island of the Dead, over a million of the poor, the unclaimed or those who are not known to be dead by their relatives are buried there.

The burial site has been shrouded in secrecy for decades. It is run by the New York Department of Corrections, whose prisoners are forced to bury an average of 1,500 bodies each year. Only since 2011 have the names of those interred been released.

A *New York Times* report on Hart Island painted a

grim picture of the lives of some of the people whose remains were transported to a pauper’s grave. Lola Dickerson worked as a domestic for a family for 50 years. She died at the age of 88, however her only living relative was also in poor health. Her body sat in a morgue for three months before it was taken to Hart Island.

Burgeoning income inequality has led to record numbers of American workers forced to subsist in extreme poverty. This scandal reveals that the bane of destitution afflicts not only the living, but haunts their deaths as well.



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