

Fall
2024

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Phil Olson
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2026 Term

Tiffany Carpenetti
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2025 Term

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**Funeral Consumers Alliance
of the Virginia Blue Ridge**



Successful Annual Meeting

Election of Board members:

The Board of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Virginia Blue Ridge (FCAVBR) thanks newly elected members, Ivory Desper, Phillip Olson and Linda Plaut for willingness to serve the 2025 to 2027 term.

The annual meeting of the FCAVBR was held September 25 in the Community Room of the Blacksburg Library.

The program was a presentation in the changes of “Death Culture” by Ross Blount, owner and manager of McCoy Funeral Home in Blacksburg. Mr. Blount started by recognizing miscommunication in the early years of the FCAVBR. We heard statistics of how things have changed. Embalming was status quo, but now is not routine, a family must request this service. Once cremation was a lesser option for death care, now more than 50% of funerals involve cremation. He noted that convenience and cost are major factors in the increase in cremations.

Information was presented on Alkaline hydrolysis, organic reduction and some misconceptions of systems such as pods. McCoy’s Funeral Home now receives more inquiries on green burial and has participated in such. They have options such as shrouds and biodegradable coffins. Covid challenged the funeral industry with the number of funerals on each day, as well as storage of bodies waiting to be buried. Mr. Blount also described the complexity involved in the relationship with the city and county to handle unclaimed bodies. Another problem area is administrative, such as getting a doctor’s signature. Mr. Blount stressed that the Funeral Home helps families achieve a meaningful ceremony. If a family is aware of the services available, as are most of our members, it is easier for the Funeral Director to better meet the family needs.

Some superior snacks were served, courtesy of the helpful staff in the deli department of the University Mall Kroger’s. In addition, Mr. Blount brought useful, informational booklets on end-of life planning and decision-making for funerals.

The President of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Blue Ridge, Dianne Rencsok, as editor of the Summer 2024 newsletter, asks forgiveness from the FCAVBR membership.

The FCAVBR Summer 2024 newsletter had two goals. One was acquainting people of the benefits of digital viewing. The other, learning how many people found our newsletters useful. Unfortunately, a plethora of problems and errors prevented any chance of success!

See page 5 for enlightenment



Presenting a shorthand version of the 2023/2024 annual report

In this 2023/2024 year, the FCAVBR spent some time reviewing our public statements about who we are and what we provide. We agreed that our most useful “product” is information. To that end, we have continued in person advocacy by sponsoring information tables at several public events and presentations of “Getting your Ducks in a Row”. In addition, we have also begun participation in two similarly focused organizations, Palliative Care Partners of the NRV and Blue Ridge Green Burial.

After many years of being presented with information, the town of Blacksburg approved the option of green burial in Westview Cemetery. In addition, town representative, John Boyer, provided explanation and history in a public meeting that we organized at Warm Hearth.

Price surveys of Cemeteries and Funeral Homes were conducted and have been posted on the fcavbr.org website. Future surveys will be limited to the surrounding geographical area. Our continued monitoring of the Virginia Legislature and the Board of FD&E has been rewarding as we see how death culture remains an important aspect of governmental review.

We have used our newsletters to encourage members to take advantage of the increased information opportunities that the digital world offers. Unfortunately, our website was ineffective in supporting this concept. Many thanks to our web developer, Katy Morikawa, for working with us to improve the website and bring information to you more effectively. If you have any suggestions for further improvement, or any questions, please let us know. We will continue to provide current information in our newsletters.

*To view the formal Annual Report, see the FCAVBR website
Go to fcavbr.org Double click the “About” tab, scroll down to “Annual Report”*

Thanks to all for the work done by the board and other members to enable continuing our mission:

Kim Marye and Jo Burroughs for sizeable work on the surveys
Bill Baker, Kim Marye and Phil Olson's review of the Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers and of Virginia Legislative actions.
Ben Crawford and Bill Baker for significant work on mission evaluation
Franklyn Moreno and Helen Renqvist for event facilitation
Tiffany Carpenetti working with the Virginia Department of Health
Phillip Olson for publishing and speaking about death culture
Cynthia Luke for taking the lead in Death Cafes
Inga Solberg, our treasurer and
Linda Plaut, keeping us all straight as our recording secretary

Death Café

FCAVBR is sponsoring a Death Café on January 15, 2025. Death Café is a global movement that brings people together for conversation about death over coffee or tea and snacks. There is no agenda, just a place where people can freely share their thoughts and feelings.

So join us,

January 15, 2025 from 7:00pm to 8:30pm
Meadowbrook Library's Community Room
(267 Allegheny Spring Road, Shawsville)



Who is using our webpage?

Answer = lots of people. Lots for Taylor Swift is millions. Lots for the Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Virginia Blue Ridge (FCAVBR) is 872. Most of these viewers looked at more than one page, as there were 2140 page views. It was rewarding to see that the page most often visited was the one with our price surveys for Funeral Homes and Cemeteries.

The purpose of these surveys is to provide you, the consumer, with information to help determine your priorities when planning a funeral. Cost is not the only factor one should use to select a Funeral Home. History, Reputation, and Trust need to be considered as well.

FUNERAL POVERTY

Did you know that most of the phone calls we receive include requests for help paying for funerals? For some, this may be surprising, but **FUNERAL POVERTY** is a serious problem for many people. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, **the average cost of a funeral with burial in Virginia is roughly \$9,000**, while the average cost of a funeral with cremation is roughly \$7,000. These numbers are striking when you consider that **less than half of U.S. adults would be able to pay for an unexpected \$1,000 expense** without using a credit card or borrowing money.

As a result, many grieving families turn to unreliable crowd funding websites, such as GoFundMe, to raise money for funeral expenses. Increasing numbers of grieving families have resorted to leaving the bodies of their deceased kin unclaimed, which then shifts the financial burden of disposition to the county or state. Clearly the cost of funerals is a serious burden that can saddle grieving people with longstanding debt, or with choices between meeting funeral-related financial obligations and paying for food, clothing, transportation, or medicine.

Several policy strategies have been proposed to address funeral poverty. One approach involves changing costly state licensing requirements for funeral directors while also revising state regulations that burden funeral businesses with capital costs that get passed along to consumers. Creighton University law professor, Victoria Haneman, has proposed several policy changes. These include:

- Use of Flexible savings accounts (FSAs)** to qualify for funeral cost reimbursement
- Tax credits** for environmentally sustainable (and generally less expensive) funeral choices, including green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, or natural organic reduction
- Changes to the U.S. Internal Revenue Code** that would allow for **tax-deferred savings plans** (529 Plans) designed to help people plan and pay for funeral expenses (such plans already exist to help people plan and pay for college expenses).

Another strategy, proposed by FCAVBR board member Philip Olson and Wake Forest law student, Lane Wilson, involves **expanding the Affordable Care Act (ACA, aka “Obama Care”)** to include not only health insurance but also funeral insurance. Through the ACA, federal and state governments could negotiate with funeral insurers for lower premiums, and with funeral service providers for lower costs. These negotiations could serve as a requirement for participation in state death care insurance exchanges. Moreover, these negotiations could be used to incentivize funeral homes to offer affordable, green death care options.

To learn more about how you can help to address funeral poverty, please see the help options on the national Funeral Consumers Alliance website (fca@funerals.org), or contact Philip Olson at prolson@vt.edu.)

Annual wreath laying ceremony

The **public is invited** to attend the annual wreath laying ceremony at the Southwest Virginia Veterans Cemetery, in Dublin. This ceremony takes place on Dec 14 at 1pm (1300 hrs), no matter the weather. There is parking available across from the cemetery. Plan to get there early. There is shuttle bus service from 11:30 to 12:45. Over 1800 wreaths will be placed at Veterans gravesites.

The creation of veteran's cemeteries means that military members and their families need not face Funeral Poverty. The grave, burial, and marker are at no cost to the Veteran and eligible family members. The state of Virginia has established three veterans' cemeteries, in Amelia, in Suffolk, and in Dublin. National cemetery designation also occurs in many commercial cemeteries and can be identified at (<https://www.cem.va.gov/find-cemetery/state.asp?STATE=VA>)

Southwest Virginia Veterans Cemetery Volunteers (see SWVAVCV.org) has an Ambassador program, which hosts the Annual Wreath Laying Ceremony as well as a Memorial Day Program. SWVAVCV Ambassadors serve one day each month and attend all veterans' funerals. When an honor guard or rifle salute has been arranged by the funeral home or cemetery staff, Ambassadors direct funeral attendees during the honors portion of the funeral service. In cases when there are no attendees, Ambassadors's attendance assures that no Veteran is buried alone.

Why the editor of the Summer 2024 newsletter asks your forgiveness.

The Summer 2024 newsletter only served to confuse people. Nothing worked as planned. First was the loss of words on the page. Initially, there was a paragraph asking readers to fill out and return to us the enclosed post card if they wanted to continue to receive newsletters by postal mail. There are about 60 people who prefer newsletters by email. For those online people I substituted a comment not mentioning any postcard. Unfortunately, the online format was printed and mailed instead of the correct one! So, the postcard request was not in the newsletter. Some readers did return the postcard. One of those readers, Jim LoJocono, brought to my attention how hard it was to find the newsletters on the website. Jim's attempt to view the newsletter clarified that finding it to read was not intuitive. Our web developer has now created an easy-to-see link on the home page.

Obviously, neither goal, electronic introduction or feedback for newsletters, was met. The website changes now make it easier to find the newsletters and the Price surveys, as well as to know of coming events. We would still like to know if you wish to continue to receive a paper copy of the newsletter. If you no longer have the postcard, please just send us a note with your preference.

Thanks, Dianne Rencsok

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Or email to fcavbr@gmail.com

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