

June 06, 2023

MOTION BY SUPERVISOR JANICE HAHN

Making the Los Angeles County Ceremony of the Unclaimed Dead Open to the Public

Los Angeles County (County) has conducted burials for the unclaimed dead since 1896 to ensure that all that have passed in LA County are laid to rest with respect. Every year, a non-denominational, interfaith ceremony is held at the County Cemetery located in Boyle Heights. The Ceremony of the Unclaimed Dead (Ceremony) is presided over by local faith leaders and includes prayers, music, and burial customs in multiple languages. The cremated remains are placed in a single grave site with a marker indicating the year of cremation atop of the plot. In 2022, the remains of 1,624 unclaimed individuals were buried.

The Office of Decedent Affairs (ODA), under the County Department of Health Services, manages the outreach to families, cremation, burial, and the Ceremony. ODA collaborates with the Public Administrator who utilizes information provided by law enforcement, private hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, etc., to find next of kin. If at the end of their investigation, no next of kin is found, the Public Administrator then authorizes cremation. ODA holds the unclaimed remains for three years to allow the next of kin, who may not have been initially identified, to claim the remains. If after three years, decedents are not claimed they are buried during the Ceremony.

The Ceremony is a way to honor the life of the deceased and for the community to have an opportunity to grieve. For community members that want to pay their respect it is important that

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they be able to participate. Due to the pandemic, since 2020 the Ceremony has been open to a small number of officials while being live streamed for the public. In 2022, the event had 2,600 views from the public on Facebook. Streaming allows people from all over LA County, and beyond, to participate in the event to pay respect to those who are being laid to rest.

The 2023 Ceremony will be the first year that includes individuals who died of COVID-19, marking a significant time in County history. Currently, the County Cemetery is not able to host the public event due to damage from recent rains. Nevertheless, in order to fully honor those that have passed, an option should exist.

I, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors Direct the Department of Health Services to report back in writing in 60 days on options to open the 2023 Ceremony of the Unclaimed Dead to members of the public for in-person attendance. The report back should include a funding assessment and options to increase the attendance capacity for the public over the next 3 years.

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JH:jm