

FUNERAL GUIDANCE



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The Gila River Indian Community's COVID-19 Taskforce continues to work with partners in order to provide guidance for planning services for their loved ones who have passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic adds additional difficulty with making decisions on how to properly honor a beloved family member but it is important that all final arrangements be made with COVID-19 Safety and Prevention Measures at the forefront.

In a continued effort to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 on the Gila River Indian Community, adherence to protocols set forth should be followed when preparing arrangements and while honoring the deceased.

This prohibition of gatherings of more than fifteen (15) persons applies to funerals, wakes, cremations, burial and gravesite services per Executive Order No. 12.

- a. The fifteen (15) person limit refers to fifteen (15) additional persons allowed to attend plus the total amount of individuals currently residing in the home of the dearly departed.
 - i. Example: If the household of the dearly departed consists of five (5) people, only fifteen (15) additional people who live outside the home can attend. Total attendees would be twenty (20).
- b. Gravesite and Burial Protocols – We understand it takes several people to dig and prepare a gravesite and to facilitate the lowering of the casket into the ground. Persons assisting must follow the fifteen (15) person limit and maintain appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) requirements. All persons are encouraged to wear a mask for added protection during the time spent at the gravesite. Persons should not congregate after burial.
- c. The place at which the services will be held must be able to accommodate physical distancing (at least six (6) feet) between all persons present.
- d. Individuals should not attend funerals, wakes, cremations, burial and gravesite services if they fall within a high-risk category for COVID-19, are exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19, have tested positive for COVID-19 and currently quarantined, or have been exposed to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the last fourteen (14) days. All funeral arrangements must be coordinated by phone or virtually until the quarantine period is completed.
- e. The family must appoint a family member to oversee the funeral, wake, cremation, burial or gravesite preparations. District Service Centers will share Burial Work Orders with GRIC Departments which identify the primary point of contact whom will ensure the compliance of each criteria:
 - i. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), any individual(s) attending services i.e. funerals, wakes, cremations, burial, gravesite and memorials will adhere to requirement for masks and/or face coverings and protective gloves; and
 - ii. Hand washing stations and/or hand sanitizer readily available; and
 - iii. Adhere to physical distancing (6 feet) of attendees; and
 - iv. No feeding will be permitted until further notice; and
 - v. Refrain from congregating after you pay your respects;

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- vi. Lowering devices and FM transmitters will be provided upon request to assist with lowering the casket and to continue to practice physical distancing.
- f. Individuals/families overseeing final arrangements will be required to submit the name of the appointed family member overseeing the funeral, wake, cremation, burial or gravesite service to their District Service Center.
- g. Space out seating for attendees who do not live in the same household to at least 6 feet apart between household groups. Attendees who do not live in the same household should stay at least 6 feet apart and wear a mask when interacting with people who do not live in their household.
- h. Attendees should not hold or shake hands, hug, or kiss anyone who does not live in their household.
- i. Veteran Services – The Gila River Indian Community will consider and allow for the Military Honors and the Committal Service from the Post of their choice.
 - i. The family will make contact with the Post of their choice.
 - ii. The Post will ensure minimal contact with the family.
 - iii. No hand shaking or hugs.
 - iv. Military Honors will allow for:
 - The playing of “Taps”
 - A rifle detail
 - A color guard
 - Uniformed service members who present the burial flag.
- j. Those persons holding or sponsoring funeral services, wakes or cremations are recommended to view applicable guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/funeral-guidance.html>

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Below are COVID-19 mitigation strategy requirements and points to consider when planning for services. These requirements and considerations should be exercised before, during, and after all funerals, wakes, burials, gravesite services, memorials, vigils, family visits, and viewings.

In some situations, many people have become sick with COVID-19 after attending a funeral service. To help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in our community, this guidance provides strategies to protect yourself and others when you are grieving the loss of a loved one, supporting each other, making funeral arrangements, and participating in funeral services and visitations.

Guiding Principles for Arrangements and Service

- a. Take precautions when planning to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among those in attendance, including those who may not have symptoms.
 - i. Consider having virtual or phone meetings instead of in-person meetings with family members, funeral home staff, cemetery staff, clergy or officiants, and others to plan funeral arrangements.
 - ii. If you need to meet in person, follow everyday preventive actions to protect yourself and others from COVID-19, such as wearing a mask, physical distancing, washing your hands often, and covering coughs and sneezes.
 - iii. Do not attend in-person meetings if you are sick, a positive case or if you might have been exposed to COVID-19. Those who have higher risk of severe illness should weigh the benefits of in-person attendance against risk of exposure to a person with COVID-19.
- b. Discuss your cultural or religious traditions and the funeral wishes of the deceased, if applicable, with family members and the people you are working with (funeral home staff, clergy, or officiants).
 - i. Identify any potential concerns and determine options to make changes to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Preserve traditional practices when it is possible to safely do so, and identify whether modified or new practices could satisfy the needs and values of you and your loved one.
- c. Generally, there is no need to delay funerals, wakes, cremations, burials or gravesite services due to COVID-19. However, some changes to traditional practices are likely needed. Family members may need to discuss timing of services with funeral service providers, who may be overwhelmed.

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Consider the following modifications to funeral services and visitations to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. These modifications are recommended for events held in any setting, including funeral homes, cemetery facilities, and places of worship, private homes, and other venues.

- a. Consider virtual services, visitations, and memorial tributes by online video streaming or recorded video.
- b. Consider online guest books or memory books that invite people to share stories, notes of condolence, or photos.
- c. Consider limiting the number of people from different areas when there are high case counts of significant spread of COVID-19.
- d. Consider offering other ways for family and friends to participate, such as by phone or online (live or recorded).
- e. Consider holding services in a large, well-ventilated area or outdoors, as circumstances and traditions allow.
- f. Consider limiting the number of people engaged in activities that produce respiratory droplets, which may contain virus, (e.g., singing or chanting) especially when participants are indoors and in close proximity to each other. If attendees choose to sing or chant, encourage them to wear masks and increase distance between people to greater than 6 feet.
- g. Changing or removing funeral practices that involve close contact or sharing things among members of different households such as worship aids, prayer books, and other items shared or passed by clergy and attendees during religious rituals.
- h. Avoid having non-household members sharing vehicles to travel between locations during the services; if necessary, increase ventilation by opening windows or using the air conditioner on non-recirculating mode.
- i. In some cultures, bringing food or gifts to grieving family members is an important way to express care and concern. During the COVID-19 pandemic, consider expressing care in ways that do not involve personal interactions. Consider delivering food or gifts to grieving family members in ways that keep people at least 6 feet apart, mailing care packages, or giving families gift cards for food delivery services.

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There are many different cultural traditions involved in the bereavement process, including some that involve touching the deceased person's body before preparation. Though we are still learning more about how COVID-19 spreads, it may be possible that you could get COVID-19 by touching the body of a deceased person who had confirmed or suspected COVID-19 prior to the body being prepared for viewing. After the body has been prepared for viewing, there may be less of a chance of the virus spreading from certain types of touching, such as holding the hand or hugging. However virus transmission may be possible. Take steps to protect yourself, such as:

- a. COVID-19 is a new disease, and we are still learning how it spreads. There is currently no known risk associated with being in the same room at a funeral service or visitation with the body of a deceased person who had confirmed or suspected COVID-19 after the body has been prepared for viewing.
- b. Persons who die from COVID-19 are most infectious before death when they are sick and coughing. Sealed caskets and urns do not pose any additional hazard for spread of virus through the air or soil. After a person dies and their remains are placed in a sealed casket or urn, the outside should be cleaned and disinfected.
- c. Avoid touching, hugging, or kissing the body of a deceased person who had confirmed or suspected COVID-19 before and during body preparation.
- d. Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds after any contact with the body. If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- e. Take precautions with rituals that involve touching the deceased person's body
- f. People at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and members of their household should not be involved in these activities.
- g. If removing personal possessions (such as wedding rings) from the body or casket, clean and disinfect the items and wash hands right away.
- h. You should use gloves and practice good hand hygiene when handling your loved ones' belongings. Depending on the type of belongings, such as electronics, you should also follow the household item-specific cleaning and disinfection guidelines when handling these items. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/disinfecting-your-home.html>
- i. Individuals should consider not traveling to other areas with travel restrictions to attend a funeral, burial ceremony, or associated activities.



Frequently Asked Questions

➤ **Can you get COVID-19 from someone who has passed/died from the virus?**

- Persons who die from COVID-19 are most infectious before death when they are sick and coughing. Caregivers who are exposed can easily get infected and should follow precautions of isolation and quarantine. After a person dies and their remains are placed in a sealed casket or urn, the outside should be cleaned and disinfected. The cleaned casket or urn is not considered contagious.

➤ **Can you bury a person who passed/died from COVID-19 in the local cemetery?**

- Yes. Burials should follow protocols. Sealed caskets and urns do not pose any additional hazard for spread of virus through the air or soil.

➤ **Can we wash and dress our deceased loved one?**

- The risk of infection is higher with direct contact. Strict and frequent handwashing, wearing a mask, minimizing the number of people who come in contact, avoiding splashes, can decrease the chance of infection. Cleaning and disinfecting the area with products approved for COVID-19 or bleach (1/4 cup bleach and 2¼ cups of water) will reduce the amount of virus on surfaces. Some funeral homes will assist families with washing and dressing their loved one in a safer setting.

➤ **If I am a close relative, but I am sick, can I attend?**

- Saying goodbye and closure is very important. Invite family and friends who cannot attend because they are sick or have serious medical conditions to share their wishes in different ways using cards, video, poems, or telephone if they are sick to lessen the chance of spreading illness. People with diabetes, cancer, obesity, dialysis, lung or heart disease should consider not attending.



Gila River Indian Community
Governor's COVID-19 Task Force - Unified Command Team

COVID-19 Hotline: (520) 550-6079
grhc.org/hub
mygilariver.com