

# Trump blocks federal funeral aid to families of COVID-19 victims

Jacob Crosse  
2 May 2020

Demonstrating that there is no expense the criminal oligarchy will not foist onto the back of the working class, President Donald Trump has barred the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) from using any of the \$45 billion Congress appropriated to the agency through the CARES Act to help families and relatives pay for funerals costs incurred due to COVID-19.

While an ocean of new funds have been made available to the agency, an April 28 White House memorandum directed to the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Administrator of FEMA, sharply curtailed how the funds could be appropriated. Language within the memo prohibits “individual assistance,” that is funds provided to the states and then distributed to individuals through FEMA assistance programs, except for “crisis counseling services.”

On April 18 the Trump administration declared that a “major disaster exists in all States and territories as a result of the virus” and authorized “Emergency Protective Measures.” However, the only “protective measures” for individuals and families approved have been the aforementioned “crisis counseling services.”

Leaving no doubt of the administration’s intentions to limit aid to victims of the pandemic, the memo states, “authority vested in the Secretary, acting through the Administrator... shall not be construed to encompass any authority to approve other forms of assistance.” FEMA operates several aid programs which could be used to facilitate unemployment assistance, as well as crisis counseling and reimbursement or vouchers for funeral costs.

Over the last 30 years, the average funeral cost in the US has skyrocketed by over 227 percent when adjusted for inflation, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics . Government researchers found that caskets

alone ballooned in price by 230 percent compared to a 95.1 percent rise for all other commodities tracked over the same time.

In the epicenter of the pandemic, New York City, funeral parlors and mortuary centers have been unable to keep up with the deluge of corpses, in some cases resorting to storing bodies in unrefrigerated trailers, stacking them in storage closets or shamefully piling the dead in unoccupied rooms.

The ghastly situation in New York is compounded by the lack of dignity many will be able to offer their loved ones in their final remembrance. Compounding the emotional trauma of an unexpected and preventable death, is the economic calamity millions are already facing. With over 30 percent of the country unemployed and millions unable to collect or file for unemployment insurance or waiting on as-yet-to-be-delivered stimulus checks, the added burden of funeral expenses, which in New York City can exceed \$11,000 per burial, is too much for many to bear.

Representatives from approximately 30 states and US territories, according to ProPublica , have appealed to FEMA for “the full suite of individual assistance declarations,” which includes burial services. Not a single one, as of this writing, has received a positive response. Instead many, including Armand Randolph, a spokesman for the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency, have only received a perfunctory letter informing them that their request was “under review.”

In previous “disaster” situations such as Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy in 2005 and 2012 respectively, FEMA, at the direction of the president, had provided meager assistance to help defray the costs of funerals. A September 2019 report from the Government Accountability Office revealed that the agency paid out

approximately \$2.6 million in funeral costs for just under 1,000 applicants for three 2017 hurricanes—Harvey, Irma and Maria—paying out roughly \$2,700 per applicant.

Or to put it other terms, flying 6 F-16C/D Fighting Falcons and six F-18 C/D Hornets for an hour over the New York City skyline the same day the White House issued its memo denying funeral aid, cost roughly \$245,076, or enough to pay costs for the “dozens of corpses” discovered in U-Haul trucks in the city two days later.

The average disbursement of \$2,700, an insulting amount, is not even enough to cover the costs of a traditional funeral, according to 2019 figures compiled by Anthony Martin, editor of ChoiceMutual.com. Martin reported that the cheapest city in the US “to die in,” is Las Cruces, New Mexico, with an average funeral cost of \$4,560.

The FEMA operated Disaster Relief Fund has fluctuated wildly in funding in recent years with between \$7 and \$13 billion available, however with the passage of the CARES act an extra \$45 billion was allocated by Congress. Every Democratic Senator voted for the CARES act, providing no-strings-attached funding to FEMA without bothering to write in any provisions guaranteeing the money would actually go to those who need it. As with the “corporate welfare” Senator Bernie Sanders and the rest of his party knew was in the CARES Act, the Democrats were fine with the Trump administration having sole discretion in how to use, or withhold, these funds as it pleases.

As in previous disasters the ruling class will use the pretext of the pandemic, and agencies such as FEMA, to enrich themselves. Carnival Cruise Lines, the recent beneficiaries of between \$4–6 billion in Federal Reserve guaranteed loans, also profited tremendously from previous disaster declarations.

During the Obama administration, according to a charter agreement between Carnival and FEMA, obtained by Jim Walker at [cruiselawnews.com](http://cruiselawnews.com), the government agency paid Carnival a staggering \$74.7 million for use of one ship over a four month period in 2017. The ship was used to house relief workers off the Caribbean island of St. Croix following a series of hurricanes that struck the region.

During the six-month stretch following Hurricane Katrina, Carnival once again, in a no-bid deal with

George W. Bush’s FEMA, chartered three ships to the Gulf of Mexico to provide space for the tens of thousands of residents stranded inside the flooded Louisiana Superdome. Over the next six months FEMA paid Carnival a total of \$236 million, which the *Washington Post* reported at the time would have been over twice the cost paid per passenger if the ship was full and actually moving.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**