Sticky Funeral Prices and Rigid Regulations in the COVID–19 Crisis

By David E. Harrington

Thousands of Brooklynites have lost their lives to COVID-19. Last spring, at the height of the tragedy in New York City, relatives of the deceased were frantically scrambling to find a funeral director to handle arrangements for their loved one. Time was ticking. Hospitals wanted bodies collected as soon as possible. The city's medical examiner posted online that any bodies left unclaimed for two weeks would be buried on Hart Island, New York City’s potter’s field.

Early on, Brooklynites were calling Amy Cunningham, owner of Fitting Tribute Funeral Services, to ask about prices. Soon, they were only asking whether she would handle their case. Desperate to find help, some Brooklynites called John Quevedo, a funeral director in Yonkers, in the city’s northern suburbs. As he talked to them, he often wondered how many funeral homes had turned them down, forcing them to look outside the city. Given that there are 256 funeral homes in New York City, there must have been a lot of fruitless phone calls.

The shortage of funeral directors wasn’t surprising. The number of deaths in New York City during the COVID-19 spike was six times higher than normal. What’s more, the spike increased the cost of providing direct cremations. Funeral directors tell harrowing stories of retrieving COVID-19 victims’ bodies from cluttered apartments and disorganized hospital trailers. Soon, funeral directors were turning to outside...