

NEWS

51% of California funeral homes hide prices or make them hard to find online, consumer groups say

Five years after passage of law, some price lists are difficult to find on websites and others are nowhere to be found



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Consumers cannot opt out of death, a new report astutely notes. And unlike other retail transactions, paying for a funeral is a “distress purchase” — something no one *wants* to buy, but everyone *has* to buy, eventually.

To prevent the newly bereaved from getting ripped off, and to make [comparison shopping](#) easier, California law requires funeral homes to disclose their price lists online. But five years after the law passed, fewer than half of funeral home websites — 45 percent — prominently displayed complete price lists, two consumer groups found.

Another 26 percent posted price lists, but made them difficult to find. Yet another 26 percent concealed prices, taking advantage of a loophole in the law, and a small number — 3 percent — didn’t post price lists or alert consumers that they available by request.

“Overall, nearly 30 percent didn’t comply with the spirit or letter of the law,” said Joshua Slocum of the Funeral Consumers Alliance.

Los Angeles residents were more fortunate than most, with 73 percent of funeral homes prominently posting prices. In Sacramento city, it was 52 percent; Orange County, 47 percent; San Francisco, 38 percent; and San Diego city, 31 percent.

Price tags for funerals can exceed \$10,000, and “because funeral consumers are frequently grief-stricken, they often cannot make decisions that are as rational as they would make with other large purchases,” the Funeral Consumers Alliance and Consumer Federation of America say in [their latest survey of hidden funeral pricing](#). “This puts the funeral director in a position of greater influence than the buyer.”

In the 1980s, the Federal Trade Commission required funeral homes to provide price lists, on paper, to consumers who visited in person. But grieving families often don’t have the time or wherewithal to physically travel to three, four or five funeral homes in person to gather such lists and compare prices, the consumer

California became the first and only state to require disclosure on websites in 2013. The law requires funeral homes to either post a complete general price list, or list 16 kinds of services and merchandise available, along with a note saying, “A General Price List is available on request”.

The biggest scofflaws, according to the study, were affiliated with [Service Corp. International](#) under the brand name “Dignity Memorial.” Thirty-three funeral homes took advantage of “a legal loophole” to hide prices, they said, but Golden State residents aren’t alone: In their national research, FCA and CFA have found no SCI/Dignity funeral home that included the general price list online anywhere in the U.S.

In California, SCI/Dignity funeral homes included a sometimes-obscure list of services offered followed by the statement, “A general price list is available on request,” the groups said. But when those price lists were requested from the 33 SCI/Dignity homes, only two locations responded. One employee provided price lists for five locations in Orange County, and one SCI/Dignity location in Los Angeles provided a price list by email.

“Uninformed consumers allow funeral homes to charge higher prices,” said Stephen Brobeck of the Consumer Federation of America. He urged consumers to demand greater transparency from SCI/Dignity, and to think twice before patronizing funeral homes that refuse to post prices.

SCI/Dignity objected to the groups’ analysis.

“There is no loophole,” the company said in [an emailed statement](#). “California law is clear that funeral establishments may choose to post either their general price list or a list of funeral goods and services required to be on the establishment’s general price list. SCI’s websites are in full compliance with both the letter and the intent of this law.”

Prices alone don’t provide consumers enough information to adequately plan something as customizable as a funeral service, “leading to customer confusion that could result in uninformed decisions,” it said. “We strongly believe having a personal conversation with a funeral director goes far beyond using just an online price resource.”

The company surveys some 60,000 of its customers per year, and 91 percent of them gave “clarity of pricing and payment” a score of 9 or higher on a 10-point scale, it said.

The cost of a full-service conventional funeral is \$7,360, the groups have found. That doesn't include cemetery costs, which can add \$2,000 to \$3,000 to the total. Simple, direct cremation runs from \$1,500 to \$2,500.

“The California Legislature should move quickly to close the ‘opt-out’ loophole,” the consumer groups said in their report. “It is clear that legislators intended to help Californians compare prices for one of the most emotionally and financially expensive transactions a family will face.

“There is no sound public policy reason, in the internet age, to continue allowing funeral homes – most notably the nation's largest and high-priced chain – to make it very difficult for individual consumers to collect information about prices.”

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Teri Sforza is one of the lead reporters on the OCR/SCNG probe of fraud, abuse and death in the Southern California addiction treatment industry. Our "Rehab Riviera" coverage won first place for investigative reporting from the California Newspaper Publishers Association, first place for projects reporting from Best of the West and is a finalist for the National Institute for Health Care Management Foundation's print award, competing with the New York Times, the Washington Post and ProPublica. Sforza birthed the Watchdog column for The Orange County Register in 2008, aiming to keep a critical (but good-humored) eye on governments and nonprofits, large and small. It won first place for public service reporting from the California Newspaper Publishers Association in 2010. She also contributed to the OCR's Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation of fertility fraud at UC Irvine, covered what was then the largest municipal bankruptcy in America's history, and is the author of "The Strangest Song," the first book to tell the story of a genetic condition called Williams syndrome and the extraordinary musicality of many of the people who have it. She earned her M.F.A. from UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television, and enjoys making documentaries, including the OCR's first: "The Boy Monk," a story that was also told as a series in print. Watchdogs need help: Point us to documents that can help tell stories that need to be told, and we'll do the rest. Send tips to watchdog@ocregister.com.

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