

Unclaimed dead stack up in Wayne County morgue

Thursday, August 6, 2009

Charlie LeDuff / The Detroit News

Detroit -- Poor Grandpa.

His corpse lies at the bottom of a pile of other bodies unclaimed at the Wayne County morgue. But Grandpa -- whose name has been withheld to avoid embarrassing his family -- is a special case. He has been in the cooler for the past two years as his kinfolk -- too broke to bury him -- wait for a ship to come in.

"There is destitution," says Dr. Carl J. Schmidt, the chief medical examiner of this, the nation's poorest big city. "But when you're so destitute that nobody has claimed you, that's a whole different level of being destitute."

Peering into the small glass window of the cooler door, Schmidt counts 52 unclaimed bodies stacked like cordwood -- in some cases four to a shelf; always two to a gurney.

Generally, the economic well-being of a municipality is measured by unemployment rates and quarterly earnings reports. But Schmidt's cooler may say as much about metropolitan Detroit's financial health as any statistics released by the Federal Reserve.

"It really is a sign of how bad things have gotten," says Schmidt, 52, a 16-year veteran of the Detroit death scene. "Some people really have to make a choice of putting food on the table or burying their loved ones. It is very sad really. In all of my years here, I have never seen it this bad."

As a comparison, the doctor said that just a few years ago, when credit was easy and SUVs were a must-have, he would typically have no more than 10 unclaimed bodies at any one time.

But nowadays, people are using his cooler like a no-charge cold storage facility, he says. Corpses linger longer and longer as family members wait for a paycheck, a tax return, the lottery or a lawsuit to get the money needed to give their dead a proper burial. And thus, Grandpa lingers. Some of the dead have been signed over to the county by people either unable or unwilling to pay for the burial.

The dead who have been signed away by their families find themselves bound in bureaucratic red tape. They await a \$700 check from the state Department of Human Services, which, because of its own budgetary constraints, last year slashed the burial grant from \$900.

Once the state money is received, Wayne County will kick in another \$250 and the remains will be contracted out to a funeral home that will place them in a pauper's grave. Cremation is never a consideration, says Schmidt, as state law prohibits it.

The process takes about two months, and by that time, another 15 to 20 corpses will have taken their places in the cooler. Schmidt may handle as many 200 indigent cases this year.

There are an additional 20 bodies in the cooler waiting for investigators to locate a next of kin. Another two bodies have yet to be identified, including a femur that has been there for several years.

Living on the margins

Any way you slice it, says Schmidt, the cramped cooler is a repository of the human condition. "How society treats its dead says volumes about the way society lives," he says. "Civilization requires intrinsically that we bury the dead. It distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom."

About 4,000 people died last year in Wayne County, with 2,500 requiring an autopsy. According to Schmidt, perhaps 15 percent of those were murdered. Another 20 percent died as a result of accidents, even drug overdose, and another 10 percent committed suicide. The remaining 55 percent died of natural causes.

It is this "natural cause" type of death that appears to be on the rise due to the bad economic times.

"There are some people living on the margins who simply can't afford their medication anymore," he says. "Diabetes and what have you. And sadly, these types of deaths are preventable."

Rarely will you find that children go unclaimed. "There is still a social connection to children," the doctor says. And rarely will a person of Jewish or Muslim descent have to wait. Religious law requires that they be buried within the day.

Being nice matters

Schmidt is a sort of Descartes to the deceased -- a detective of death who washes away the daily stress of his job by solving complex mathematical puzzles by lamplight. He continues to perform autopsies -- about one a day -- and has conducted more than 5,000 in his career. He believes in the concept of a soul and enjoys reading the existential philosophers Kierkegaard, Camus and Sartre, whose writings he boils down to this: You are really the consequence of your own actions.

"The essence of the dilemma is this: If you are nicer to people, your chances of ending up here are greatly reduced," he says during a midafternoon tour of the circular facility in midtown Detroit.

The morgue features seven dissection stations, an anteroom stuffed with jars of flesh samples, lighting the color of flypaper, a sickly stench of death that is something of a mix of cherry and ammonia and, of course, the metallic cooler.

Not everyone in the cooler is there because his family is poor. Rather, some have arrived because they treated their family poorly, the doctor explains. Consider the son of a dead man who said of his father: "I didn't like him when he was alive, why would I help him now?" Or consider the case of the man whose two wives first met over his dead body. Finding that they had little in common except for the cadaver, they left him.

"If you do end up here," Dr. Schmidt advises, "your chances of getting out of here are greatly increased the nicer you were to people when you were alive."

Looking for next of kin for unclaimed bodies at the Wayne County morgue

The remains of the following people are at the Wayne County morgue, their next of kin unknown.

If you have information, call (313) 833-2568.

- **Michael A. Brown** : black male born Jan. 8, 1973; arrived at the morgue on Aug. 30, 2007
- **George Carter**: black male born May 19, 1949; arrived at the morgue on Aug. 14, 2008
- **Prazetta Dixon**: black female born Dec. 6, 1951; arrived at the morgue Feb. 24, 2007
- **Rafael Garcia** : Hispanic male approximately age 50; arrived at the morgue on July 25, 2006
- **Daniel Gorski**: white male born March 30, 1955; arrived at the morgue on Aug. 11, 2006
- **Charles Guthrie**: white male born Aug. 12; 1948; arrived at the morgue on Dec. 2, 2008
- **Neal Harden**: black male born July 11, 1960; arrived at the morgue on May 14, 2006
- **Dwayne Jackson** : black male born April 20, 1949; arrived at the morgue on March 1, 2008
- **Richard Johnson** : black male born May 19, 1949; arrived at the morgue on Sept. 6, 2008
- **Alan D. Jones** : black male born Dec. 14, 1957; arrived at the morgue on June 28, 2006
- **Lee King** : black male born Aug 20, 1955; arrived at the morgue on July 26, 2007
- **Joseph Lam** : white male born April 11, 1950; arrived at the morgue on June 11, 2008
- **Dewanda McNeil** : black female born April 16, 1950; arrived at the morgue on Oct. 29, 2006
- **Richard Nelson**: black male born May 7, 1947; arrived at the morgue on Aug. 24, 2005
- **Robert Owens** : white male born Jan. 13, 1949; arrived at the morgue on April 9, 2008
- **Dora Robinson** : black female born July 4, 1951; arrived at the morgue on Oct. 7, 2007
- **Joseph Shelley**: black male born Nov. 23, 1957; arrived at the morgue on Nov. 12, 2006
- **Beatrice Simms**: black female born May 11, 1945; arrived at the morgue on May 1, 2008
- **Shawn Thompson** : black male born April 25, 1973; arrived at the morgue on Sept. 30, 2006

• **Maurice Webber** : black male born June 2, 1977; arrived at the morgue on Aug. 2, 2006

charlie@detnews.com (313) 222-2071

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