

Stewarding a LEGACY of Cultural Relevance

NJSFDA Board Unveils Proposal for Funeral Service and Educational Reform

by Wilson H. Beebe Jr.

As part of a multi-year process, the NJSFDA Board of Directors has developed a proposal designed to align the education and internship requirements for licensure with the realities of today's funeral service marketplace. The association's working assumption is that the social capital of funeral service—its cultural authority—has not kept up with the education, needs and preference of its customer base. At its core is the nationally accepted belief that funeral service is not attracting the talent it needs to address the current shift in consumer disposition preferences.

The magnitude of this shift is driven home by the fact that burials in New Jersey in 2011 totaled 36,138—15,000 less than the

51,407 burials reported for 1992. Cremations numbers moved in the opposite direction during this same period, increasing to 25,414 from 11,908. (See *Chart 1: New Jersey Deaths by Disposition Type*.)

Consumers Are Voting with Their Pocketbooks

Cremation in the United States has been culturally and financially disruptive. Current industry receipts (represented by the blue line in the *Chart 2: New Jersey Funeral Service Annual Receipts*) have not kept pace with inflated adjusted revenue (the red line). That means funeral firms are taking in fewer dollars today than they were 20 years ago. Moreover, the current trend line is flat.

CHART 1 • New Jersey Deaths by Disposition Type

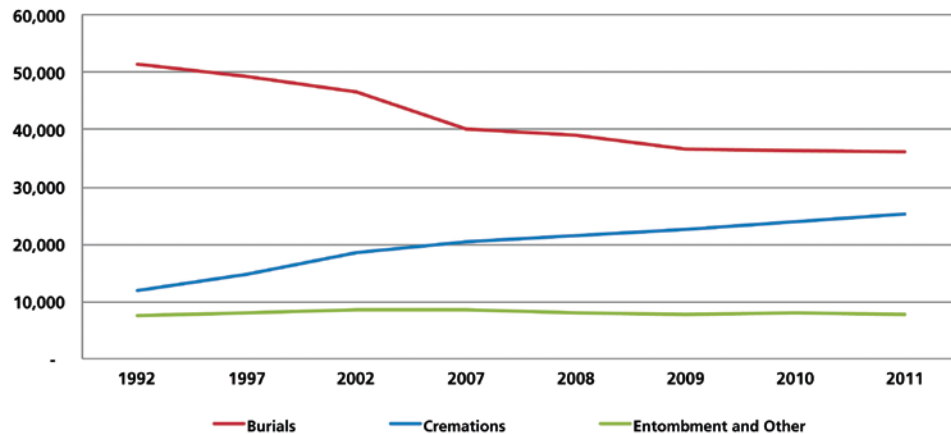
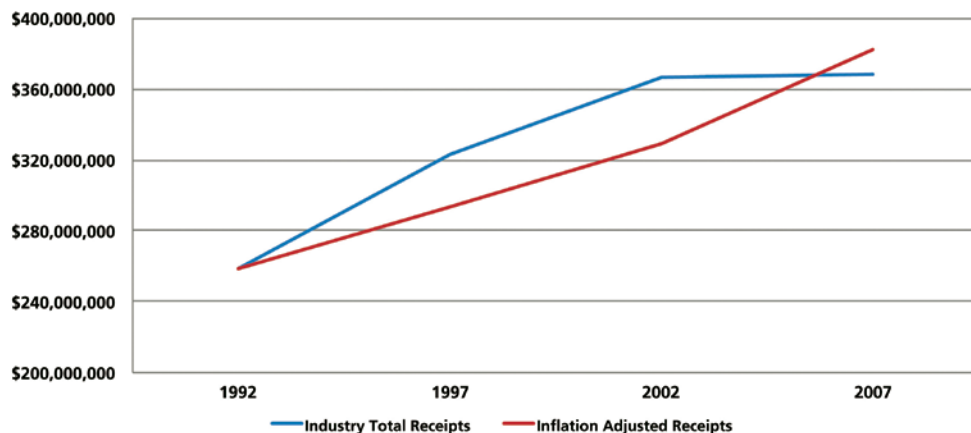


CHART 2 • New Jersey Funeral Service Annual Receipts



To not insist on a four-year degree as a standard for funeral service licensure could result in a future workforce that is incapable of effectively communicating and guiding consumers.

What these data represent are that there is a distinct gap between the value that funeral directors place on body-present, “traditional” funeral services, and the increasing rejection of this type of ceremony by consumers. The association board has determined that it is “our” job to close the gap between the two and that the best way to achieve this goal is through a program of internship and educational reform.

While we do not entirely understand what the end game will be, we think the best way to equip ourselves and the next generation depends on the education, breath of knowledge, cultural awareness, sensitivity and responsiveness of our workforce.

Simply put, that means more and better education and internships that are at once more structured and flexible.

The Proposal

The association took its first steps toward this goal in December 2009. It began by evaluating information, data and current industry thought on workforce development and the various forms of licensure, education and internship programs currently in use or under development across the nation. The association board conducted the research on its own, as part of an effort by the National Funeral Directors Association, and in conjunction with other state associations.

The association board has concluded two things:

1. Education is important, but cannot by itself make a better funeral director, and;
2. An improved internship cannot by itself change the aptitude of those entering the profession.

Therefore the association determined that funeral service needs to do both. The result is a two-part proposal calling for a four-year degree and an enhanced internship program as the standard for future funeral director licensing. (See *Chart A: The Proposal*.)

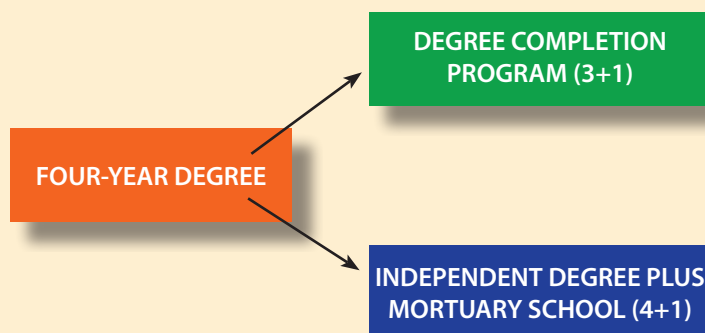
CHART A • The Proposal



A Four-Year Degree

The goal of the four-year degree proposal is to gain more mature, well-rounded and better-qualified students. While more education is not of itself a guarantor of a better funeral director, as previously stated, the entire history of human progress has depended on education.

CHART B • Four-Year Degree



Specifically, as depicted in *Chart B: Four-Year Degree*, the proposal allows applicants to qualify in one of two ways:

1. Participate in a degree-completion program that integrates one year of mortuary school with a funeral service-specific bachelor’s degree. This is described as the “3+1 Approach.” Schools like Mercer County Community College (MCCC) can develop degree completion programs in partnership with four-year colleges, while retaining the mortuary education component.
2. Complete a four-year degree program followed by one year of mortuary school. This is described as the “4+1 Approach.” Under this scenario students could earn a four-year degree in their choice of discipline (allowing for the fulfillment of certain mortuary school prerequisites) and then attend and complete mortuary school. This is an educational and licensure path now being followed by approximately one-third of today’s New Jersey funeral service entrants.

The proposed educational requirement would not affect current licensees or students. These persons would be grandfathered under the prior standards. A four-year licensure standard would meet the U.S. Department of Labor’s definition of “professional” for the purposes of administering the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Unintended Consequences?

What kind of unintended consequences could result from this proposal? The biggest concern might be that we inadvertently create a shortage of licensees. But based on historical data on licensure and mortality, it does not seem likely.

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Stewarding a Legacy of Cultural Relevance

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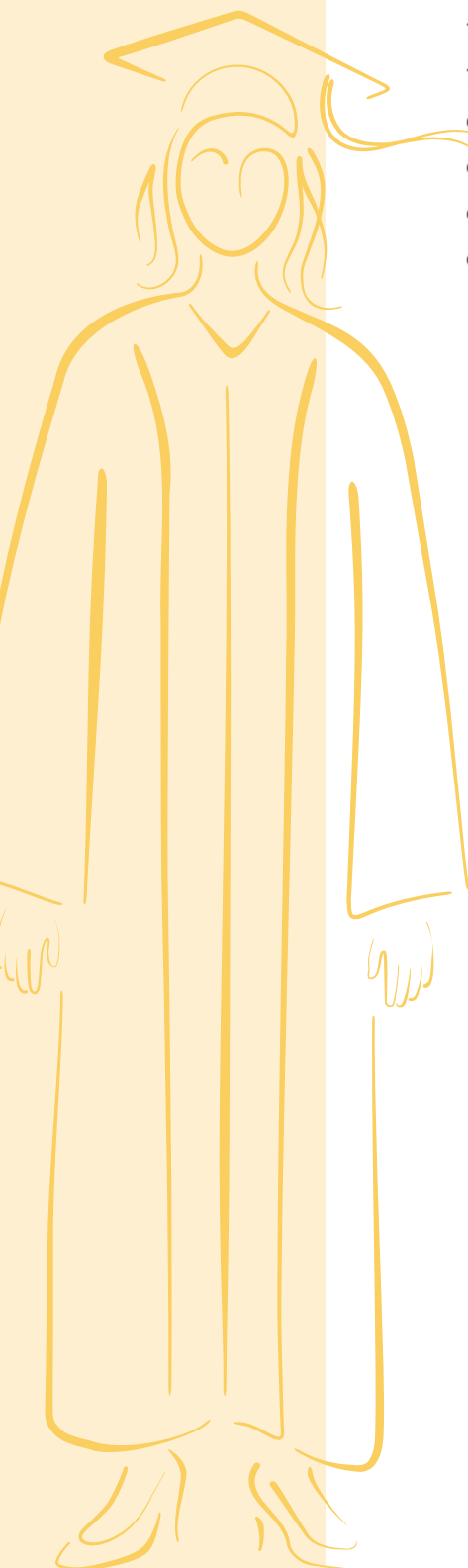


CHART 3 • New Jersey Deaths Per Annum

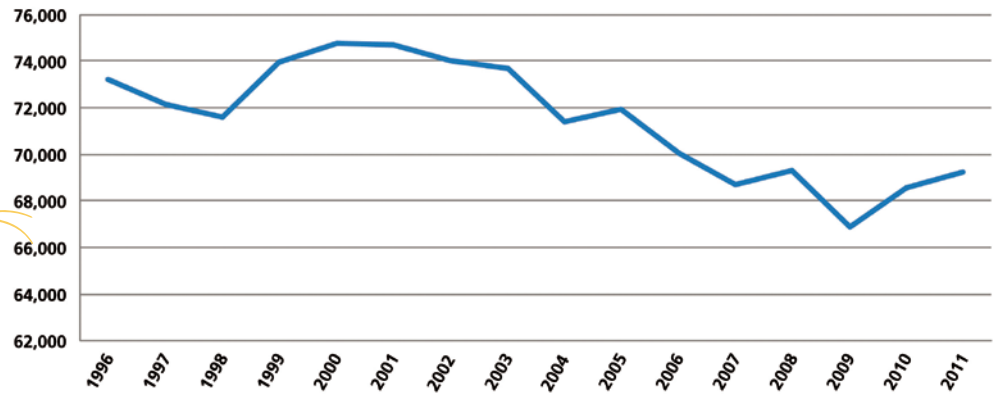


CHART 4 • New Jersey Deaths Per Funeral Director

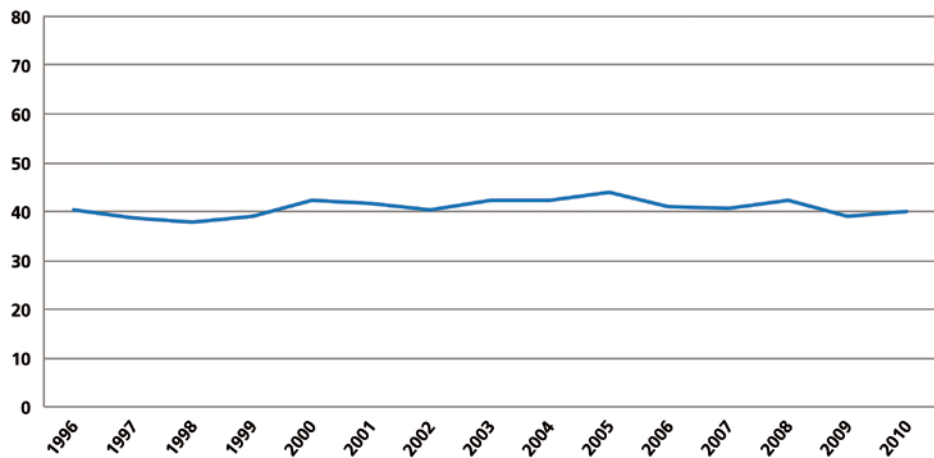
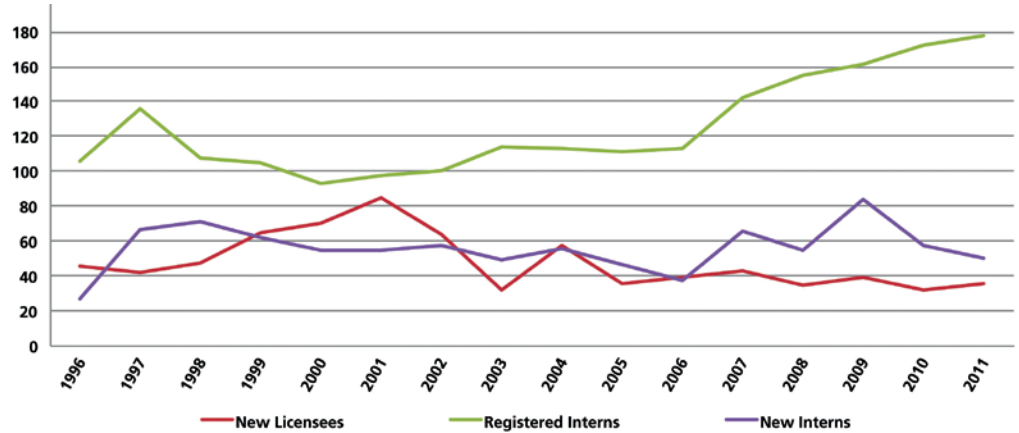


CHART 5 • New Jersey Funeral Director Entrants



To start, total deaths in New Jersey have declined from a high of nearly 75,000 in 2000 to a low of approximately 67,000 in 2009. (See *Chart 3: New Jersey Deaths Per Annum*.) Despite the recent uptick in annual deaths in the last two years, the state is still 6,000 deaths a year away from the mortality highs in 2000. To the extent that there is any regain in mortality, it is and will continue to be consumed by a corresponding and continuing increase in cremation.

Chart 4: New Jersey Deaths per Funeral Director, further indicates that, based on the number of licensees in New Jersey—about 1,700 each year since 2000—the work available has remained very steady at about 40 calls per licensee for the last decade and a half. Therefore, any potential contraction in the rate of new entrants into the funeral business while we adapt to a new system of licensure standards, is not likely to have a material impact.

Moreover, as the red line in *Chart 5: New Jersey Funeral Director Entrants* shows, the number of new licensees in funeral service has remained relatively steady having adjusted itself to the decline in volume. The chart also depicts that the number of new interns, represented by the purple line, has increased somewhat in the last few years, but is now settling back down to its historic average.

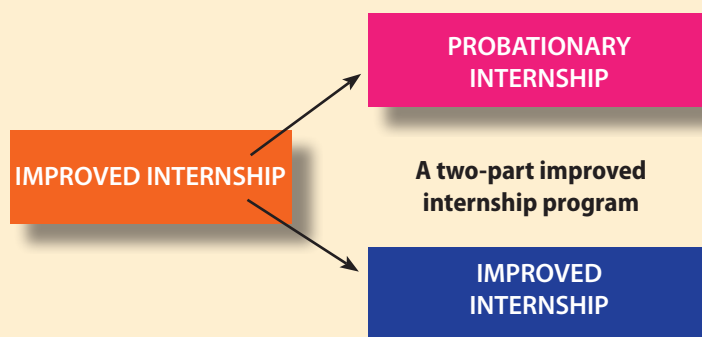
What is disturbing in *Chart 5*, however, is the green line, which represents the current number of registered interns in the state. What appears to be happening is that, while the number of interns is increasing, many of those individuals are not completing their internships or other qualifications and appear to be dead ending before licensure. While historically this number increases during economic recessions, the lack of licensee conversion also suggests the need to examine the internship program for viability, availability and effectiveness.

This is the second half of the association’s two-part proposal.

An Improved Internship Experience

The association’s improved internship proposal is divided into two parts. (See *Chart C: Improved Internship* below).

CHART C • Improved Internship



First, it proposes a probationary internship wherein pre-funeral service program students work 40 to 60 days in funeral service in order to gain needed exposure to all aspects of the profession before committing to a full course of funeral service instruction. The association board considers this an early ‘weeding-out’ or ‘fail safe’ mechanism.

Second, it proposes improving the existing internship program with the addition of a preceptor certification requirement; internship rotation across multiple worksites; a system of supervising regional preceptors; and practical qualification and authority based on observed competency.

The goal of the improved internship proposal is to provide a capacity to actively manage and connect the dots of classroom education and worksite experience, while formalizing the internship experience inside of a system of deployment across multiple worksites.

The idea of an improved internship program has much to recommend itself. If money were no object there is no doubt we could make a better program. A substantial hurdle will be finding a way to finance an initiative like this on a self-perpetuating basis, without unduly burdening prospective licensees.

The Path to Enlightenment

Almost under any scenario, it is difficult to make a case against a four-year degree for licensure. To make a case against it would ignore the reality that one out of three Americans currently holds a four-year degree or better. To not insist on a four-year degree as a standard for licensure is to prescribe a future where our workforce may be incapable of effectively communicating with and guiding those whom it seeks to serve. It also risks discouraging those interested in funeral service from doing the hard work now that will help them experience a more fulfilling life later.

And last, the absence of a four-year degree makes funeral service noncompetitive. There is a negative association for career aspirants where professional licensure does not even have a minimum standard of a four-year degree.

The path to personal and professional enlightenment is clearly to be found in improving the educational objectives of our colleagues, friends, and our sons and daughters. ■

At a District Meeting Near You

New Jersey licensees, interns and students will have an opportunity to discuss the association board’s proposal over the next seven months at local district meetings. Each county will be hosting **Talking Internships and Educational Reform (T.I.E.R. Series)** conversations. These meetings are open to members and non-members alike. All are welcome and invited to attend.

The complete district meeting schedule can be found at www.njsfda.org/TIER. Dates, times and locations are subject to change, so keep checking the Website for the most up-to-date information.

Use your voice. Participate in a conversation.

Remember, the responsibility of stewardship means we have to ensure a continuing legacy of cultural relevance, before it’s too late.