

650 bodies stored in freezer trucks for months in New York City disaster morgue

Josh Varlin
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The *Wall Street Journal* reported Sunday that hundreds of bodies have been kept in a disaster morgue on the Brooklyn waterfront for months, after New York City was overwhelmed by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. About 650 remain, and as a second wave of the virus hits the New York City area, the macabre “backlog” of bodies is likely to rise.

Just as the pandemic overwhelmed the city’s health care system, it also overwhelmed the city’s death care system, with bodies overwhelming morgues and funeral homes. Thousands of New Yorkers lived within view of a refrigerated truck brought in to store bodies on the street or in a parking lot during the height of the pandemic.

Hundreds of those bodies ended up on the 39th Street Pier in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, after delays in identifying them and making proper arrangements.

The New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) is trying to identify relatives for about 230 of the deceased, with others remaining in storage as their aggrieved family members make funeral arrangements.

In many cases, these family members have themselves had COVID-19; some have died from it.

Even in terms of staffing, the OCME was simply unequipped to deal with the surge in deaths: 15 forensic investigators and seven staff working to identify next of kin were dealing with 200 deaths a day rather than the normal 20. Calls from family members asking about death certificates or trying to view a body skyrocketed to 1,000 daily from only dozens before the pandemic, prompting the addition of staff from the city’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

The *Wall Street Journal* relates the case of Lea-Anne Carafa, who was contacted by the OCME on July 28 to tell her that “her husband, Frank Joseph Carafa, from whom she was separated, had died and been found in bed almost three months earlier, on May 6.”

As much as the delays in identifying bodies and

contacting relatives have created a situation in which hundreds of people have not been buried for months, the concurrent health and economic crises are also delaying burials.

Assuming a family can be contacted and is physically well enough to arrange for a funeral, they have to pay, on average, thousands of dollars for a burial. Traditional funerals cost about \$9,000, and cremations with services are only slightly cheaper: \$6,500, according to the New York State Funeral Directors Association.

The city’s burial subsidy is only \$1,700, a fraction of the cost of a dignified burial, and itself an increase from \$900 before the pandemic. While this was costly for many even during “normal” times, mass unemployment has made affording burials impossible for even more people. Many of the families will choose, perhaps after setting up a GoFundMe or appealing to friends and family, to bury their loved ones in the potter’s field on Hart Island for free.

OCME Executive Deputy Commission Dina Maniotis told the *Wall Street Journal*: This has been traumatic. We are working with them [next of kin] as gently as we can and coaxing them along to make their plans. Many of them will decide they want to go to Hart Island, which is fine.”

The experience has also no doubt been traumatic for OCME staff dealing with an unprecedented, sustained influx of bereaved family members and difficult situations. OCME Deputy Director of Forensic Investigations Aden Naka told the *Journal* that family members were themselves recovering from COVID-19 or had lost multiple family members to the pandemic.

“So many people just needed us to hear their stories, to listen to their experiences, to be a friendly voice on the other end of the phone, in a way that I have not experienced before,” she said.

The OCME has only managed to secure burials for

about 50 people since mid-September, indicating that the disaster morgue is unlikely to be decommissioned in the near future, to say nothing of the rapidly emerging second wave.

The pandemic has killed 24,200 people in New York City, according to Johns Hopkins University, which does not count those who were unable to get tested, especially early in the pandemic, before dying, and also does not count those who died indirectly from the pandemic—such as people with heart attacks who avoided going to the hospital when they were full of coronavirus patients. The pandemic’s victims were disproportionately older and poorer, and were mostly victims of inequality —affecting comorbidities, likelihood of infection and quality of hospital care.

In April, millions of people were shocked when videos emerged of mass graves being dug on Hart Island, a potter’s field where the city’s unclaimed bodies have traditionally been buried. At the height of the pandemic, the rate of burials on the island had quintupled, exemplifying the deadliness of the pandemic as well as its disproportionate impact on workers and the poor.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat, responded to the reactions of horror—as well as reports that the city was prepared to dig temporary mass graves on Hart Island and in city parks if needed—by declaring that there would not be mass graves in New York City. However, given the scope of the deaths, it is clear that this was only possible by storing hundreds of bodies in refrigerated trucks for months.

The scenes of mass graves on Hart Island, along with the other morbid imagery of the spring, will return unless the working class intervenes decisively to prevent a second wave of the disease. This requires shutting down nonessential businesses and in-person schooling and compensating workers and small businesses for their losses.



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