



Pursuit of Excellence

2026 Certificate of Honorable Mention

B.C. Bailey Funeral Home, Wallingford, Connecticut
Bailey Funeral Home, Plainville, Connecticut
Carpino & Bailey Funeral Home, Southbury, Connecticut

Plan With Trust: A Rapid Consumer-Protection Campaign for Connecticut Families

When news broke that a Connecticut funeral director had allegedly misappropriated funds entrusted to the funeral home for prepaid funeral arrangements, the story understandably caused fear, anger, and confusion. Families who had already made advance arrangements began questioning whether their own money was safe. Others became uncertain about whether preplanning could still be trusted at all. Bailey Family Funeral Homes recognized that the funeral profession could not respond to the scandal with silence.

Almost immediately after the story became public, our funeral home developed and launched Plan With Trust, a consumer-education campaign designed to help Connecticut residents understand how prepaid funeral arrangements should work and how they could protect themselves. Rather than focusing on the individual accused of wrongdoing or attempting to capitalize on another firm's failure, we concentrated on restoring public confidence through accurate, practical, and transparent information.

The centerpiece of the campaign was an educational video that explained the safeguards consumers should expect when prefunding funeral arrangements. The video encouraged families to ask where their money would be placed, what documentation they would receive, how the funds would be protected, and how they could verify that the appropriate trust or insurance arrangements had been established. It also emphasized that consumers should receive clear written records and should never be made to feel uncomfortable asking questions about the security of their funds.

The campaign was executed with unusual speed because we believed the public needed reliable information while the scandal was still developing. Confusion spreads quickly, particularly through social media, and families were already questioning whether all prepaid funeral funds were vulnerable. Our staff worked to prepare clear messaging, produce the video, and distribute it through the funeral home's social media platforms. A shortened version was also placed on television, allowing the information to reach people who might not follow the funeral home online or regularly seek out funeral-planning resources.

This use of both social media and television made Plan With Trust more than a traditional advertisement. It became a broad public-information campaign delivered through the same channels where many families were first hearing about the scandal. The campaign did not simply tell consumers to trust our funeral home. Instead, it gave them tools that could be used when speaking with any funeral provider. A family could take the questions and guidance presented in the video and use them to evaluate an existing arrangement or consider a new one, regardless of which funeral home they selected.

Plan With Trust also demonstrated our belief that funeral homes have an obligation to educate the public before a death occurs. Advance funeral planning can reduce uncertainty, preserve personal wishes, and ease the burden placed on surviving family members. However, those benefits depend upon trust, transparency, and responsible stewardship. When one provider violates that trust, the damage extends beyond the affected families and can undermine confidence in the entire profession. We believed it was our responsibility to address that harm directly.

The program was innovative because it combined rapid response, consumer advocacy, professional education, and mass-media outreach. Funeral homes often use television and social media to promote services. In this case, we used those platforms primarily to explain consumer rights and encourage greater accountability throughout the profession. The campaign, in the shadow of a serious failure within funeral service, showed the public that ethical funeral professionals were prepared to respond openly and constructively.

Plan With Trust reflects the values that guide Bailey Family Funeral Homes. We believe families deserve complete and understandable information, especially when they are making financial decisions connected to death and bereavement. We also believe public confidence must be earned through consistent transparency rather than requested through advertising alone.

By acting quickly after the scandal broke, our funeral home helped replace uncertainty with practical guidance. The campaign encouraged families to ask informed questions, review their documents, and expect accountability from any funeral provider entrusted with their funds. Plan With Trust was not created merely to distinguish our funeral home from another. It was created to strengthen consumer protection, defend the integrity of ethical funeral service, and remind the community that advance planning can still be a safe and valuable act when it is completed with transparency, proper safeguards, and trust.

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David C. Brown Funeral Home, Belleville, Michigan

On Tuesday, June 9, 2026, Matthew Ban, Funeral Director Assistant, hosted our first Pet Memorial Remembrance Ceremony at Horizon Park on Belleville Lake in Belleville, MI.

Grief does not distinguish between two legs and four. For many people, the loss of a beloved pet is the loss of a family member, a constant companion, and an irreplaceable source of unconditional love. Yet despite the profound impact of pet loss, this form of grief is often minimized or overlooked, leaving individuals to mourn quietly and alone.

Recognizing this invisible pain inspired Matthew Ban, Funeral Director Assistant, to create a Pet Memorial Service, a community-centered program designed to provide comfort, connection, and hope for those navigating the loss of a cherished companion.

Our vision was simple: create a safe space where grief could be acknowledged without judgment and where every story, memory, and tear would be welcomed with compassion. We believe that healing begins when people know they are not alone.

Our Pet Memorial Grief Support Service was hosted on Tuesday, June 9, 2026, at Horizon Park on High Street, in Belleville, MI. It provided a peaceful and inviting setting where community members could gather in nature. Through local media, community outreach, and personal invitations to individuals we knew had recently experienced the loss of a pet, we welcomed several participants for an evening of remembrance and support.

Every detail of the event was intentionally designed to foster warmth and meaningful conversation. Guests were greeted with light refreshments, including cookies cut into the shape of paws, creating a gentle reminder of the companions they had come to honor. Guided discussion questions encouraged participants to reflect on the unique bond they shared with their pets, while dedicated time was provided for each individual to tell their pet's story and celebrate the memories that continue to shape their lives.

Jacqueline J. Dalzell, Licensed Funeral Director, and Matthew helped facilitate the gathering by reading poems that captured both the sorrow of loss and the enduring love that remains. As participants listened and shared, conversations naturally unfolded, revealing common experiences of grief, gratitude, and healing. Many expressed appreciation for finally having a place where their loss was recognized as real and worthy of remembrance.

The support did not end with the event itself. Participants were introduced to additional grief counseling opportunities and ongoing resources available through David C. Brown Funeral Home. While pet loss was the reason many attended, we recognized that grief often intersects with other life experiences. By extending continued support, we sought to accompany individuals not only through the loss of a beloved pet but through life's broader journey of healing.

This program has also strengthened the relationship between our funeral home and the community we serve. Every member of our staff has experienced the loss of a beloved animal companion, allowing us to engage with participants from a place of genuine empathy rather than professional obligation. The gathering reminded us that our calling extends beyond traditional funeral services, it is about caring for people wherever grief

enters their lives. These shared experiences created authentic relationships built on trust, compassion, and understanding.

For the community, the Pet Memorial Grief Support Service addressed a need that often goes unseen. Participants found validation for emotions that are frequently dismissed, discovered meaningful connections with others who understood their pain, and left with a renewed sense that healing is possible when grief is shared. In offering this program, we helped transform an often-isolated experience into one marked by acceptance, remembrance, and hope.

Although this event was independently organized, we are actively seeking partnerships with local bakeries and other community organizations to enhance future gatherings while continuing to preserve the personal, welcoming atmosphere that participants valued so deeply.

The success of this program has reaffirmed our commitment to continuing and expanding these gatherings. Our goal is not simply to host another event, but to remain present for our community through every form of loss they may encounter. By recognizing overlooked grief, creating opportunities for connection, and reminding individuals that they do not have to walk through sorrow alone, we hope to continue building a community where compassion outlives loss.

This moment reflects our belief that remembrance is an act of love; healing is strengthened through community; and every life (whether human or animal) leaves an imprint worthy of being honored.

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Dwayne R. Spence Funeral Homes and Crematory, Canal Winchester, Ohio

Dwayne R. Spence Funeral Homes and Crematory, Pickerington, Ohio

We are blessed to be our community's place for pet cremations outside of local veterinary offices. Without us, our community would have to travel to another city to provide a final disposition for their beloved pets. Though we are still rural in some areas, the ever-encroaching metropolis of Columbus is heading our way, and burial on family property is slowly fading as an option for many people.

What we see in our community is a deep love for our feathered and furry friends, and though we provide a disposition option, we did not have a strong grief resource outside of a simple brochure. So, this year became the "year of our pets." We created a memorial event and grief support program for our community centered around the loss of a pet.

The Pet Grief Support Program held three key moments for community members, young and old, to come to our funeral home and memorialize their pets. The first was a memorial craft. With every cremation, we provide a lock of the pet's hair or feathers, a nose print or paw print, and of course, the cremated remains of the pet in an urn chosen by the family. We invited the public to bring in a lock of hair or a print to decorate and place in a frame for memorialization, pictured below.

The second key moment was a ceremony. We held a candle-lighting ceremony where each person could come forward and light a candle in honor of their pet. Finally, we invited licensed counselor Lisa Huelskamp, LPC, CWC, NCC, PhD, to speak about grief and validate those who feel their sorrow is "too great for just a pet who died." We also provided printed grief-support materials for those who did not necessarily want to talk but still needed support.

This event also benefited the funeral home in two ways, one of which we did not realize at the time. The first and most important benefit was opening our doors to the community and showing them that we care about them not only during the loss of a loved one, but during the loss of a beloved pet as well. Many people call us asking whether we provide pet cremation services because they simply do not know that we do. This event

showed the public that we offer this service and can even assist with transportation arrangements for their pets.

The hidden benefit was gaining Lisa as a community partner. Since the event, we have continued sharing resources and events with one another. We recommended books and brochures back and forth, both excited about possible additions to our grief-support libraries and programs.

Though this will not be a recurring event, it opened many watery eyes that day and reminded our community that grief over a pet is real, valid, and worthy of support.

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Gamble Funeral Service, Savannah, Georgia

The 2025 give back to the community program that we chose, as a staff, from Gamble Funeral Service, was a community wide cook-out. We, as a group, discussed how important hospice is, not only to our business but also to the overall good of its client families. We discussed the benefits of spotlighting our funeral home with the benefits that Hospice provides to client families. These strong and valuable traits that we both use and the importance of continuing to strengthen these ties and cross business relationships.

On November 20, 2025, the staff of Gamble Funeral Service cooked, served and spoke with members of the five local hospice organizations in the greater Savannah area.

Hot Dogs, Hamburgers, Sausage as well as side dishes and beverages were offered on site as well as delivered to their respective locals with the volunteer driver staff from the funeral home. The staff at the funeral home wanted to recognize the many selfless employees that help so many through our local hospice services as well as the nurses, doctors, administrative staff etc. associated with hospice. This event also gave Gamble Funeral Service and its employees the one-on-one time to discuss how we can benefit from and assist the local hospices with all services they provide. November is “National Hospice Month” and we, as a group, thought that recognizing the tireless work that is carried out by these hospice staffs with the benefit of allowing the staff members of hospice organizations the time to help us understand what we can do to assist their organization and strengthen the funeral home commitment to their organizations.

In addition to the above-mentioned annual event, Gamble Funeral Service also provides flowers to the local hospice facilities every Monday. The flowers are bought and delivered by the staff members of the funeral home. They are meant to bring beauty and color to a solemn occasion in people's lives. This simple yet effective program has given the staff much needed in person time to not only hear on a phone but to meet in person, the nurses, doctors, volunteers and administrators that assist these families and promote our profession and business. The funeral home now receives requests for flowers when hospice is doing a community luncheon and event. This has become an invaluable tool in assisting this organization as well as client families in their time of need. We have had many of our client family's comments on the flowers we provide and how they see the Gamble name on the white buckets.

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Jardim da Saudade Assistencia, Curitiba, Parana, Brazil

Transforming the Funeral Sector Through Artificial Intelligence and Applied Innovation

In a sector traditionally marked by intense operational processes and the need for high sensitivity in service, the Jardim da Saudade Group identified a strategic challenge: how to increase the efficiency, quality, and speed of services without compromising human care — a central element of the families' experience.

Faced with the growing evolution of Artificial Intelligence and its potential for organizational transformation, the company structured an innovative and comprehensive initiative: IAvengers – the Artificial Intelligence Application Center. Over time, this initiative evolved and, in 2025, was consolidated as part of a broader innovation ecosystem, driven by the Group's entry as a corporate member of Hotmilk, one of the main innovation hubs in Paraná.

The program's rationale is based on the need to transform knowledge into action and data into decisions. In an environment where time, precision, and organization directly impact the families' experience, reducing rework, improving internal communication, and expanding analytical capacity has become essential. IAvengers was therefore created with the purpose of automating processes, enhancing team performance, and raising the standard of service through technology.

The program was structured around the formation of a multidisciplinary core composed of employees with an innovative profile. From there, an intensive phase of experimentation with Artificial Intelligence tools began, always connected to the organization's real demands. One of the main milestones was the development of the MIRA virtual assistants, which began to support teams in real time, providing guidance, speeding up consultations, and reducing dependence on manual processes.

However, the program's great differentiator lies in its practical and comprehensive application across various areas of the company. Among the main solutions implemented, the following stand out:

- Departmental Deliveries Dashboard, which allows for monthly monitoring of area progress, promoting greater transparency and results-oriented management;
- Funeral Home Dashboard, which significantly optimized customer service work, in addition to enabling strategic competitor tracking;
- AI-powered Revenue Scenario Projection System, used by management to support strategic decisions based on predictive data;
- Strategic Indicators Dashboard, consolidating critical information for organizational management;
- Sales Simulator with Artificial Intelligence, which supports sales team training, raising the level of preparedness and assertiveness in approaches;
- Lead Management and Latency Ruler Dashboard, ensuring efficient monitoring of sales opportunities and increasing sales conversion.

These initiatives demonstrate that Artificial Intelligence was not used merely as support, but as a structuring element of the operation, directly impacting how the company makes decisions, manages teams, and serves its clients.

The benefits for the funeral home and its team are significant. The program brought greater autonomy to employees, reduced response time, increased productivity, and strengthened a culture of innovation and proactivity. The reduction of manual tasks and the centralization of information allowed teams to direct their efforts toward more strategic and higher-value activities.

For families, the impacts are even more significant. Although many of the solutions operate behind the scenes, their effects are directly perceived in the quality of care: more agile processes, more accurate information, and greater organization result in a more fluid, respectful, and welcoming experience during one of the most sensitive moments in life.

The program was developed entirely by the internal team of the Jardim da Saudade Group, with strategic support from Hotmilk in strengthening the culture of innovation. While Hotmilk contributed knowledge, methodology, and connections, the conception, development, and implementation of the solutions were conducted internally, reinforcing the organization's ability to innovate autonomously.

As it is an ongoing program, IAvengers is constantly evolving. Over the last cycle, there was a significant expansion of applications, improvement of tools based on real-world use, and expansion of impact to new

areas of the company. This model ensures scalability and replicability, and can be adapted to different contexts within and outside the funeral sector.

In addition to operational gains, the program also promotes positive impacts from a sustainability perspective, with reduced paper use, fewer unnecessary meetings, and better use of productive time. In financial terms, greater operational efficiency directly contributes to resource optimization and improved results.

External recognition reinforces the relevance of the initiative. In 2025, Grupo Jardim da Saudade was ranked among the 10 most innovative companies in Paraná in its category, in a competition with more than 100 organizations, consolidating its position as a benchmark for innovation in the service sector.

More than implementing technology, IAvengers promoted a cultural transformation. It positions Grupo Jardim da Saudade as an organization that honors its tradition while building the future, demonstrating that it is possible to combine sensitivity, efficiency, and innovation to generate real value for people.

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Jones-Wynn Funeral Homes & Crematory, Villa Rica, Georgia

Jones-Wynn Funeral Homes & Crematory, Douglasville, Georgia

For more than 76 years, our funeral home has believed that serving a community extends far beyond the families we care for during times of loss. It means showing up for life's celebrations, supporting the next generation, and investing in the people who make our hometown special. One of the most meaningful examples of this commitment took place during our local high school's historic football playoff season.

Each year, Jones-Wynn Funeral Homes & Crematory proudly sponsors the Villa Rica High School Wildcats through stadium advertising, community support, and spirited traditions such as providing cowbells for fans to cheer on our team. This past season, however, we wanted to do something even more meaningful.

When the Wildcats earned a place in the state playoffs, they faced an extraordinary challenge—a six-hour trip across Georgia for one of the biggest games in school history. Knowing the long journey ahead, Scott and Ellen McBrayer wanted every player, coach, and staff member to leave feeling encouraged and supported by the community that had been cheering them on all season.

On behalf of Jones-Wynn Funeral Homes & Crematory, we hosted a pre-travel meal for the entire team the evening before they departed. It provided an opportunity for players, coaches, and volunteers to gather, relax, and enjoy time together before the long road ahead. In addition, we prepared travel bags filled with snacks and drinks so each student-athlete had something to enjoy during the six-hour bus ride. While the meal and snacks were appreciated, the greater message was simple: your hometown believes in you.

What made this year especially memorable was the way it connected generations. Throughout football season, our stadium video advertisement featured a nostalgic tribute celebrating the history of our funeral home and our longstanding relationship with Villa Rica. The video blended vintage photographs and clips from previous generations of our family with present-day images, reminding fans that while our profession centers on caring for families during life's most difficult moments, our commitment to this community has always extended into everyday life.

The Villa Rica High School athletic department partnered with our funeral home by coordinating the team's schedule and allowing us to participate in the send-off. Our role was to provide the meal, travel snacks, and ongoing financial support throughout the season, while the school created the opportunity for the community to rally behind its student-athletes.

The impact reached far beyond football. Players, parents, coaches, and community members shared how meaningful it was to see a local family-owned business continue a tradition of investing in the same school that previous generations had supported for decades. Our staff also found great pride in participating, reinforcing

that our mission is not simply serving families after a death, but caring for the people of our community every day.

While many organizations sponsor athletic programs, we believe true community service means being present when it matters most. For 76 years, Jones-Wynn Funeral Homes & Crematory has stood beside the Villa Rica Wildcats. This playoff journey reminded us that whether we are comforting a grieving family or encouraging a bus full of student-athletes chasing a dream, our purpose remains the same—to serve our community with compassion, generosity, and heart.

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Miller & Van Essendelft Funeral Homes & Crematory, Edenton, North Carolina

Miller & Van Essendelft Funeral Homes & Crematory, Hertford, North Carolina

Miller & Van Essendelft Funeral Homes & Crematory, Gatesville, North Carolina

There are many ways to talk about the death and dying process to both kids and adults, a lot of books, videos, articles, etc... If you wanted a six page booklet on how to talk about death and dying I am sure you could find one with one simple Google search. Yet, the thing that I feel like gets overlooked is what do you do after death? How do you keep living your day to day life that has now been changed forever. You have to find a new sense of normal. There are not as many tools that talk about what the afterwards looks like when you have lost someone important. This is why I decided to do a program to address some of these things. I found a trilogy of kids books about how to honor your loved ones memory and how to live life after. They were published by the New York Life Foundation. Each book goes over something a little bit different than the last. The first one acknowledges the difference in routine and how you can feel sad after all the events surrounding the death of a loved one kind of calms down. Each book kind of has a main topic about doing something that honors the memory of your loved one or that still provides a way to connect with them. What I did was create a story time for kids, the first three Tuesdays in May from 4-5pm. I partnered with the local county library to set up a space in their community room. I also planned activities for the kids and had time for a question and answer session for the children or parents that were in attendance. We used Facebook to market the program to a wide variety of groups online. This program benefitted the funeral home as a whole because it showed community outreach for the kids. It also showed that we can cater to the parents as well. The staff also got a little reprieve during the day and was able to socialize with people in our community in happier circumstances than they would normally be talking to people about. This program benefitted the community because it teaches kids that while change can be scary there are many things that can be done to still think and have space for the loved one that has passed away. It also gave kids space to talk to their parents about what otherwise may be a difficult subject to approach. Giving the kids this space to be able to hold conversations while not in the midst of a tragedy is a valuable resource.

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Milward Funeral Directors - Broadway, Lexington, Kentucky

Milward Funeral Directors - Southland, Lexington, Kentucky

Milward Funeral Directors - Man 'O War, Lexington, Kentucky

Art therapy can be a deeply healing and transformative process for individuals grieving the loss of a loved one. Grief is complex and often difficult to express through words alone. Art therapy offers a non-verbal, creative outlet that helps individuals explore and process their emotions in a safe and supportive environment.

On May 6, Milward Funeral Directors invited families they served in the past to participate in a neurographic art creation with light refreshments and a chance to relax and have a time of self-care and reflection. The purpose of the workshop was to offer individuals an opportunity to create a small neurographic art piece with quiet meditation in a casual atmosphere to connect, and express their creativity. All art supplies were provided and included an opportunity for guests to enjoy a light appetizer and fellowship. Milward limited the event to just 10 people in order to keep it an intimate and non-intimidating environment.

Milward is fortunate to have a funeral director on staff who is passionate about art and even more so about leading art workshops with families who are on a healing path from the loss of loved ones. Funeral Director Angie Walters led the workshop.

Angie Walters began as an artist at an early age during junior high and high school in Elkhart, Indiana where she is from originally. Her works include pen & ink, mixed media and pastel, acrylic, and most recently, watercolor. Throughout the last 20 years, Angie has volunteered or held membership with Studio 315 in Mishawaka, Indiana, Shelby Artists on Main in Shelbyville, Kentucky as well as Art House Kentucky in Lexington. She started her journey in funeral service in 2012 and now works for Milward Funeral Directors.

One of the primary benefits of art therapy after a loss is the ability to express emotions that are difficult to articulate. Grieving individuals may feel overwhelmed by sadness, anger, guilt, or confusion. Art allows them to communicate these feelings through symbols, colors, and imagery, offering relief and a sense of release. This form of expression can be particularly helpful for children and those who may struggle to talk openly about their grief.

Art therapy also promotes relaxation and stress reduction. The act of creating can be calming, helping to reduce anxiety and bring a sense of peace during a time of emotional turmoil. The focus required for artistic expression can provide a temporary respite from ruminating thoughts and painful memories, creating moments of mindfulness and emotional clarity.

Another benefit is the opportunity to maintain a connection with the deceased. Through creating memory books, portraits, or symbolic artwork, individuals can honor and remember their loved one in a personal and meaningful way. These creative rituals can become part of the healing journey, offering comfort and a sense of continuity.

Art therapy can also foster greater self-awareness. The creative process often brings unconscious thoughts and feelings to the surface, allowing individuals to better understand their grief and how it affects different areas of their lives. This insight, especially when guided by a trained art therapist, can lead to emotional growth and acceptance.

In group settings, art therapy can reduce feelings of isolation. Sharing artwork and experiences with others who are grieving can build a sense of community and support, reminding participants that they are not alone in their pain.

Ultimately, art therapy empowers individuals to cope with loss in a way that feels authentic and healing. It offers a space for both expression and reflection, helping people move forward while honoring the memory of their loved one. Even without prior artistic experience, anyone can benefit from the healing potential of art during the grieving process.

This is the second year implementing this program. Small improvements were made, including having more staff participants and promoting the event much earlier than in the past. Three event dates were provided on the initial invitation distributed with aftercare materials. Following the event Milward posted info and photo about it on its Facebook page.

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Morada da Paz, Parnamirim, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil

Project: When Grief Touches Childhood: A Look at Childhood Grief and Families Who Lose Children

Introduction

Throughout our journey, we at Morada da Paz have developed initiatives that recognize care as a core value, especially during families' most vulnerable moments, such as the loss of a loved one. Supporting individuals through grief has always held a significant place in our mission, guided by our commitment to providing attentive listening, compassionate support, and an ethical presence in the face of loss.

In recent years, through our direct contact with the families we serve, the need for a more focused and specialized approach to childhood experiences of grief has become increasingly evident. One of the situations that most strongly calls for this level of care is the death of a child, an experience that profoundly impacts the entire family and challenges parents, siblings, grandparents, and other meaningful relationships to rebuild meaning in the face of such a significant absence.

At the same time, attention must also be given to children who experience the loss of important people in their lives. Although childhood grief has its own characteristics and is influenced by the emotional and cognitive stages of development, children do not always have access to appropriate spaces for expression, support, and understanding.

In both contexts, childhood occupies a sensitive, complex, and often overlooked place. These situations require specialized care, age-appropriate communication, and interventions capable of respecting both the child's emotional development and the unique nature of each family's grief experience. Grief involving children demands qualified listening, sensitivity, and an approach that acknowledges stories, relationships, and emotions that often remain unspoken.

Recognizing this reality, this project was created from Morada da Paz's desire to deepen its institutional focus on grief as it relates to childhood, expanding and strengthening the forms of care already available. The initiative was designed to address this subject in an intentional, structured, and compassionate manner, acknowledging its complexity and the importance of providing appropriate support both to families who lose children and to children who experience the pain of loss.

Introduction

The death of a child disrupts one of the most deeply rooted expectations of the human experience: the natural continuity of life. Socially, culturally, and emotionally, it is expected that older generations will pass before younger ones. When this order is interrupted, it gives rise to a unique, complex, and profoundly disorienting form of grief that affects families, relationships, and the wider community.

The loss of a child is widely recognized in the literature as one of the most intense and challenging forms of bereavement. It encompasses not only the pain of absence, but also feelings of injustice, guilt, helplessness, shattered dreams, and, in many cases, social silence surrounding the suffering of parents and family members. This type of grief requires qualified support, specialized care, and safe spaces for expression so that it does not become chronic or invisible.

At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that children themselves experience grief. Bereaved children, whether mourning the loss of siblings, parents, relatives, or other significant individuals, express their pain in ways that do not always translate into words. Childhood grief often manifests through play, behavior, physical reactions, emotions, and developmental changes, requiring sensitive interventions that are appropriate to the child's age, developmental stage, and relational context.

In response to these realities, this project was developed as part of Morada da Paz's institutional commitment to expanding grief care by placing children at the center of both reflection and practice. The initiative seeks to provide focused support not only to families facing the loss of a child, but also to children who experience loss and need their grief to be recognized and validated.

To address the complexity of these experiences, the project was structured around two complementary pillars that interact with one another while maintaining distinct objectives and strategies:

Pillar 1 – Families Who Lose Children

This pillar is dedicated to supporting families who have experienced the death of a child, recognizing that such a loss represents one of the deepest, most complex, and often most isolated forms of grief. The death of a son or daughter profoundly affects parents and the entire family system, disrupting expectations, life plans, and sources of meaning.

Morada da Paz, which has a longstanding commitment to grief support, developed this pillar to provide a dedicated space for these families. The initiative is grounded in the understanding that parental and family grief following the loss of a child requires qualified listening, time, recognition, and validation. It emerged from the recognition that many families continue to carry their pain in isolation, without safe environments where they can share memories of their children, honor their stories, and express the impact of their absence.

Pillar 2 – Childhood Grief

In contemporary society, death and grief continue to be surrounded by taboo, silence, and avoidance, particularly when children are involved. In an effort to protect them, adults often avoid discussing loss, death, or grief, which can create confusion, misconceptions, and silent suffering.

This pillar is based on the belief that children can and should be included in conversations about death and grief, provided these discussions are conducted in a manner appropriate to their age, language, and emotional development. Normalizing these topics from an early age can help foster a healthier relationship with loss, encouraging emotional expression and a more comprehensive understanding of life and its natural cycles.

Through these two pillars, specific initiatives focused on care, education, and support were developed, all aligned with Morada da Paz's mission and its ethical commitment to providing compassionate, human-centered care to families experiencing loss.

Objectives

To promote qualified, compassionate, and ethical care in grief situations involving children by placing childhood at the center of institutional practices. This is achieved through support for families experiencing the loss of a child and through initiatives focused on helping children understand and cope with loss and death in age-appropriate ways, while respecting their emotional, relational, and developmental needs.

The specific objectives of the project are:

- To recognize children as central individuals within the context of grief, expanding the institutional perspective on the unique characteristics of childhood experiences of loss, whether the child is the one who has died or the one who remains.
- To enhance support for families grieving the loss of a child by acknowledging the singular nature of this type of bereavement, its emotional, symbolic, and relational impacts, and the need for specialized care and attentive listening.
- To provide sensitive support to bereaved children, respecting their individual ways of expressing grief, their developmental stages, and the relationships that sustain them.
- To raise awareness and provide training for professionals and teams regarding child loss and childhood grief, strengthening more compassionate and human-centered support practices that reflect the complexity of these experiences.
- To contribute to reducing the silence and invisibility that frequently surround grief involving children by creating legitimate spaces for listening, expression, and care.
- To strengthen the institution's role in the field of grief support by expanding projects, practices, and initiatives that integrate childhood as a fundamental dimension of family care.

- To align all project activities with the organization's core values, reaffirming its commitment to the dignity of life, humanized service, and comprehensive care during experiences of loss.

Methodology and Results

Axis 1 Action Proposal – Support and Listening Group for Families Who Have Lost Children

We offered a support and listening group, facilitated by a grief-specialized psychologist, for families who had experienced the loss of a child. The initiative aimed to create a safe environment for sharing experiences, recognition, and emotional support.

The group was open to:

- Families of Morada da Paz employees who had experienced the loss of a child, reflecting the organization's commitment to caring for its own team members;
- Families from the broader community, expanding the social and community reach of the project.

Three meetings were held during the month of May, chosen intentionally because it includes Mother's Day, allowing participants to establish connections, share experiences, and begin processing their grief while respecting each individual's pace and personal boundaries.

Meeting Structure

The sessions were conducted by a psychologist and grounded in a humanized and grief-sensitive approach, incorporating:

- Compassionate and qualified listening;
- A respectful space for open expression, free from judgment or pressure for solutions;
- Symbolic and reflective activities appropriate to the theme of parental grief;
- Encouragement of ongoing self-care, acknowledgment of personal pain, and engagement with support networks.

Although the group was not designed as a formal therapeutic intervention, it served as a meaningful space for support, validation, and recognition of grief, honoring the uniqueness of each family's story.

Among the participants was Anne Michelle, who lost her son, Luís Eduardo, nearly seven years ago. For her, the experience was transformative:

"I always believed I could handle this pain on my own, but I discovered the importance of having a space where I could talk about it. Hearing other mothers share similar stories made me realize I was not alone."

Mariana Simonetti, grief psychologist and creator of the project, explained that the initiative emerged from the need to acknowledge a form of grief that is often overlooked:

"We wanted to create a space that recognized these stories and told these women that their children existed and continue to have a place in memory."

Symbolic Memorial Product: Launch of the "Garden of the Little Ones"

As an extension of this initiative, Morada da Paz launched the Garden of the Little Ones, a memorial space dedicated to honoring the memory of children who passed away prematurely, including babies lost during pregnancy.

Inspired by a Japanese tradition that honors the memory of children, the space features ceramic sculptures symbolizing protection, tenderness, love, and enduring remembrance. Each participating family was invited to select a sculpture representing their child, creating a collective environment of memory and affection.

The sculptures were created by ceramic artist Marina Pantoja, who was involved in the project from its earliest stages. According to the artist:

“As I learned more about the project and the grief support work developed by Morada da Paz, I realized the responsibility these pieces carried. They would not simply be decorative sculptures, but symbols capable of representing deeply meaningful memories for each family.”

Following the launch event, the Garden of the Little Ones was made available to the general public. This decision expanded the project’s reach, ensuring that the tribute would not be limited to the original participant families. Any family could acquire a sculpture and dedicate a place in the garden to the memory of a beloved child.

As a result, Morada da Paz transformed the Garden of the Little Ones into a memorialization offering accessible to the community, supporting countless families in their grief journeys. More than a physical space, the garden became a public expression of recognition, compassion, and care, providing a symbolic way to honor brief yet profoundly meaningful lives.

Employee Care Initiative

As a gesture of internal support, Morada da Paz employees who had experienced the loss of a child and participated in the support group were offered a dedicated space within the Garden of the Little Ones, along with a memorial sculpture honoring their child.

This symbolic gesture represented:

- Institutional recognition of their loss;
- Validation of their child’s story and memory;
- Care for individuals who are not only employees but also grieving family members.

Purpose of Axis 1

Axis 1 reaffirmed Morada da Paz’s commitment to providing care that extends beyond funeral services. By offering opportunities for listening, remembrance, and symbolic tribute, the project helped ensure that families who had lost children did not have to endure their grief in isolation or invisibility.

Photographic records of the support group sessions and the launch of the “Garden of the Little Ones” are attached below.

Listening Group and Launch of the “Garden of the Little Ones” – Support Group Participants. Appendix 1

Listening Group and Launch of the “Garden of the Little Ones” – Ceremony for the Dedication of the “Garden of the Little Ones”. Appendix 2

Listening Group and Launch of the “Garden of the Little Ones” – Dedication Ceremony of the “Garden of the Little Ones”. Appendix 3

Listening Group and Launch of the “Garden of the Little Ones” – Ceramic Sculptures in the “Garden of the Little Ones,” Representing the Memory of the Children. Appendix 4

Axis 2 Action Proposal – Childhood, Grief, and Care: Playful Approaches to Talking About Death

The second axis of the project focused on children as individuals who can also experience grief and on the need to create more natural, sensitive, and age-appropriate ways of discussing death during childhood.

In Brazilian society, death is still a subject often surrounded by taboo, silence, and avoidance. When children are involved, this challenge becomes even greater. In an effort to protect them, adults frequently avoid explaining, naming, or discussing loss, which can lead to confusion, misconceptions, fear, and unspoken suffering. This project was founded on the understanding that children can and should talk about death and grief, provided these conversations are conducted using age-appropriate language, emotional sensitivity, and respect for their developmental stage.

To support this approach, Morada da Paz utilized Turma do Vilinha (Vilinha & Friends), its own educational initiative specifically designed to help children understand grief and loss through engaging and developmentally appropriate resources. Learn more at: <https://www.oquefazeremcasodemorte.com.br/turma-do-vilinha/>. Appendix 5

Turma do Vilinha includes:

- Educational games;
- Children's books;
- Guided storytelling activities;
- Symbolic tools for emotional expression.

All of these resources are available through Morada da Paz (<https://www.oquefazeremcasodemorte.com.br/turma-do-vilinha/>), and are designed to help families and caregivers address death and grief in an accessible, respectful, and natural way.

Institutional Event – Activity with Employees' Children

As part of this axis, Morada da Paz organized a special event for the children of its employees, strengthening the connection between family, work, and care.

Held in celebration of Labor Day (May 1st), the event invited children and their families to visit and learn about their parents' workplace. This experience provided an opportunity for children to better understand the work carried out by their mothers and fathers and the purpose behind the services provided by Morada da Paz.

Following the workplace visit, the program continued with activities specifically designed for children, combining play, learning, and conversations about death and grief in a natural and age-appropriate manner.

The event included:

- Storytelling sessions and theatrical performances featuring Turma do Vilinha characters;
- Educational games and expressive activities;
- Opportunities for fun, laughter, and social interaction;
- Recreational spaces with toys, popcorn, and cotton candy.

The initiative also helped redefine perceptions of the cemetery as a place of memory, care, and affection. Many children arrived with preconceived notions associating cemeteries with fear or sadness. Through the experience, they were able to see the environment differently, as a welcoming, well-maintained, and meaningful space dedicated to caring for families and preserving memories.

Eulália, a ceremonial services employee, highlighted the importance of the experience for her family:

"It was a beautiful afternoon, and I felt truly valued by the company. My children and grandchildren always knew that I worked at the cemetery, but they had never seen the place. Coming here and realizing that it is not a gloomy or frightening environment completely changed their perception of my workplace. I am sure this moment will stay with them forever."

For Marcos, a funeral service agent, the event also provided a valuable family experience:

"It brought me great joy to spend this time with my daughter. With our busy routines, opportunities for lighthearted family moments are often limited. In addition to providing the children with an afternoon of learning and fun, the parents were extremely grateful for this opportunity to connect with their families."

Marina, a funeral services employee, emphasized the value of the educational approach used with the children:

"I was very impressed by the grief-related content presented through theater. Even though we are professionals who work with grief every day, we do not always know how to discuss these topics with children in an accessible way. I was delighted by how educational, engaging, and meaningful the presentation was."

By sharing this experience with their families, the children were encouraged to understand the work performed by Morada da Paz and to relate to the subject of death in a more human, approachable, and natural way. The initiative also helped them gain a greater appreciation for the important role their parents play as members of the organization.

Photographic Records of the Event with Employees' Children at Morada da Paz

Institutional Event: Activity with Employees' Children — The children's arrival at the cemetery was marked by reunions with their family members in their respective work environments. In the first photograph, a funeral service agent welcomes his daughter and wife. In the second photograph, a ceremonial services coordinator greets her young daughter. The moment symbolized the connection between family, care, and professional recognition. Appendix 6 e Appendix 7

Institutional Event: Activity with Employees' Children — The children enjoyed a variety of playful and educational activities organized by the recreation team, creating opportunities for fun, interaction, and learning in a welcoming and engaging environment. Appendix 8

Institutional Event: Action with Employees' Children — The Grief Psychology team spoke with the children about the purpose of the event, the importance of their parents' work, and the meaning of the cemetery as a place of memory, affection, care, and connection to the stories of many families. Appendix 9

Institutional Event: Action with Employees' Children — A theater group performed a play inspired by the story of Dudu, a character from Turma do Vilinha, which addresses themes related to loss and grief in a playful, sensitive, and age-appropriate manner. Appendix 10

Institutional Event: Action with Employees' Children — The children enjoyed recreational activities with a variety of games and attractions, promoting fun, social interaction, and the welcoming atmosphere that characterized the event. Appendix 11, Appendix 12

Institutional Event: Action with Employees' Children — To make the experience even more special, the children enjoyed popcorn, cotton candy, and açaí, in a moment marked by joy, care, and a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere. Appendix 13

Institutional Event: Activity with Employees' Children — Each child received a kit containing materials from the Vilinha & Friends grief support program, including games and other playful resources designed to help children understand and express their emotions in a sensitive and supportive way. Appendix 14

School Outreach Initiative: Raising Awareness About Childhood Grief in Educational Settings

In addition to the activity involving employees' children, Axis 2 also included an outreach effort with schools in the city of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte. The Morada da Paz Grief Psychology Team visited two educational institutions and met with school counselors to present the Vilinha & Friends project, its educational resources, and its potential applications within the school environment.

During these meetings, Morada da Paz offered to provide, free of charge, training sessions for teachers and school staff on childhood grief, age-appropriate approaches to discussing death with children, and strategies for supporting students experiencing loss. The company also made its grief psychologists available to guide parents and students whenever schools identified such a need and considered the initiative beneficial to their educational community.

The experience revealed, however, how much resistance to the topic still exists. Even though loss can occur within school, family, and community contexts, the institutions demonstrated caution and reluctance when it came to addressing death and grief openly with teachers, students, and especially with parents. This reaction highlighted the fact that overcoming the stigma surrounding these subjects remains an ongoing challenge.

For Morada da Paz, this resistance reinforces the importance of continuing to promote dialogue, education, and support. Silence surrounding childhood grief does not protect children; rather, it can leave them isolated with emotions they do not yet know how to name or understand. For this reason, the company remains committed to serving as a reference in the field, providing specialized knowledge, professional support, and

practical tools that help schools, families, and communities approach death with the importance, responsibility, and care it deserves.

Purpose of Axis 2

Axis 2 reaffirms Morada da Paz's commitment to emotional education, mental health prevention, and fostering a healthier relationship with death and grief from childhood onward. By utilizing the resources of the Vilinha & Friends project, promoting an activity for employees' children, and initiating partnerships with schools, the project expanded the reach of its care efforts, bringing information and support to various environments where children are present.

The initiative involving employees' children also served as an internal appreciation program, recognizing that the organization's commitment to care extends not only to the families it serves but also to its own employees and their loved ones. By opening its workplace to employees' children, Morada da Paz strengthened feelings of belonging, recognition, and professional pride, allowing children to better understand their parents' work in a more human, positive, and meaningful way.

The school outreach initiative, in turn, demonstrated the project's broader social impact beyond the organization itself. By offering free training, technical guidance, and educational materials, Morada da Paz sought to help schools become better prepared to support grieving children and address difficult conversations with sensitivity and care. Although the resistance encountered reflects the persistence of social taboos, it also confirms the need for initiatives that sustain this dialogue in an ethical, compassionate, and ongoing manner.

In this way, Axis 2 integrates care, education, prevention, employee appreciation, and community responsibility. It demonstrates that discussing death with children is possible when supported by appropriate language, qualified guidance, and sensitive resources. More than a one-time initiative, this axis represents a movement toward cultural transformation, helping families, schools, and communities understand that children, too, need support in times of loss, offered with honesty, compassion, and care.

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Morris-Baker Funeral Home and Cremation Services, Johnson City, Tennessee

Crucial Conversations: Building Stronger Communities Through Better Dialogue

For many years, Morris-Baker Funeral Home has emphasized the importance of communication—not only within our organization, but throughout the community we serve. The rationale for our Crucial Conversations initiative originated from a simple observation: many workplace conflicts, family disagreements, and community challenges are not caused by bad intentions, but by an inability to discuss difficult topics effectively when emotions are high and opinions differ. After experiencing the positive impact of Crucial Conversations training within our own funeral home, we recognized an opportunity to make these skills available to others in our region.

To accomplish this goal, Morris-Baker partnered with Summit Leadership, a local nonprofit organization dedicated to professional and personal development. Morris-Baker served as the program sponsor and organizer, providing financial underwriting, planning support, promotion, and logistical coordination. Summit Leadership assisted with community outreach and event administration, helping extend the program's reach across Northeast Tennessee.

On April 14–15, 2026, the partnership hosted a public two-day Crucial Conversations course. The training teaches nine practical skills designed to help individuals navigate difficult conversations, reduce conflict, improve accountability, and strengthen relationships. Participants included business leaders, nonprofit staff, healthcare professionals, educators, funeral service professionals, and community members.

The 2026 program represented a significant advancement over previous years. Most notably, the course received approval from the State of Tennessee for continuing education credit, making the training more valuable to licensed professionals. In addition, Morris-Baker owner and funeral director Preston McKee became a certified Crucial Learning trainer and served as the volunteer instructor. This achievement allows the organization to offer training more affordably and more frequently while ensuring long-term sustainability of the program. It also provides the funeral profession with a 30-year licensed funeral director capable of teaching these communication principles to colleagues in the industry.

The benefits to Morris-Baker and its staff have been substantial. The training reinforces the communication skills that are essential in funeral service, where employees routinely interact with grieving families, coordinate complex arrangements, and collaborate closely as a team. During the April 14–15, 2026 session, two Morris-Baker full-time employees completed the training, bringing the organization even closer to its long-standing goal of training every full-time employee in Crucial Conversations. As a result, only one full-time employee remained who had not yet completed the course. Having a certified trainer within the organization also creates ongoing opportunities for staff development, leadership growth, and future training opportunities for both employees and funeral service professionals throughout the region.

The benefits to families and the broader community are equally significant. Participants gain tools that help them address conflict respectfully, communicate more effectively, and preserve important relationships during difficult circumstances. These skills can improve workplace culture, strengthen nonprofit organizations, enhance customer service, and foster healthier interactions throughout the community.

By expanding access to high-quality communication training, securing continuing education approval, developing internal training capacity, and moving closer to the goal of training every full-time employee in these skills, Morris-Baker has transformed a successful professional development program into a sustainable community resource. The initiative reflects our belief that stronger conversations create stronger organizations, stronger relationships, and ultimately a stronger community.