

# NCT Article

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## Mortuary survey shows wide price variations

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SAN DIEGO ---- A recently published survey of funeral homes in San Diego County shows prices varying widely, with some mortuaries charging nearly twice as much as others for similar combinations of services.

The cost of memorializing and burying a loved one varies even more widely with the extent of the services. Several North County crematoriums and funeral homes offer simple cremations for \$1,000 or less, not including the cost of a niche in a shared memorial wall, according to the survey by the nonprofit San Diego Memorial Society. An open-casket funeral with cosmetic preparation and the full complement of burial services can easily cost \$15,000 at the priciest mortuaries.

Published last month, the survey included 49 of the 59 mortuaries and crematoriums in San Diego County. Such businesses employ about 500 people in San Diego County, according to state figures. Cemeteries employ an additional 300.

Barbara Thomson, who runs the nonprofit's office in Kearny Mesa, said prices appeared to have risen in line with overall inflation over the last five years. It was difficult to say precisely because similar surveys in 2004 and 2006 included fewer mortuaries, Thomson said.

At the same time, Thomson and mortuary representatives said cremations have become more popular over the last generation, a shift that can reduce costs.

One funeral director in Oceanside said 60 percent of his clients purchase cremations, though many of those ask for funerals and other services.

Baby boomers already are beginning to shape the industry by demanding a wider variety of funeral services for themselves and their spouses, according to mortuaries. They could have a greater impact as they continue to age.

People over the age of 65 have already grown as a demographic group. The group's numbers increased 19.8 percent in San Diego County, from 273,000 in 1990 to 327,000 in 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That growth was slightly faster than the both over-65s in the U.S. as a whole and the overall population of San Diego County.

The Memorial Society's price survey shows fees for 14 separate services, including less common options such as forwarding or receiving the deceased's remains.

Thomson advises that a family think over even common services before agreeing to them. Consumers take embalming for granted, for example, even though California law doesn't require it until seven days after death, and even though mortuaries refrigerate the deceased's remains.

Among the less expensive mortuaries, Oceanside Mortuary charges \$1,845 for basic services with hearse and a graveside service, and \$3,110 for a traditional funeral with cosmetic preparation and a wake, according to the survey. Adding up the same services at Poway Bernardo Mortuary yields totals of \$3,635 and \$5,890.

Thomson and funeral directors caution against simply adding up the numbers in the price survey, which state law requires be disclosed in an "a la carte" manner.

Scott Pennington, general manager at Poway Bernardo, says a traditional funeral package from the mortuary costs \$4,995, more than \$1,000 less than if the services were purchased "a la carte." But the survey does give an accurate sense of which funeral homes are generally more expensive and which are less expensive, Thomson said.

None of the totals above include burial plots, which can cost \$6,000 with associated cemetery fees.

Also not included in those numbers are casket costs, which can vary from the \$500 range to a starting price of \$1,895 at Poway Bernardo. Thomson said a family can sometimes save hundreds of dollars by shopping around for a casket, particular among higher-priced models.

A ritzy casket that costs \$5,000 at a funeral home might cost \$3,000 from Costco, she said. Strange as it may seem, Thomson said, the national Funeral Consumers Alliance can provide the thrifty with blueprints for do-it-yourself casket construction.

Contact staff writer Chris Bagley at 760-740-5444. Read his blogs at [bizblogs.nctimes.com](http://bizblogs.nctimes.com).

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[San Diego Memorial Society's 2009 price survey](#)

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