



Pursuit of Excellence

2026 Innovative Ideas Essays

Community Outreach: Hospice and Healthcare

Bram Funeral Home, Maryville, Missouri

Bram Funeral Home is working with the hospice groups in Nodaway county to provide discounted services to those who are financially struggling and fit our eligibility criteria. Maryville, being a smaller town in Missouri, is home to many individuals in less than ideal circumstances. The median household income in the United States is \$83,730 while Maryville is about thirty thousand less at only \$53,352. With 24% of individuals in poverty, double the national average, we felt it was important to implement a program to lessen the financial burden for some families. Although Nodaway county has an indigent program that helps in the extreme cases of abandonment or lack of family, there is a group that still struggles to be able to afford the thousands of dollars needed even for a simple cremation service.

Individuals just want quality end of life care for their loved ones; which does unfortunately come with a price. This leaves many families having to pay various medical bills in addition to the funeral bill. It is hard to tell from the outside whether or not an individual is truly struggling with finances, but working hand in hand with hospice groups will allow us to better understand which families these may be. Our funeral home wants to help those in the community who are unable to afford a service get closure when their loved one passes. This program allows us to communicate directly with the hospice administrators and families to get a full picture of the financial situation these individuals are in.

Once someone has been deemed eligible for this program we will cover the costs of; the transportation, the cremation process, and an alternative container. This would leave the family only having to pay for cash-advance items such as death certificates. We may also at our discretion with the knowledge of the financial situation discount some of the services. Although we cannot do this for every family struggling financially we will also work with them in contacting other assistance programs in the area that can help to cover small portions of a funeral bill.

The past few months we have been in contact with hospice to implement this program. Their role is to be the facilitator for the family. Since the family has been working with hospice for the last chunk of time we believe coordinating with hospice is instrumental; as they are more aware of the financial situation along with family dynamics.

References Kollar, M., & Scherer, Z. (2025, September 9). Income in the United States: 2024. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2025/demo/p60-286.html> Shrider, E., & Bijou, C. (2025, September 9). Poverty in the United States: 2024. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2025/demo/p60-287.html> U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Maryville City, Missouri. QuickFacts. (2024, July 1). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/maryvillecitymissouri/PST045224>

Caldwell & Cowan Funeral Home, Covington, Georgia

Caldwell & Cowan Funeral Home has long believed that meaningful community service extends beyond the walls of our facility and beyond the moments of immediate need. With that philosophy in mind, we developed an ongoing outreach initiative in partnership with Abbey Hospice: a monthly breakfast program designed to support and uplift hospice staff who dedicate their lives to caring for others. This program, led by our team member Lori, has become a consistent and impactful expression of compassion, connection, and community care.

Rationale Behind the Idea

The inspiration for this program stems from a growing awareness of the emotional and physical demands placed on healthcare professionals, particularly those working in hospice care. Studies and industry observations have consistently shown that hospice staff experience high levels of stress and burnout due to the nature of end-of-life care. Recognizing that these caregivers often give so much of themselves with little recognition, we saw an opportunity to provide encouragement in a tangible, meaningful way. Rather than focusing solely on families at the time of loss, we wanted to extend our mission to those who walk alongside families every day in their most vulnerable moments.

Program Description

For over a year, Lori has faithfully coordinated and delivered breakfast once a month to Abbey Hospice on behalf of Caldwell & Cowan Funeral Home. This is not simply a meal drop-off; it is a thoughtfully prepared gesture timed to coincide with staff meetings, ensuring that the entire team can pause, gather, and feel appreciated. The breakfast offerings are curated to provide comfort and nourishment, creating an atmosphere that fosters connection and gratitude. Over time, this monthly tradition has become something the staff genuinely anticipates, including Dr. King and the entire hospice team.

Benefits to Funeral Home and Staff

This program has strengthened our internal culture by reinforcing our commitment to service and empathy. Staff members take pride in supporting an initiative that reflects our core values, and it has enhanced team morale by providing a shared purpose beyond daily responsibilities. Additionally, the program has deepened our professional relationship with hospice partners, creating stronger lines of communication and trust that ultimately benefit the families we both serve.

Benefits to the Community

The impact on the Abbey Hospice team—and by extension, the families they serve—has been profound. By offering a moment of appreciation and encouragement, we help caregivers recharge and feel valued. This renewed sense of support can translate into more compassionate, attentive care for patients and their loved ones. The program also strengthens the broader community by modeling kindness, collaboration, and the importance of recognizing those who serve others.

Partnership Roles

Caldwell & Cowan Funeral Home is responsible for organizing, funding, and delivering the monthly breakfasts, with Lori serving as the primary coordinator. Abbey Hospice provides the setting and integrates the breakfast into their staff meetings, ensuring that the entire team can participate and benefit. This collaboration is rooted in mutual respect and a shared commitment to compassionate care.

Ongoing Improvements

Over the past year, we have refined the program by incorporating feedback from hospice staff, varying menu options, and ensuring dietary inclusivity. We have also become more intentional about aligning the visits with particularly demanding times for staff, maximizing the program's positive impact.

In essence, this initiative represents an innovative yet simple approach to community service—meeting people where they are, recognizing their efforts, and reminding them they are not alone in their work.

Funeraria San Vicente S.A., Medellin, Colombia

Beyond the Clinical Boundary: Funeral Transition Rooms as a Model of Excellence, Humanization, and Social Commitment

“Show me how a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical precision the tender compassion of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals.” (William Ewart Gladstone, 1994)

- Rationale behind the idea.

A person's death demands to be treated with dignity and respect during every aspect of the process, which requires the full attention and care of the professionals providing support. People often say that their preferred place to die would be their home; however, most deaths in the modern world occur in hospitals, primarily due to an aging population, advances in medicine, the complexity of chronic diseases, and care needs that exceed community resources. Death in a hospital setting presents an institutional paradox: on the one hand, medical practice is oriented toward preserving life; on the other, the fast-paced nature of the clinical environment often reduces postmortem care to a purely administrative procedure devoid of warmth, leaving families vulnerable and adrift in a maze of paperwork at their most vulnerable moment.

As Thomas Lynch (1997) points out, “the dead do not care about the service or the words spoken about them... but to the living, the dead matter.” This reminds us that funeral work is not merely a logistical task, but a fundamental pillar of emotional well-being and social dignity. Excellence in our sector is achieved when we transcend the cold reality of clinical death and facilitate farewell processes that are dignified, ethical, professional, and deeply human.

Given that early rituals can positively impact the mental health of the bereaved, while their absence increases the risk of grief-related disorders, San Vicente Funeral Home has developed and established Funeral Transition Rooms in hospitals in Medellín, Colombia, responding to the critical need to humanize this setting.

- Detailed description of the program, service, or activity.

The Funeral Transition Room is a physical space that transforms—both aesthetically and in terms of care—traditional hospital morgues, which are typically cold, gloomy, and isolated places located near hospital parking lots or laundry facilities; these spaces are now transformed into appropriate and intimate environments and are operated directly by specialized funeral staff, conceived as an ethical extension of non-commercial patient care. The service is governed by a strict protocol based on three essential components:

- Custody and basic preparation: The team assumes custody of the body following medical certification through auditable physical and digital records, performing basic preparation tasks and preliminary aesthetic arrangements in accordance with biosafety criteria.
- The role of the funeral counsellor: A professional trained in psychological and emotional support respectfully engages with the family, providing active listening and transparent guidance on legal and administrative procedures as well as rituals.
- A dignified farewell: A private and respectful architectural design removes the bereaved from the clinical environment and allows for initial visual and physical contact as the loved one is passed into the care of the funeral home staff in an atmosphere of peace and solemnity.

- Benefits provided to the funeral home and its staff.

The management of these rooms brings immeasurable value to the organization and its human capital:

- Professionalization and positioning of the funeral industry: It elevates the status of the funeral director and the funeral industry as the final link in a chain of comprehensive public health care and community social assistance.

- Error control and mitigation: Immediate custody of the body ensures proper legal and administrative traceability, completely eliminating errors in handling or transport, thereby safeguarding the civil and criminal liability of both institutions (the hospital and the funeral home). It also ensures that sensitive processes, such as the issuance of certificates and medical records, comply with the data protection framework (Law 1581 of 2012), safeguarding the reputation of both the hospital and the funeral home. Furthermore, it frees medical staff from logistical tasks unrelated to their primary role, strengthening mutual trust and consolidating an ethical corporate image.
 - Sense of Purpose Among Staff: It dignifies the daily work of funeral professionals by offering support during a critical time, which reinforces their sense of purpose, dedication to service, and emotional resilience in the face of work that has a profound human impact.
 - Institutional Loyalty: It establishes relationships of deep mutual trust between the medical and administrative staff of the clinics, positioning San Vicente Funeral Home as a leading ethical choice in the sector.
- Benefits provided to families and/or the community at large.

The program's social impact extends beyond the healthcare context, restoring dignity to death in the face of bureaucracy and the rush of clinical care:

- Emotional Support and the Grieving Process: The funeral counsellor ensures a compassionate approach and emotional support during the most critical moments to prevent families from feeling abandoned. They also provide educational guidance on the role that funeral rituals play in mental health, facilitating a dignified farewell that positively contributes to the grieving process.
- Protection against predatory practices: They serve as an ethical shield within the hospital, preventing unscrupulous intermediaries from approaching families in crisis or exerting aggressive sales pressure in waiting rooms.
- Democratization of Human Dignity: It serves families with a spirit of social service, regardless of class, creed, economic status, or prior contractual affiliation.

The model ensures that families who have previously contracted services with other companies also receive support from the healthcare institution to say goodbye to their loved one and assistance in contacting their funeral home; that individuals without coverage have free and informed access to transparent and ethical options; and that vulnerable populations receive dignified solutions, such as assistance in dealing with public agencies to access state benefits, and institutional support from San Vicente Funeral Home, which provides an average of 50 donations of funeral services each month, including full logistical and emotional support in the case of stillbirths and newborns who die shortly after birth, advocating that the right to a dignified farewell should not depend on financial resources or administrative limitations—such as the prohibition of Catholic religious rituals for the “unbaptized”.

- Organizational links and synergies.

The program's viability is based on synergy with clearly defined institutional roles:

- Role of the hospital: It acts as a partner by providing suitable physical infrastructure within the medical complex, immediately reporting deaths, and delivering the required clinical documentation to the authorized funeral home, thereby allowing medical staff to focus on caring for living patients.
- Role of San Vicente Funeral Home: It assumes full operational, financial, and legal responsibility for the facility, handling the provision of biosafety supplies, technical maintenance, the provision of qualified staff, traceability, and strict compliance with data protection regulations (Law 1581 of 2012).

- Program evolution and improvements over the past year.

This program is constantly evolving to meet technological and social demands. Over the past year, the following substantial improvements were implemented to optimize user experience and efficiency:

- Digitization of traceability: The program transitioned from manual records to a secure digital system that generates real-time custody logs, ensuring precise monitoring and documentation of the status of cadavers, thereby strengthening the legal robustness of the process.

- Data protection update: Staff were recertified under Law 1581 of 2012 to ensure the secure delivery of death certificates and medical records in light of increasing global cyberattacks.
- Expansion of the portfolio of social solutions: Partnerships with state-run charitable banks were strengthened, reducing the wait time for authorizations for subsidized funerals from 48 hours to less than 6 hours within the Transition Room itself.

The implementation of Funeral Transition Rooms demonstrates that excellence in our profession is achieved when logistical efficiency is combined with deep social sensitivity and ethical standards. By transforming the hospital environment into a space of comfort, safety, and legal accountability, this program protects healthcare professionals, honours the memory of the deceased, and provides support to families during their most vulnerable moments.

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.

Macz Funeral Homes and Cremation Services, Centralia, Illinois

Macz Funeral Homes and Cremation Services, Sandoval, Illinois

Macz Funeral Homes and Cremation Services, Patoka, Illinois

Macz Funeral Homes and Cremation Services, Odin, Illinois

Supporting the Creation of the South Central Illinois Nurses Honor Guard

After serving a family alongside the National Nurses Honor Guard from the St. Louis area, Macz Funeral Homes recognized the profound meaning and comfort this service brought to families honoring a nurse's life and legacy. We learned that this beautiful tribute was being offered in the state of Missouri, but was not available throughout South Central Illinois.

With a commitment to serving families and honoring those who have dedicated their lives to caring for others, Macz Funeral Homes made it our mission to help bring this meaningful service to our region. Over the course of a year, we reached out to nurses throughout the area, sharing the vision and working to build interest and support.

Through dedication and collaboration, the South Central Illinois Nurses Honor Guard was formed with a board of directors and more than 20 dedicated nurse members willing to give their time and compassion to honor their fellow nurses. Macz Funeral Homes is proud to say that in under one year it happened!

Macz Funeral Homes has been honored to support the organization from the beginning by creating informational materials, sponsoring 20 nurses' capes, providing a place to store the capes and supplies, and offering ongoing encouragement and moral support as this program continues to grow.

To help share the mission and meaning behind this special tribute, Macz Funeral Homes also created a beautiful trifold folder highlighting the purpose of the South Central Illinois Nurses Honor Guard, the symbolism behind the tribute, and the different ways this service can honor nurses. The materials explain both the memorial tribute, which is performed to honor nurses who have entered eternal rest, as well as the living tribute, which provides a meaningful recognition for a nurse who may be nearing the end of life.

The trifold also includes a QR code created by Macz Funeral Homes, allowing families, healthcare professionals, and community members to easily learn more about the organization and the services available.

We also partnered with area media outlets, including radio, newspapers, and online platforms, to help spread awareness of this service and ensure funeral homes within a 50-mile radius were aware that this tribute is available to families in our area. Here at Macz Funeral Homes we believe in collaborating with our peers to provide premier services to families whom are grieving.

To close, the South Central Illinois Nurses Honor Guard tribute has left a lasting impact on the families we have had the privilege to serve. Many families have shared how deeply touching and meaningful this ceremony has been as a way to recognize their loved one who dedicated their life to the nursing profession and gave so much of themselves to care for others in their time of need.

In return, this special tribute has provided families with comfort, honor, and a moment of reflection as they celebrate the compassion and service their loved one shared with countless others. Time and time again, families have expressed that the ceremony brought tears of gratitude and emotion, knowing their nurse was being recognized in such a dignified and heartfelt way.

Watching the South Central Illinois Nurses Honor Guard grow from an idea at our funeral home into a meaningful community service has been a true honor. It is a privilege to stand beside these dedicated nurses and help ensure that those who spent their lives caring for others receive the respect, dignity, and recognition they so greatly deserve.

Martin Funeral Home, Mount Morris, Michigan

Detroit Cremation Society, Grand Blanc, Michigan

Hospice Appreciation

Several years ago, we were invited by a local attorney to present funeral information to a seminar for hospice employees. The idea for our part in the seminar was to explain the funeral process to hospice employees so those who had not personally experienced funeral arrangements would have a better understanding of the process. After our presentation, we had several hospice facilities ask us to present at their staff meetings.

Following that initial seminar, we began going into local hospice offices for staff meetings, discussing funeral arrangements and more specifically the funeral representative procedures in Michigan.

Over the years, as we have built a close relationship with several hospice companies, we implemented a holiday meal program to assist families in need. Through building these relationships, we learned that some of the families that hospice are caring for, are on a very tight income. To help elevate the burden, a hospice employee can request a holiday meal basket from us. The week leading up to the holiday, our staff will go grocery shopping. We purchase the items needed for a nice holiday dinner and deliver the basket to the hospice facility. We ask for no names. And we also ask to remain anonymous to the family in need.

Over the years, as the program has grown, and our relationships with hospice employees have strengthened, we added to our hospice program to recognize their efforts to caring for families. Several times a year, we take themed baskets of appreciation to the hospice offices for their staff. We have taken July 4th themed baskets, Halloween, Cinco de Mayo, and more. We deliver baskets four times a year. The baskets are quite popular and a great way to recognize the dedication of the hospice staff at other less popular times of the calendar year. The baskets contain fun items to celebrate the holiday. This is a token of our appreciation for the care they provide.

This past year, we have taken our hospice appreciation program one step further, by tracking every hospice caller who reports a death to our funeral home. This hospice employee is sent a handwritten card of our appreciation, signed by our arrangers, and a gift card for Starbucks is enclosed.

The benefit provided to the funeral home staff in many of the instances highlighted above is a break from the day to day grind. Taking an hour to plan out a themed basket and toss around ideas on what to stuff it with, is a nice mental break from the day to day demands in funeral service. Delivering the baskets, sometimes we encounter multiple hospice employees, who are so appreciative, but most times, we encounter a front desk worker and it's simply a drop off visit. Either way, it's a break from the office, getting out into the community, and giving back. The benefit to the funeral home is simply building relationships within the hospice community.

The benefit provided to the families with this program is they may have a hospice nurse who is more educated now on funeral service and if a question arises and the hospice nurse is unsure, they know they can reach out to us because of this relationship we have built with any questions and we will assist to the best of our ability. The holiday food baskets, because this is anonymous, the benefit to the funeral home, is simply knowing we are doing something for others in need.

We have not partnered with any other organizations for this program. Items purchased for food baskets, themed hospice baskets, Starbucks gift cards have been done from the funeral home, staff members develop ideas while on the clock and organize, shop, deliver baskets all while on the clock.