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Closing of Mount Washington funeral home leaves some customers in limbo

By BRIAN BURNES
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Jamie and Thomas Elder didn't want to burden their children.

About 10 years ago they bought a pre-need funeral plan at Mount Washington Forever Funeral Home and Cemetery in Independence. They paid approximately \$7,400 for two Mount Washington Cemetery mausoleum spaces, with funeral services, plus — for \$150 — a flag to be flown every Memorial Day for Thomas, a veteran.

Now they're wondering if that flag will ever fly.

"We thought we had everything taken care of and paid for," said Jamie Elder. "And who has been earning the interest on that money for the last 10 years?"

Many people across the Kansas City area are having similar thoughts, since they learned that the Mount Washington funeral home no longer is operating. It closed about 10 days ago.

Mount Washington Cemetery, a 400-acre Independence landmark, remains open. Charter Funerals of Kansas City now is handling inquiries from area residents who purchased pre-arranged funeral contracts through the Washington funeral home, said Dan Porrevecchio, a Kansas City area advertising and marketing consultant representing Charter.

Charter representatives, he said, on a case-by-case basis, may issue a credit toward future funeral services based on Mount Washington contracts that families hold.

One of the checks Jamie Elder wrote, she said, was to National Prearranged Services Inc., a St. Louis company that offered prepaid funeral plans.

This month lawyers for insurance guaranty associations asked a federal judge to issue an injunction against the owners of that company to prevent them from spending proceeds generated by the firm. The owners, the Cassity family of St. Louis, are accused in a \$600 million federal lawsuit of stealing money that should have stayed in trust funds to pay for prepaid funerals.

The owner of the Mount Washington Forever Funeral Home is listed in the Missouri secretary of state's office as Brent Cassity, a representative of Mount Washington Forever L.L.C. of St. Louis.

Another area funeral home group, the Speaks Family Legacy Chapels in Independence, also is offering assistance to families with Mount Washington contracts.

"If families would like to re-establish their funeral plans, we are offering a credit toward a new plan," said Brad Speaks, president.

As of Thursday afternoon, almost 80 families had brought paperwork to the Speaks group this week, Speaks said. One of those families, he added, needed to arrange a funeral for a loved one.

"The whole thing is a mess," said Speaks.

"Here we have elderly people in our community who thought they had everything taken care of, and now they learn that they may likely have been defrauded. The families are upset and shell-shocked, trying to wrap their minds around what happened."

On Wednesday, the consumer protection hotline of the Missouri attorney general's office received more than 200 calls on the Mount Washington funeral home, said Nanci Gonder, office press secretary.

Jamie Elder said she was one of them.

“We are going to tell our children that, when we die, just put our bodies underneath our mausoleum space with a copy of the contract in our hands,” she said.

“We paid in good faith. Why should we pay a second time?”

To ask questions or receive information about filing a complaint regarding the Mount Washington Forever Funeral Home, call the Missouri attorney general’s consumer protection hotline at 1-800-392-8222.

To contact Charter Funerals, call 816-921-5555.

To contact the Speaks Family Legacy Chapels, call 816-252-7900.

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