

State suspends Gastonia funeral home's license (updated with comments from Howell)

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State regulators have closed a Gastonia funeral home accused of mishandling money for prepaid funeral contracts.

The N.C. Board of Funeral Service last week suspended the licenses of Howell Funeral Home on 2916 Union Road and funeral director Eric Mark Howell. A woman had filed a complaint against the funeral home because it couldn't account for more than \$10,000 she paid it for pre-need arrangements, officials said.

"It has not been registered with us and we cannot find evidence it was at a bank," said Paul Harris, executive director of the funeral board. "In the course of looking at that complaint, we discovered additional contracts and funding that we could not account for."

Funeral homes licensed to sell pre-need services place payments into a bank trust fund or purchase an insurance policy, Harris said. Records of each prepaid funeral contract should be filed with the funeral service board in Raleigh.

Harris said investigators found more than 10 additional contracts with no evidence that payments had been deposited in a bank or used to buy insurance. Howell Funeral Home does have contracts that were handled appropriately, he said.

"We have contracts that have been properly registered and funding that has been properly done," he said. "It's not like every contract that's been done there we have had problems with."

The suspension bars both Howell Funeral Home and Eric Mark Howell from conducting business until the board holds an Oct. 1 administrative hearing on the allegations.

Doors at the funeral home were locked Wednesday afternoon and no one appeared to be inside the building.

The 43-year-old Howell was arrested July 15 in Lincoln County and charged with possession of drug paraphernalia, having an open container of alcohol in a motor vehicle and littering. Sheriff's deputies stopped a sport utility vehicle driven by Doug McKown, the York County, S.C., coroner, who has since resigned.

An officer allegedly saw Howell smoking from an aluminum drink can in the passenger seat of McKown's county-owned sport utility vehicle. Howell has denied that he was smoking crack cocaine and said he took a drug test at a local doctor's office four days after his arrest.

"These allegations are not entirely accurate," Howell told *The Gazette* in July. "I have a copy of test results from a drug analysis that prove there hasn't been any drug use."

Drug tests can detect cocaine in the body one to four days after use, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. A May 2007 Department of Energy report states that it might be

detectable for just one to two days for infrequent users.

Howell was scheduled to appear in court Wednesday but had his case continued until Oct. 22, according to the Lincoln County Clerk of Court's office.

Out of 736 licensed funeral homes in North Carolina, 675 are licensed to sell pre-need contracts, Harris said. About 2,700 individuals hold funeral director, embalmer and funeral service licenses from the state board.

Howell has a funeral service license, which qualifies him to work as a funeral director and embalmer, Harris explained. Licensees are required to have an associate's degree or higher from an accredited mortuary science school, serve a 12-month traineeship and pass a national board exam or two equivalent state tests.

Funeral service providers are required to have a minimum of five hours of continuing education each year in order to renew their licenses.

You can reach Corey Friedman at 704-869-1828.

Have concerns?: Howell Funeral Service customers who have concerns about their pre-need contracts can call the N.C. Board of Funeral Service toll-free at 1-800-862-0636 or e-mail wpharris@ncbfs.org.

Statement from Howell: Howell Funeral Home will honor its prepaid funeral arrangements and correct discrepancies being probed by state regulators, its manager said in a written statement Wednesday.

The Gazette left voicemail messages for Howell at the Union Road funeral home and at his home in Gastonia. Howell responded with the following statement faxed to the newspaper:

I want the citizens of Gaston County to know that I've given this matter my immediate attention. I'm in negotiations with a group of funeral service professionals. A new entity will emerge and the funeral home for which I have made so many sacrifices will be stronger than ever.

All pre-arranged contracts will be accounted for and properly registered with the North Carolina Board of Funeral Service. This will be resolved with promptness. I want to thank the community for the positive support and prayers extended during this time. I intend to make a formal announcement of the new structure of the funeral home very soon.