

Who will maintain CT's cemeteries in the future? Volunteers struggle to find next generation.

By Karen Tensa



BROOKFIELD — Thousands of Connecticut cemeteries are struggling to find the next generation to take over for their aging volunteers, raising concerns about what that means for the millions of dollars in their charge and the care of those interred there.

“There’s a huge gap here,” said Jeff Nolan, Central Cemetery Association’s treasurer. “The question is why is that gap remaining?”

[Central Cemetery Association in Brookfield](#), which oversees Laurel Hill Cemetery, has spent three years trying to address the

issue, but keeps hitting walls when seeking help.

"The remarkable indifference to this is a concern," Nolan said.

The unsurety surrounding the future has led the association to consider forgoing volunteers moving forward and hiring full-time staff members that can oversee the cemeteries using the needed technology and training. They hope to do this by having associations partner up, join cemeteries that already have these resources or have regional government organizations take them over.

Connecticut has about 5,000 cemeteries scattered throughout the state, many of which are handled by individual nonprofit associations or religious groups working independently without state oversight.

Some cemeteries have full-time employees overseeing them, while others only have part-time employees, solely volunteers, or in some cases no one.

"It's handled on an ad hoc, piecemeal manner that isn't cogent at all," Nolan said.

So far, all of the association's requests have been rejected, including from the [Danbury Cemetery Association](#) and [the Bridgeport Diocese](#).

"We know how difficult it is to solicit volunteers and we, like you, continue to network within our community for fresh volunteers," Gail Spencer, president of the Danbury Cemetery Association said in a letter to the Central Cemetery Association. She offered other resources to meet their needs.

The association is trying to join other cemetery associations to create a professional organization, as well as encourage regional government organizations take over the mapping tasks, if not all of the responsibilities.

If that fails, the board plans to dissolve and go to the state Superior Court to determine a succession plan.

The Western Connecticut Council of Governments [already maps different aspects](#) of its member towns, so Nolan thinks adding the cemeteries is a natural fit. Each town has different land use codes though, complicating how to properly track the state's cemeteries on a large scale.

Nolan said each cemetery should be digitally mapped so that cemeteries can better keep track of their records of who is buried there and in which plot. Right now, many of these records are kept by hand and the caretaker physically goes out to the cemetery to find the location of a caller's ancestor or loved one.

"There are more burial locations in one cemetery than there are parcels of land in any town," he said.

These inquiries are on the rise as the popularity of ancestry websites grow and people, including those from outside the area, try to learn more about their family trees.

The GIS mapping of plots could be expensive though for each cemetery on its own, costing about \$30,000 in some cases. Nolan said the cemeteries joining together can reduce the individual expenses for each group and make operations more efficient by allowing them to share technology and accounting services.

Nolan said it's costing the association about \$8,000 for an accountant to oversee the books, a big chunk of the \$20,000 the cemetery generates each year, not counting the landscaping costs. He said this can be a burden on many smaller associations.

"It's too expensive," he said. "You have organizations holding people's money who can't afford to account for it properly.

Even if they could find volunteers to take over the responsibilities, Nolan said the scope of the work and liability is no longer something volunteers should be handling, especially because the state or trade groups don't offer the needed finance and legal training.

For example, record-keeping errors are classified as a Class D felony, yet Nolan said proper training isn't available for volunteers.

Most trade associations require people to be full-time employees who have spent at least five years at a cemetery, preventing volunteers from getting certification. About 90 percent of those who qualify are landscapers, Nolan said.

"Our theme of 'regionalize, professionalize, modernize' is really about trying to achieve economies of scale that are essential for survival," he said. "That requires technology and skills that are simply not available in the pool of volunteers we have out there."

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