

What Being a 501c3 Means to the NHFA

Excerpted from the NHFA Orientation Manual

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BACKGROUND

History

When the NHFA was formed, there was an intent to unify home funeral guides under one roof, to create a networking body that was mutually supporting, and that would eventually give a public voice to this work.

A corporation was formed and registered with the State of Washington, a bank account was established, and the NHFA was in business. Conferences were held, bringing guides and others interested in the home funeral concept together to explore myriad aspects of end-of- and after-life care.

Board Governance Structure

The more time the members spent together, the clearer their questions became about what each needed from the organization and from each other. Committees were formed at the Board level to address specific issues and areas, such as providing a clearinghouse of resources and educational materials, and members were invited to participate.

The Board chose a model of governance for itself called the Consultative Leadership Process (CLP) rather than a formal, authoritative Robert's Rules of Order style customary to a national nonprofit board. Instead, members wished to create a system of leadership by consensus that was thoughtful, deliberate, and inclusive.

Why a 501c3?

As the Board developed, it became clear that, for financial reasons alone, it was necessary to attempt to obtain tax-exempt status with the IRS. The question evolved into one of organizational identity. *Did we see ourselves as a professional entity, which would eventually require providing all that goes with it, such as standard setting, certification, fee schedules and the like? Or did we see our primary function as one of providing educational resources to home funeral guides and the public, and of keeping the rights of families as our polestar?*

It was clear that the NHFA could not do both simultaneously, and it was even more clear that until the public was aware of home funerals, guides would not be in a position to assert themselves professionally. Given the legal licensing constraints of the funeral industry, there was also a risk of exposing the organization and its members to potential legal action by pursuing trade or professional organization status, known as a 501c6.

Were the Board to have chosen this route, it would have meant the necessary development of regulatory actions and functions, such as required standards of care, certification processes and testing, and the added burden of monitoring and enforcing. The result would have been a top-down management paradigm.

The sitting Board instead chose to follow the process of becoming a 501c3, focusing on educational and charitable activities and, with minor adjustments, committees were realigned accordingly. An intention was set to develop a unified fundamental message while providing recommendations for guidance and educational resources first and foremost, with the expectation that home funeral guides were uniquely qualified to take up the challenge and lead the way.

By doing so, the Board sought to preserve the grassroots nature of the organization to make home funeral a household word again, forging ahead with initiatives intended to support rather than mandate, to inform rather than dictate, and to steer rather than regulate.

Membership

The NHFA also opened its doors to anyone—funeral directors, hospice workers, medical community members, and the general public—in addition to any persons choosing to call themselves home funeral guides, in concert with the spirit of inclusion invested at the start of the organization.

Anyone can become a member, participate on committees, access the Member Resources section on the website, and request mentorship. Members are responsible for approving by-law changes and nominations to the Board during the biennial meeting, scheduled to coincide with the biennial conference.