

Thank you Chair Johnson and members of the House Oversight Committee for this opportunity to share my perspective as a funeral director.

My name is Lindsey Jonkhoff Rogers and I am a sixth-generation funeral director and I am here with my mom who is the co-owner of our funeral home in Traverse City. I have been caring for members of my community for the past twelve years and without a doubt this past year has been the most challenging of my career thus far.

On March 1, we were called to care for a young woman who lost her courageous battle with cancer. Jennifer Johnson was a pillar of our community; a wife, a mother, a daughter, a teacher and a friend to many. Her family was **forced** to literally pick and choose who could attend the funeral. It was not only frustrating for them, but emotionally taxing, at a time when they were already grieving. As the first month since her death draws near, we continue to care for her family. They have shared with us how they are of course still struggling with her loss and have felt stuck. Although they were able to have a small funeral for their top 25 family members, they feel they missed out on the community support that a “real” funeral would have provided them. They feel **cheated** in that they could not properly honor her life. And this is why we are here today. Not because our business is suffering, but because we literally can not do what we are here to do. The great poet Thomas Lynch once said – a good funeral gets the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be. We feel that the current restrictions **severely affect** our ability to help the living.

I also want to briefly address how the restrictions have impacted the mental health of the families that we have served. We currently have over 50 families who are waiting for the restrictions to be eased so that they don't have to select their “top 25”. This means that over 50 families in just the Traverse City area alone are stuck in their grief journey. We also know that of those 50 families, roughly 80% will probably not do anything because it will just be too hard. We believe that the funeral or memorial service is so important in the grief journey as it helps people acknowledge their loss and the reality of death; it helps people move **toward** their pain so they can begin to process it; and perhaps most importantly it activates a community of support for the mourners. Just think about the hundreds of thousands of people in Michigan who have lost a loved one this past year who are dealing with not only their own grief, but by the complicated effects of pandemic grief that has affected us all. I along with my team, have cared for many people who have died from COVID-19, but far more who have died because of the way COVID-19 has affected our lives.

My name is Peg Jonkhoff and I would also like to thank you for this time today. Together we felt compelled to testify before you because caring for families in our community who have lost a loved one is truly our life mission and ministry!

To echo Lindsey's point, as a funeral home and a representative of the funeral industry, we feel frustrated by the inconsistencies across different industries.

Why for example, can we have only 25 people at a funeral, yet the family could have more people at a funeral luncheon at a restaurant? Why is it that at a funeral where everyone can gather safely and under the direction of licensed professionals and with masks on, only gather in a group of 25? Yet at a restaurant, people can gather without masks on and up to 50% capacity?

We feel that our industry deserves distinction in any COVID-19 restrictions. Currently, we are limited to 25 people by the indoor gathering limit in the MDHHS order. However, we are able to mitigate risks because at a funeral we can require that masks be worn at all times with strict protocols in place. We can postpone a funeral, but it comes at a steep emotional price.

We are also frustrated by the lack of communication from the MDHHS. We have cancelled several funerals which has caused significant emotional stress on grieving families because the orders have changed so frequently. I have emailed our state representatives many times to help inform them of our situation.

We are an industry with licensed professionals who have never been more essential! Yet at the same time are being negatively impacted by the restrictions and mandates unlike many other industries that have less restrictions. The families that we are trying to help cope with the loss of their loved ones are suffering and their grief journey is being prolonged.

We are asking for the partnership of our decision-makers so that we may get back to helping families heal along with the loving support of an increased number of family members or friends.

Thank you again Chair Johnson and to all the members here today. We appreciate your time and service to our state.