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MWDA newsletter

MWDA Mission Statement:

- Establish and promote equitable, efficient, and standardized administration of administration of General Assistance.
- Encourage the professional development, growth. And knowledge base of those who administer General Assistance.
- Advocate for the municipalities and citizens that we serve.
- Actively promote and present our program needs to the Legislature and citizens by creating a greater public awareness of the importance and the benefits of equitable, efficient, and standardized General Assistance Administration.

A Letter from the President

By Stacey Parra

Thank you for allowing me the privilege to serve as your President for the 2005-2006 year. I felt that after having served a year as Chair of the Professional Development Committee it was time to put my feet up, but as President, there isn't time! I want to thank the wonderful people of this organization who year after year volunteer to help, even though they have "served" their time already. They have kept me going as well as the organization, which would have not survived without them.

I want to thank all those who stepped up to the plate this year to serve as Officers and members of our Committees – our rosters are full! It's great to see new faces wanting to join and give new ideas to MWDA.

Please feel free to e-mail at rocksec@midcoast.com or call me anytime at 236-0806 if you would like to discuss any aspect of MWDA. Any comments (good or bad) are welcome, they are what help me improve and make the organization grow. I look forward to the year ahead.



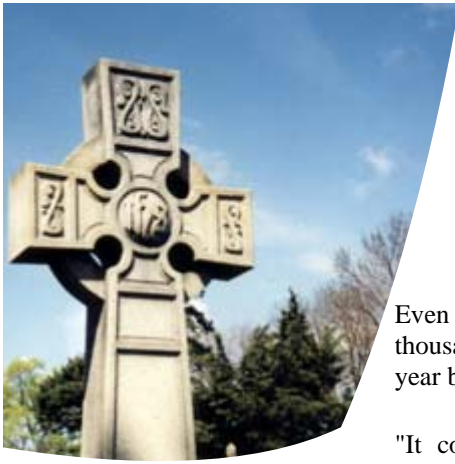
Technical Advisor Says 'Goodbye'

By Antoinette Mancusi

It is hard to believe that it has been almost nine years since I started as a 'technical advisor' within MMA's Legal Services Department. I remember my first meeting with the MWDA as though it was yesterday. There were approximately twenty of the more veteran MWDA members including of course the unforgettable Mary-Anne Chalila (Bangor), Mary-Francis Bartlett (Augusta), Mary Reindl (Brunswick), Linda Fossa (Waterville), Earl Edgerly (Auburn), Brenda Harrington (Rockland) and many other very experienced and dedicated GA administrators.

At the start of my employment with MMA, my goal was to learn as much as possible about general assistance so that I could deliver committed, proficient and professional service to the GA community. To that end, I hope my goals have been realized. I sought to accomplish these goals by dedicated and conscientious service performed in my own personalized manner and style and trust I have not disappointed you.

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Undertakers Cite Losses via Indigent Burials

By – Mechele Cooper, Staff Writer, Kennebec Journal

Richard Kalagher says he would never turn away a family who couldn't afford to bury a loved one.

The Fairfield funeral home director recently took it upon himself to get a court order to bury James "Jimmy" Bayard, a Vietnam veteran from Somerville. Bayard's sons expressed no interest in burying their father and later said they couldn't afford the cost of funeral services.

He said they wouldn't even take the time to sign necessary papers so he could apply to the Department of Veterans Affairs for reimbursement.

As a result, the remains of the highly decorated serviceman were stored in a vault for nine months before the courts gave Kalagher permission to bury him at the Maine Veterans' Memorial Cemetery in Augusta.

On average, Kalagher said, Lawry Brothers Funeral Home in Fairfield buries 10 people year whose families are unable to pay for a burial. In these cases, the funeral home provides minimum services, he said.

Even so, funeral homes lose thousands of dollars each year burying the poor.

"It costs about \$2,000 (for burials), because some of these are cremations, and when you're doing 10 of these folks every year, that's \$20,000," Kalagher said.

Funeral directors say they are more than willing to do pro bono services, but that caring for the dead is a business and they deserve to make a profit.

To recoup some of their losses, funeral directors often must increase the price of funeral services for paying customers.

Under Maine general assistance statutes, funeral homes can be reimbursed up to \$1,125 for a burial from municipalities. But that's only a quarter of what a traditional funeral costs.

An Augusta funeral home director said she waits to hear from a municipality before any arrangements are made to see if it agrees to pay for services.

"Hopefully, we're reimbursed for our out-of-pocket expenses -- cemetery charges and clergy charges -- but it doesn't cover personnel or services," said Lynn Roberts-Reed, president of Knowlton, Hewins & Roberts Funeral Home.

At Plummer Funeral Home in Augusta, Mike Murphy said the 10 to 20 welfare cases they do a year become part of the funeral home's overhead, which usually includes the cost of building, staff and motor vehicles.

"Every time we do a welfare case, it's a loss of funds," Murphy said. "The city of Augusta gives us \$975 to help with a cremation and \$1,700 for a burial. That's only a fraction of what our charge would be. The rest is written off and goes to free care. That's one of the things that adds to why funerals are so expensive."

He said a funeral home receives even less from the Department of Veterans Affairs to bury a soldier.

"I hear a lot, especially from World War II vets who come in (to plan a funeral), 'Don't worry, honey. When I die, the government will pay for me.' But it's not true. It's only when they die in a war."

Ken Finley of Bragdon-Finley Funeral Home in Monmouth, said he hasn't had that many pro bono burials. The first one in two years was Friday, for a man dishonorably discharged from the service who had been on welfare all his life.

"The call came in this morning, and his girlfriend is *Continued on Next Page*

GA OVERALL MAXIMUMS

BY CINDY BOYD



By now you have all received the mailing with the new Appendices A through C. I am sure that you have all noticed that there are some major changes to Appendix A. There are two reasons for the changes. One is the fact that there was legislation this past year that changed how we calculate the Overall Maximums and one was a change that HUD made in how localities were organized.

LD 367 was submitted to the Legislature because last year there were areas of the State where the HUD fair market rents went down. This would have caused the GA Overall Maximums to go down in those areas and we did not want that to happen. The passage of LD 367 now requires us to use the greater of 110% of the HUD fair market rents or the amount achieved by annually increasing the most recent overall maximum by the percentage increase in the Federal Poverty Level of the current year over the prior year. This resulted in extra work for Antoinette this year. She had to do two calculations for each household size and use the higher result.

If that was not confusing enough HUD did away with the SMSAs and came up with new groupings. They now label localities as HMFA (HUD Metro FMR) and MSA (Metropolitan Statistical Area). Some municipalities

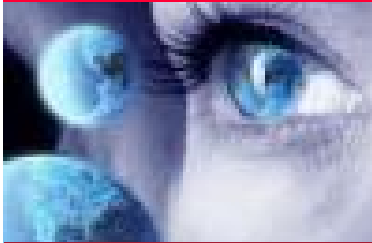
It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare.

MARK TWAIN (1935 – 1910)



GA OVERALL MAXIMUMS

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are not grouped with the same municipalities they were in the past. I have received calls asking why and I cannot answer that question. HUD does surveys early before they post their FMRs and they must have decided that the conditions warranted changes.

This change meant that there were municipalities that were placed in the grouping that HUD put them in but because of the State's law change we had to calculate them separately and give them their own Overall Maximums. The bad part is that we did not realize this until the mass mailing went out. The municipalities involved have been notified and they have the correct Overall Maximums. Hopefully next year will go more smoothly. I want to thank everyone for their patience and understanding.

I also want to thank Antoinette Mancusi for all her help. I have been here since 1998 and she has been the one preparing the Appendices every year. The Department has mailed them out but she did all the calculations and has been the one able to answer the questions. I will miss her.

in the same capacity, on welfare with no money, no capabilities -- nothing," Finley said. "I think you have to do these things to help the individual. I feel obligated to make sure something happens for them."

Peter Neal, of the Maine Funeral Directors Association, said changes to the state's general assistance program a few years ago as a result of budget cuts put more of a burden on funeral homes -- especially smaller, family-run operations.

One of those changes says towns can refuse to provide funds to bury an indigent if relatives have the means to pay.

Also, under the statute, funeral homes are required to accept the small allowance from general assistance, even if a funeral costs \$4,500.

"In some of the more depressed areas in the state, funeral homes get more instances of people without the means to pay, so it gets harder," Neal said. "We've tried a couple of times to make it more equitable for us, but anytime we go to the Legislature and want more money for general assistance, they're up against a wall, and I understand that."

In Winslow, general assistance director Frank Stankevitz said the town

follows guidelines established by the state to help indigent people. He said it's up to the funeral director to call the Town Office, then the family has to come in to meet with him to see if they are eligible for assistance.

"Burial expenses vary from town to town. Ours is \$1,000 maximum," Stankevitz said.

Antoinette Mancusi, technical advisor in legal services at the Maine Municipal Association, said the funeral component of the state's general assistance program is a horrific burden on municipalities.

The average general assistance funeral application takes municipal officials hours to review. The state does not cover the cost of those administrative services.

Mary Frances Bartlett, director of Augusta's Health and Welfare Department, said she reviewed eight applications this past year.

"The way the law is written, if a family asks for help with a burial, you have to determine whether the parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren or siblings could afford to pay," Bartlett said. "You can imagine how long that would take if a person has 10 brothers and sisters. It's a very difficult process, because you have to

determine whether or not they can pay, and if they're willing to cooperate with you."

Mancusi said town and city officials also have to deal with funeral directors, who she said often complain that the maximum burial amount is insufficient. In some instances, she said, they don't know what their obligations are under the law.

According to Mancusi, the statute says a funeral director is supposed to contact the municipality by the end of the next business day or on receipt of the body, whichever comes first, before they incur any costs.

"It's a very difficult situation for towns," Mancusi said. "In all fairness, some funeral directors do an outstanding job serving low-income clients. There are those, however, who are not aware of their obligation or don't care to deal with (indigents) because there's no profit. And that creates a hardship on both low-income families and also the municipal officials involved."

"What we need in the state is new statutory authority that designates how these cases ought to be handled so indigents are buried with dignity and in a responsible manner that's fair to funeral directors and municipalities."

If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN (1809 - 1865)



Looking back; I have very fond memories of working with the MWDA. You are indeed a formidable group of municipal officials and that is part of what has made this experience so rich and enjoyable. We have had fun together—I do not recall one boring time. Especially memorable have been the GA trainings where MWDA members have participated in providing the training. I was always grateful to have MWDA members by my side. Brenda (Rockland), Jodi (Lincolntonville) or Stacey (Sabbatus) can provide the details—amusing stuff indeed! They can vouch for how rambunctious the GA training crowds can get. I shall also miss the hours of brainstorming that I have spent on the many statutory, legislative and policy revision projects. There are several of you that truly tested my abilities. Sue (Lewiston) and Mary-Francis (Augusta) are just two who immediately come to mind.

I have thoroughly enjoyed working with the many dedicated, talented and bright municipal clients – far too numerous to mention individually here and now. Suffice to say these melancholy feelings at my leave extend to all of you. I shall truly miss you. The best part of this position has undoubtedly been the MMA clients.

As far as the business of GA, there are a few areas that I would have liked to have been involved with in order to see some reform. I encourage the MWDA membership to work together to resolve these matters. There is no better time than the present for the newer MWDA members to spearhead these needed changes. Work together with all the veteran talent to learn about and develop statutory changes that will be of service and benefit to the GA community (both GA administrators and clients alike). The areas I especially believe require attention are of course GA funerals (which I believe the state should take over all together) and resolving the ambiguity behind the ‘residency’ test. I also believe that given the complexity and cost of administering the GA program, the state should begin reimbursing municipalities for the administrative costs of running the program.

So where am I going? In mid-September I start with Coastal Counties Workforce, Inc. (CCW Inc.) in Topsham, Maine as Director of Operations. This position will allow me to combine two great interests of mine, employment law/compliance and social service administration. CCW Inc. is a not-for-profit organization, established by the county commissioners of the six coastal counties of York, Cumberland, Sagadahoc, Lincoln, Knox and Waldo, that works to overcome barriers to employment while serving as a catalyst in coordinating and aligning this region’s workforce investment policies and programs.

So adieu my friends and colleagues...Maine is a small state and I have no doubt and it is my hope that I shall cross paths with many of you again.

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ROSTER 2005 – 2006

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It takes a great deal of courage to stand up to your enemies,
but even more to stand up to your friends.

J. K. ROWLING (1965 -)

