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Falls Church Funeral Home Denies Mishandling Bodies

By Josh White
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A Falls Church funeral home that allegedly mishandled numerous bodies over the past year has denied wrongdoing. Its attorneys wrote to a Virginia regulatory board that the company has not violated any laws or industry standards and that it treats all remains with "the utmost dignity and respect."

Attorneys for National Funeral Home, which serves as a regional embalming and storage facility for Houston-based Service Corporation International, wrote that allegations of impropriety were unfounded. They said an internal investigation has turned up "credible, independent evidence that refutes the principal allegations" that surfaced when current and former employees and customers complained publicly this year.

The complaints, first reported in *The Washington Post* in April, centered on allegations that National Funeral Home was overwhelmed with bodies from six area funeral homes and that supervisors there resorted to storing bodies in hallways, a back room and on unrefrigerated storage racks in a garage.

Whistleblower Steven Napper, a former Maryland State Police trooper who worked at the facility as an embalmer, documented unsanitary conditions there. Photographs Napper took in December showed bodies balanced on biohazard boxes, and the remains of decorated military officers scheduled to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery being stored in the garage.

Several current and former employees have backed Napper's allegations, as did Ronald Federici, a doctor who witnessed the facility's conditions late last year when his father's body was sent there. Federici said the facility was "disgusting, degrading and humiliating."

As part of an investigation by the Virginia Board for Funeral Directors and Embalmers, the funeral home was given an opportunity to respond, leading to the company's letters Friday. Emily Wingfield, the funeral board's deputy director, said state laws prohibit her from commenting on the case.

In the letters, which SCI released yesterday, National Funeral Home officials "vehemently disagree" with Napper's claims. While denying unclean or unsanitary conditions, funeral home officials acknowledge that they stored bodies on the garage racks in coffins "during exceptionally busy times" and never for an extended period. "Mr. Napper's allegations have no merit and are plainly contradicted by objective, irrefutable evidence," wrote William G. Broaddus, a Richmond attorney representing the funeral home who also claimed Napper never raised concerns with superiors. "National Funeral Home treats all remains with the utmost dignity and respect. It has acted in accordance with all laws, regulations and industry standards at all times."

Napper said yesterday that he stands by his complaints and noted numerous conversations with his managers about problems at National Funeral Home. "There is no doubt in my mind that what they were doing was wrong and that they knew about it," Napper said.

Officials for SCI said they conducted an internal review of the allegations and hired a law firm to do an independent investigation. Citing pending litigation, SCI spokeswoman Lisa Marshall said she could not provide a copy of the investigation report or discuss its contents. "We took these allegations seriously and did an internal review," Marshall said. "We found no credible evidence that supports the allegations in the complaints." Marshall emphasized that there is no law in Virginia requiring funeral homes to refrigerate embalmed bodies, even if they are to be stored over long periods. Marshall said that storing bodies on the garage racks is a legal "option available to us."

Two families, one of which has sued SCI, said they were ensured that their loved ones would be held in refrigerators before burial and were shocked to learn how the bodies were handled. Kim Brooks-Rodney, an attorney who represents the family of an Army colonel whose body was stored at National, said it does not surprise her that SCI has denied wrongdoing.

"We fully expect the photographs taken by Mr. Napper, his testimony and the testimony of other current and former National Funeral Home employees to expose the hideous treatment the remains kept at National Funeral Home received," Brooks-Rodney said. "People deserve dignity in life and in death, and for some reason National Funeral Home does not seem to understand this basic principle of common decency."

SCI plans to spend more than \$200,000 to make improvements to National Funeral Home's facilities, including adding a third storage cooler, the ability to control the garage's temperature and new flooring and lighting. Marshall said the funeral home is developing written protocols and procedures for bodies scheduled for burial at Arlington.

The Virginia state board is considering new regulations that would require funeral homes to tell families where bodies are being held and the method of storage. The board is also considering regulations requiring that any body stored for longer than 24 hours be embalmed or refrigerated.