

A photograph of a group of men in VFW uniforms. In the foreground, a man in a dark VFW uniform and cap is touching an American flag. The cap has "VFW 2937" and "DISTRICT 200 NEW YORK" written on it. In the background, another man in a VFW uniform is visible, with "DISTRICT 1 COMMANDER 2010-11 NEW YORK" on his cap. The scene is set against a dark background, possibly at a funeral or a memorial service.

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*the* Forgotten

# Business

By Steve Cronin

## Time to Step Up Funeral Home SECURITY



For Darin Drabing, security considerations are as much a part of business as maintaining an attractive workplace or serving families above and beyond what they expect.

“I don’t know if it is a concern as opposed to a lifestyle,” said Drabing, president and CEO of Forest Lawn Memorial Parks and Mortuaries in Glendale, California. “It is ever present.”

Drabing is not alone. For many funeral homes, providing security for staff, families and the deceased is a top concern.

From dealing with volatile viewings to maintaining up-to-date cybersecurity, these funeral professionals are doing all they can to head off problems before they start.

It’s not only smart business, said Drabing, a past president of the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association – it’s also the right thing to do.

“For generations, we have certainly been focused on the remains in our care. That has evolved as we have become more cognizant of the need to protect employees and the public as well,” he said.

From shootings in funeral homes to a body disappearing following a viewing, in recent years there have been numerous news stories reinforcing the importance of funeral home security.

Things have gotten so bad that in March 2017, Chicago funeral directors held a press conference calling for legislation to address violence at funerals.

“No one is immune anymore,” Drabing said. “It seems society has become more unstable as the clock turns. We always have to be mindful

of our own protection and that of the remains in our care.”

Forest Lawn operates both funeral homes and cemeteries at 11 locations in and around Los Angeles and employs a retired Los Angeles County sheriff as a full-time director of security.

The company’s security measures include a mix of technology, best practices and training aimed at providing comprehensive protection.

All staff receive some type of security training. Preneed salespeople who visit clients’ homes, as well as daytime and evening receptionists, are being equipped with electronic panic buttons they can use in case of an emergency. These workers also receive four-hour self-defense training on breaking free from grasps, as well as strikes and blows they can employ if forced into a physical confrontation, Drabing said.

Forest Lawn cemeteries all have security cameras, and the company uses license plate recognition to monitor vehicles entering and leaving its parks.

Drabing, however, realizes that not all in funeral service have the resources his organization has. Nonetheless, he said, providing some kind of security is the responsibility of funeral home and cemetery operators everywhere.

“You can attempt to think through scenarios and provide what you believe is the best you can do and afford within reason,” he said.

The good news, Drabing said, is that basic funeral home security need not be expensive to be effective.

one has a key to get in.”

If someone with an access key leaves the funeral home’s employ, he or she should be required to turn that key in before they go. If they don’t, the locks should be changed and new keys issued, Drabing said.

Similarly, if someone – such as a repairman – needs access to a closed area, they should be supervised by funeral home staff while in the area, he said.

While this might seem extreme to funeral homes that operate in a more

doesn’t mean funeral homes can’t afford security cameras. Multi-camera wireless systems that record for multiple days can now be purchased for a few hundred dollars.

“There are certainly devices that record for seven days that can be installed in most funeral homes. You just have to make the decision to do it,” he said.

While funeral home owners might be concerned about the cost of implementing such security measures, savings in insurance premiums might

## *Man fatally shot while walking into funeral home on Detroit’s east side*

– WDIV Local 4

### **Controlling Access**

Funeral homes must, Drabing said, have a controlled system for who can access specific areas of the funeral home.

This means determining who needs access to specific rooms, such as the prep room, and only giving access to that room to those employees.

Sensitive areas need only have a regular lock and key, but these areas should always remain locked and the key to gain access to the room should not be able to be easily duplicated. Employees should also know not to share access with unauthorized people.

“Security doesn’t have to be expensive, but it does have to be legitimate,” Drabing said. “You have to know who has a key to what lock. You can’t have a system where every-

relaxed atmosphere, most employees will accept and go along with tight security measures if it is explained why they are important, Drabing said.

“Employees need to understand and respect the obligation for protection,” he said. “It’s cultural as well as it is physical. It is a tone that is set in the organization for what is acceptable behavior or not.”

Just as in securing specific areas, funeral home surveillance can also run the gamut from costly to relatively inexpensive.

Forest Lawn facilities have extensive video systems with staff constantly monitoring the images. Cameras are motion controlled, so if someone enters an area, the image pops up on the monitoring screen.

While Drabing acknowledges that most funeral operations cannot meet that level of security, he says that

offset some of the cost, Drabing said.

“Everything has a cost-benefit tradeoff,” he said.

### **Staff Security**

In addition to creating spaces where only authorized personnel can go, funeral homes also need to establish secure areas where employees can go in case of emergencies, such as an incident in Las Vegas in July, where a man with a gun inside a funeral home engaged in a four-hour standoff with police before shooting himself in the shoulder.

“There needs to be a hard line between employees and where the public has access,” Drabing said. “(The staff) needs to know there are safe places they can go.”

However, when operating a business, some employees must constantly be in contact with the public and

# Standoff at Vegas funeral home ends; 1 in custody

– FOX5 Vegas

would not be able to take advantage of such safe areas, Drabing acknowledged. At Forest Lawn, such employees are being given panic buttons they can use to sound the alert about an emergency and are trained on how to respond in case of emergencies, Drabing said.

“They have to understand what their options are, what they can and cannot do – and that is where training comes in,” he said.

Training should also include active listening and communication, how to de-escalate a situation and when to back away.

“People need to be trained. Those skills don’t come naturally,” Drabing said. “Most people who gravitate to this profession want to be helpful and solve problems. However, there are times where that could actually exacerbate the situation. Your desire to be helpful could lead to a situation where you are with someone who locks the door and takes hostages.”

While some funeral professionals might worry such training will alarm staff, Drabing said most people already understand no one is immune from such danger.

“You can’t turn on the news today and not understand that these are real-time events,” he said. “Employees are grateful (for such training), and many expect it.”

Funeral home visitors also expect a certain level of security when attending viewings or services, said Denise M. Legghio, president of Korner Security in Mount Clemens, Michigan, a small city just outside of Detroit.

Korner Security provides armed and unarmed uniformed security for a va-

riety of businesses, including local funeral homes.

Legghio said there are a variety of reasons funeral homes use her security services.

In some cases, funeral directors are worried about tense family situations escalating during a viewing or service. The sight of uniformed security on hand helps prevent such situations and protects funeral home property. Korner staff is also trained to de-escalate situations. Having a neutral, uniformed third-party on hand can go a long way toward stopping trouble before it gets out of hand.

“When you are guarding a place like a hospital or a funeral home, people are not in a great emotional state,” she said. “We are meant to be the coolers, to get the situation under control quickly.”

Korner staff is also asked to provide security services in funeral home parking lots. Thieves, aware that visitors will be in a funeral home for an hour or more, will take the opportunity to rob cars. The sight of a marked car and uniformed staff in the parking lot will prevent such incidents. At crowded viewings, the security staff can help prevent disputes over parking spaces.

The security staff does more than just guard the parking lot, Legghio said. Korner prides itself on providing “concierge service,” which means staff will walk people to the entrance, open doors for mourners and assist the disabled.

“We really work to go above and beyond and really provide assistance as well,” Legghio said.

Legghio said her funeral home clients appreciate that they can call her firm on short notice and request

security for specific funerals or events.

“I have been called as much as a week ahead and as little as two hours ahead,” she said.

## Safety in Cyberspace

Funeral homes aren’t only turning to contractors to provide physical security. For businesses of all types, cybersecurity is a top concern. It is also, frequently, a major vulnerability that requires expert help.

“You talk about physical security, which is certainly important for a funeral home, but it’s also important that the funeral home is using some kind of cyber security,” said Jay Thomas, CEO and vice president of operations at Passare, which supplies business software solutions for funeral operations.

While most businesses now realize they need to have cybersecurity options in place – Microsoft even includes Windows Defender Antivirus in its Windows 10 software – few realize the need to train staff on recognizing and avoiding cybersecurity threats, Thomas said.

“Frankly, (funeral homes) are most vulnerable based on their people,” Thomas said. “When you think about it, most cyberattacks start because of something a staff person has done: downloaded a file, given out their password, or not logged out of their system.”

Staff need to be reminded of the importance of not sharing passwords with other employees. They also need to be instructed on recognizing phishing schemes – where hackers send emails or make phone calls trying to get people to reveal their passwords, Thomas said.

# Reducing Your Risk of **LIABILITY**

No matter how well you plan, or how conscientious you are, bad things will someday happen at your funeral home. How those bad things impact your business depends on how well you prepared for them, said Emily Ann Albrecht, an attorney with Betts, Patterson & Mines, P.S. in Seattle, Washington.

Just as poor security measures can open a funeral home up to liability issues following an incident, a proactive approach can help shield owners from a big financial hit.

“Plan ahead for worst-case scenarios and be proactive rather than reactive,” Albrecht said. “Follow the stories that pop up in the news and communicate with your insurance company to find out whether something like that would be covered by your policy as it stands, whether you need to make changes to your policy and/or whether they have any recommendations for measures that can be taken to reduce the likelihood of those types of situations from occurring.”

Security measures, such as having cameras, can also save you money in case something unexpected does happen in the funeral home, Albrecht said.

“Having a security system ... will help reduce the chances of a funeral home being found negligent in the event that a body is stolen, for example – i.e. that they made a reasonable effort to ensure that their premises were secure,” she said.

“Things are always going to happen, no matter how good the security, so the best a funeral home can do is take steps – within reason of course – to reduce the chances of being found liable if and when something occurs,” she said.

Albrecht said it is also likely that taking steps to improve security would likely also reduce insurance costs “because it is less of a risk for the insurer to cover the funeral home, much like when you install a security system in your car or home and you receive discounts.”

“The number-one thing is to educate your people. Most people know to not give out their login ID and password if someone calls up and says, ‘I noticed there is something wrong with your computer system and I need your password to fix it,’” Thomas said.

Funeral home staff also need to know how to protect the sensitive information of the families they serve.

“What about stealing the identity of someone who has passed away? They are not going to notice,” Thomas said. “What will your employees do if someone calls up and says, ‘I know you are taking care of my aunt. I need to know her social security number so I can make a donation in her name.’ The next thing you know, you have a case of identity theft.”

Security is also a reason funeral home operators should make sure all users on their computer system have their own login and password.

This not only prevents passwords from being passed around, but it also allows different users to have different permissions for accessing information, Thomas said.

“Having each user of the system have their own login is important to help maintain cybersecurity,” he said.

“One question to ask (when purchasing software) is are you paying by the seat or does the system allow you to have as many people as you need to have their own login and password? If you are paying by the seat and try to save money by sharing one login and password, you’ve just violated your security.”

Thomas said he is familiar with instances where, with everyone sharing a password, a person was able to create a padded funeral bill, collect cash from the family, and then go back into the system to modify the bill and keep the difference between what was paid and what the new bill indicated.

A good system will allow you track changes and actions and allow you to see who did what.

Thomas also warned against assuming that a computer system with information stored on local machines is more secure than a cloud-based system, where information is encrypted and kept on remote servers.

“When you talk about ‘storing information in the cloud,’ I have heard people say, ‘I have no worries because all of my information is stored locally’ (either as paper or on local servers). But then you have a fire, or flood, or someone steals your

servers, and the information is probably gone. If you look at some of the most important information in the world, it is all stored in the cloud. With your information in the cloud, the cloud storage provider (like Amazon) can and will invest in some really good security and manage it for you.”

When a small system is hacked, people whose personal information was compromised often don’t learn about it and are at great risk. When large systems are compromised, the breach is usually reported in the media. In those cases, so much information is exposed that the chances of an individual being impacted is greatly reduced, Thomas said.

However, Thomas cautions, good cybersecurity is no reason to ignore real-world concerns. Even when records are digitized, funeral homes often make printouts that contain a lot of sensitive information.

“Good security starts with the simple things, like remembering to shred printed forms that are no longer needed. Funeral homes print a lot of forms with important personal data,” he said. “If you need to discard it, shred it. The simple things will cover 90 percent of the security concerns. Start with the simple things.” •