

My name is Stacey Kleinman and I am a board member of the Colorado Funeral Directors Association, Chairperson for the Colorado Funeral Service Board and the state's liaison for the National Funeral Directors Association. I am here today to show support of HB22-1221 on behalf of the Colorado Funeral Directors Association as well as my colleagues.

It cannot be understated enough how much bravery funeral professionals and coroners must possess in order to face some of life's most horrific tragedies. Deathcare workers fulfill an essential duty to humanity that most people are too afraid to think about - while others run away from catastrophic events and disasters, deathcare workers courageously face what many cannot. Whether they are confronted with the aftermath of a mass casualty event, the loss of a young life or, more often these days, families utterly destroyed by grief due to their loved one dying in isolation, funeral professionals and coroners are the witness bearers to life's greatest misfortunes. So many have stepped in to help during our nation's darkest hours and are haunted by their memories. The toll of this is unseen as deathcare workers are often forced to maintain a wall of composure while in the public eye.

One of the often-overlooked side effects of working in funeral service is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD, vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue represent a serious group of related mental health problems for people who care for, hear about or witness the intense suffering of others. Funeral professionals are especially vulnerable to these conditions. Yet, too often they are left out of conversations involving occupations at-risk for PTSD and therefore do not get access to the same level of mental wellness support that other first responders receive.

The trauma that funeral professionals are forced to live with is intensified by an inability to release their emotions. Just about every person who walks on this earth must confront a major tragedy at some point in their lives. Grief triggers are abundant for anyone who has ever lost a loved one, but for funeral professionals, those painful memories often resurface on a daily basis due to the nature of their work. Rather than being able to let out those feelings of anguish, funeral directors must often push aside their own personal devastation in order to focus on the families they are serving.

These challenges have always been present in funeral service, but the past 24 months especially have traumatized funeral professionals more than any time in the past 100 years. The experience of having to go into a crowded trailer filled with bodies to locate a deceased person, of having to carry out your job duties while fearing for your own health or your family's health, or having to refuse families you want to help, or the sheer volume of death we experienced...how

do we reconcile with such memories? It is time that the longtime psychological impact be recognized and appropriate mental health support be provided to those in most in need.

I have worked in funeral service for 15 years and was taught, as many others in my generation and older, to push, ignore or hide my own feelings and that there is “no time for feelings” or to “hide your feelings and move on”. For the bulk of my own time in funeral service, I have worked only for high volume firms in the Denver metro area, both as a funeral director and as a mortician in the prep room or crematory; so my personal experience may differ from those in rural areas where funeral professionals and coroners only handle elderly cases or those that we consider to have “lived a full life”. While I and my colleagues experience these deaths too of course, we also see an increasing number of traumatic deaths - vehicular accidents, homicides, suicides in such young ages that you would not believe, and a large amount of drug overdose deaths of all ages, again in some cases at such young ages you would not or could not believe.

Aside from the expected COVID-19 deaths of the pandemic, deathcare workers have seen an unprecedented number of deaths of all kinds at a pace that still challenges us to keep up with to this day. Burnout is at an all-time high among funeral professionals and mental health support is often not offered, nor is it typically equitable or affordable for funeral professionals making low wages - as is often the case.

I began my own journey with mental health care in the fall of 2020. On March 10, 2020, a week before the shutdown, I lost my mentor and dear friend and his funeral was held the day the shutdown was announced - the day before we were to stop providing funeral services. Over the next few months, I personally took care of friends and colleagues we lost to COVID-19 and traumatic deaths, just as my mentor taught me - “we care for those we love.” I eventually realized I was suffering and had been for years. I sought out a therapist and was eventually diagnosed with PTSD, vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue. Even with insurance, therapy was not affordable until I changed my own insurance policy, which of course was more expensive. I still am working on ways to fit in self-care, learning new coping methods for anxiety and depression. I still have dreams or nightmares of traumatic cases I have cared for or helped with - senseless infant and child homicides, victims of the Aurora theater shooting, and those I knew that were lost. You may ask as my therapist does - why do I continue in funeral service? I love funeral service and love being able to do something to help others - giving families a chance to see and hold the hand of their loved one one last time and to help families take that next step to finding peace.

Deathcare workers care for those we love but often not without personal harm. We selflessly and tirelessly care for others, putting service to families before our own families. We are available 24/7 to the families we serve, but often are not available to our friends and families and our personal relationships suffer. We are now taught by associations or other outlets that we need to care for ourselves but there is no time for self-care. Surprisingly, in this industry it is often frowned upon to discuss mental health or to even let others know you are seeking help. It is often seen as a sign of weakness and belittled, as it is often seen in other first responder occupations. We have lost a few colleagues in the Denver metro area to suicide over the past few years as a direct result.

It is time to not only shed some light on the mental health impact of being a deathcare worker, but also to ensure that all deathcare workers have access to mental health care. It is vital that we care for our own colleagues before more are lost. Our legacy should be to care for our own and ensure that mental health care access is guaranteed to the following generations of funeral professionals. Thank you for listening and thank you for your time.