



Annual Report for year ending
March 31, 2021



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Who we are

The Alberta Funeral Services Regulatory Board (AFSRB) is Alberta's funeral industry regulator. The AFSRB is an independent delegated regulatory authority and is accountable to the Government of Alberta through delegation documents and a memorandum of agreement with the Minister of Service Alberta.

The Alberta Funeral Services Regulatory Board was established December 1, 1992, under the following *legislation*:

Licensing of Trades and Businesses Act
Funeral Services Business Licensing Regulation (AR 360/92)
Alberta Funeral Services Regulatory Board Regulation (AR 225/98).

In 2002 – 2003 the Board was delegated responsibility for enforcing and administering the following legislation:

Funeral Services Act
Funeral Services Exemption Regulation
Funeral Services General Regulation, and
Crematory Regulation under the Cemeteries Act.

The Board has six members. Three of the six members are elected by funeral services businesses to represent the interests of the funeral services industry and three members are appointed by the Minister of Service Alberta to represent the interests of the public. There was one public member vacancy this year.

2020 – 2021 Board Members

Scott Barbour – Chair (Industry member)
Debbie Miller – Vice Chair (Public member)
Shawn Feist – Treasurer (Industry member)
Dean Ross – Industry member
Jack Redekop – Public member
Vacant – Public member

Board Staff

Executive Director	Karen Carruthers
Board Inspector	Del August
Administrative Assistant	Lori Elanik

Auditors Hahn Lukey Houle LLP

2020-2021 Highlights

The past year was much quieter for the Board with all meetings held over Zoom. This made it more challenging for the Board to make major strides in the work that was planned.

Business Plan

The new format for the business plan continues to be a useful tool for the Board to plan and monitor progress being made.

Computer licensing system

The AFSRB's online licensing system continued to be developed to add functionality to the program. The online payment processor was in place for the renewal period, and most funeral services businesses took advantage of that newly added feature. There is much less paper being used in the renewal process as notifications for the renewal are sent electronically and most of the documents sent to the AFSRB office are uploaded into the system. This has greatly streamlined our process and the turnaround time is reduced because we are not reliant on the mail delivery.

Digitizing documents

As part of the modernization of the AFSRB's operations, great progress has been made towards digitizing the existing paper licensing files. Previously, the physical files were the only complete record that the AFSRB had, so there was a risk to the AFSRB operations if something were to happen to these records. During the year, all of the active individual licence files were digitized and quality control completed on the first phase of the project.

Message from the Chair

2021 has been a year filled with uncertainty and apprehension. The turmoil of the pandemic introduced a difficult transition for all of the families served in our province and also for our service providers.

Our board transitioned to meeting by zoom without being able to meet in person, which certainly had its challenges but overall, made for a relatively quiet year.

The online licensing system has proven to be a tremendous asset to the day to day function of the board office where licensing is concerned. Continued changes in our board office with respect to digitizing documents and managing continuing education promise to make progress in our own 'red tape reduction'.

We continue to ensure policy items are current and up to date and are working towards creating a pandemic risk plan to ensure that as an industry we are better prepared to face uncertain times as they arise.

Our board is also working to make suggestions that can help redefine the Funeral Services Act so that we might be able to assist the government in making necessary changes the next time the legislation is opened for review. This will ensure consumers are better served by funeral professionals in Alberta.

With the assistance and vast knowledge base of our Executive Director, we will continue to make positive strides in our work as we move forward through 2022.



Scott Barbour
Chair

AFSRB Overview

Vision

Complete public trust and confidence in Alberta's funeral service professionals.

Mission Statement

Promote a fair and informed marketplace by protecting consumer rights, enhancing industry professionalism, maintaining rigorous educational standards and enforcing fair business practices.

Mandate

To achieve its mission, the AFSRB engages in two core businesses:

Promote consumer protection in a fair and informed marketplace. Facilitate excellence in funeral services through education, training, and standards. The AFSRB works to ensure that both licensees and consumers understand their rights and obligations within the legislative framework and Code of Conduct.

Maintain vigilance over the industry. Protect the public interest by ensuring fair and ethical conduct in the marketplace, through the impartial delivery of licensing, inspection and enforcement activities. Responding to issues and threats as they arise, the AFSRB monitors the emergence of trends within the funeral sector.

Funding

The AFSRB is a public agency under the Government of Alberta and is funded by the collection of business licensing fees, individual funeral professional licensing fees and the per call fee due from each funeral service provided.

Enforcement

The AFSRB has the power to enforce *The Funeral Services Act and Regulations* and the *Crematory Regulation* under the *Cemeteries Act*.

When the Act or Regulations have been contravened, the AFSRB has the authority to:

- suspend or cancel a licence
- refuse to issue or renew a licence
- apply an administrative penalty
- initiate a prosecution through the court system

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES FOR SERVICE EXCELLENCE

The AFSRB members and staff are dedicated to ensuring a standard of excellence in the funeral services that are provided to Albertans. To succeed in this mission, planning and operations will be guided by the following principles:

- ✓ **Accuracy and Professionalism.** We provide timely and accurate information about funeral services. Our communications are based on respect, honesty, and objectivity.
- ✓ **Accessibility.** We give timely responses to requests for information and concerns about marketplace conduct.
- ✓ **Accountability.** We are responsible to the people of Alberta, through the Minister of Service Alberta, for appropriate business conduct occurring in the marketplace.
- ✓ **Human Resource Management.** We strive to be respected for our knowledge and skills, and our effective administration of a legislative framework.
- ✓ **Emerging issues.** We monitor funeral services trends and emerging issues and provide leadership to ensure that funeral services continue to respond to consumer needs.
- ✓ **Service Excellence.** A set of Core Competencies has been developed for funeral professionals. The primary intention of the competency profile is to ensure that all education and training programs that lead to candidates being considered for licensing as a Funeral Director, Embalmer and/or Pre-Need Salesperson meet a high and consistent standard. All educational programming is expected to demonstrate training components that reflect the elements of the competencies.
- ✓ **Consultation with stakeholders.** We seek input from consumers, funeral services businesses, and other stakeholders, including various government departments, regarding decisions that affect satisfactory delivery of funeral services in Alberta.

Report on Operations

The AFSRB administers legislation that promotes and enforces fair business practices designed to encourage consumer confidence in Alberta.

Licensing

The number of licences issued over the past four years have remained quite consistent with only minimal variations. This speaks to the stability of funeral services industry and the funeral professionals who staff it. The numbers for individual licences are seeing a slight decrease in this year. This is likely due to the pandemic and the reduced requirements for staff with the COVID restrictions in place. There have also been three new crematories added due to the continued increase in the number of cremations in Alberta. In the fiscal year 2020-2021, there were no licences refused.



Inspections

Having implemented the new risk-based inspection process, the number of funeral services businesses that are inspected is consistent at about 35%. There were 56 funeral services businesses inspected between April 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021. During these inspections, the most common deficiency was the AFSRB logo and link not included on their business website. Other concerns included some cremated remains over 5 years found on site.

Pre-need monitoring

Pre-need monitoring continues to be a very important function of the AFSRB. The majority of the pre-need files are in order with only minor issues indicated on the accountant's reports. Some of the minor deficiencies relate to difficulty obtaining the trustee report in a timely fashion.

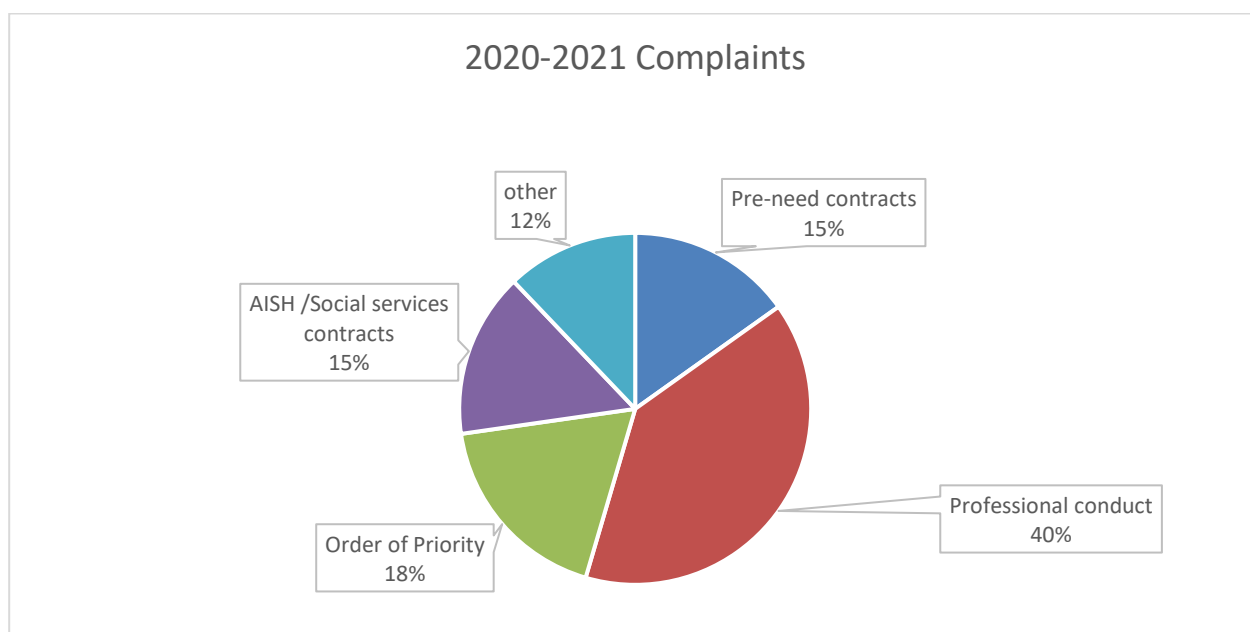
During an inspection, it was discovered that the new owners of a funeral services business in Sherwood Park had not been placing the pre-need money in trust. Further investigation was completed, and this situation went to a disciplinary hearing before the Board. The decision from the Board included a \$25,000 administrative penalty and suspension of the pre-need licence for the business. Full details of the disciplinary action can be found on the AFSRB website.

Complaints

Considering that there were approximately 25,000 deaths in the Province of Alberta, the number of complaints received is very small.

There were 33 complaints received by the AFSRB between April 1, 2020 and March 31, 2021. This number is up 58% over last year, where there were 19 complaints. The pandemic restrictions seemed to be at the heart of most of the complaints. The average timeframe to conclude a complaint was 22 days which is down from the average of 33 days last year.

There were a variety of issues outlined in the complaints. The highest number of complaints was regarding professional conduct which includes general dissatisfaction with customer service, advertising issues and the funeral service not meeting family's expectations. The second highest complaint was regarding order of priority (who controls disposition) where the family was disputing who should be making the funeral decisions.



Protecting Consumer Rights

Website

The Board's website, <https://afsrb.ab.ca/>, enables Albertans to find the information they need to make informed decisions when they are planning or arranging a funeral. It provides information on the funeral services businesses in their area. The website allows for the information to be easily viewed on smart phones and other electronic devices. We continue to update and add new material to the website.

Publication

The Board provides funeral service information to consumers through our brochure, *Funeral Planning in Alberta*. This brochure is provided to the funeral services businesses and the businesses in turn provide the brochures to consumers. Members of the public can request free copies of the brochure from the AFSRB office. A PDF version is also available online.

Information sessions

Due to the pandemic, in person information sessions were not possible this year, and there were no requests for the AFSRB to provide information in this format. The AFSRB is looking at ways to expand the reach of public education through a variety of methods and has included this as a goal in the current business plan.

Responding to inquiries

The Board office fielded more than 1,100 phone calls and just under 20,000 emails, which compared to last year is approximately the same number of phone calls and about 500 emails less. These contacts included questions, concerns and clarifications from consumers and industry members. Our goal is to respond efficiently and effectively to all inquiries that are directed to the AFSRB. Even when the inquiry does not fall under the jurisdiction of the AFSRB, an alternative source for the information being sought is provided (where possible).

Continuing Education for funeral professionals

The AFSRB retains responsibility for ensuring licensees are current in their knowledge of legislation and funeral practices. The 2019-2020 fiscal year was the start of a new three-year cycle where all funeral professionals begin to obtain their continuing education requirements. Each funeral professional must obtain at least 12 credits of continuing education hours, including the three-credit mandatory course determined by the AFSRB. The subject matter for the upcoming mandatory course was decided

by the Board in February of 2021. The new mandatory will be “The 5 Rs of Funeral Service in the Age of Cremation” and will be provided in a webinar format.

The AFSRB requires that each licensee justify the value of the continuing education that they have taken by aligning it with the applicable Core Competency. A Core Competency Profile has been implemented by the AFSRB to provide focus and attention to the competencies important for a funeral professional. The four core competencies established for the funeral service professionals are as follows:

- Business Practice (setting priorities, time and team management, administrative duties, business responsibilities);
- Communication (including understanding the psychology of grief, mediation, conflicts resolution, and general communication);
- Professionalism (appearance and demeanor, legal and ethical demands, participation in professional organizations and activities and self-care); and
- Technical Expectations (including, in addition to the usual technical skills, understanding customs and rituals, social media, digital presentations and graphic design).

AFSRB Collaborative partners

The Board works with several entities to stay current with trends and concerns in the industry. Following are some of the examples of this work.

The AFSRB meets with the Alberta Funeral Services Association (AFSA) at two annual joint meetings, one in the spring and one in the fall, to discuss concerns, trends, and current activities. The fall joint meeting was held in October via Zoom.

The Executive Director attends regulator meetings to discuss current trends and issues that other jurisdictions are experiencing. The Funeral Services Association of Canada began holding meetings via Zoom with all jurisdictions across Canada including the regulators and the funeral association executive. This was a very beneficial meeting to discuss pandemic restrictions and what the other jurisdictions were struggling with throughout the pandemic. Another meeting held this year via Zoom was with the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards (ICFSEB), which includes regulators from the US and Canada. This conference includes guest speakers to educate and inform the attendees, opportunities to liaise with other jurisdictions by region, and group activities to work on projects moved forward by the ICFSEB. This organization will also send out email blasts to obtain answers to inquiries submitted by members on industry related topics.

Looking ahead

The AFSRB has developed a robust business plan to continue to move forward and modernize the work of the Board. There are several goals that have been set for the coming year, which may be more challenging to achieve due to COVID 19. Some of the most significant of these projects are:

Legislative Review Committee – the AFSRB has created a new committee for the purpose of reviewing the Funeral Services Act and Regulations. The AFSRB has created a terms of reference document and will be moving forward with the review, with the goal of recommended amendments being provided to the Minister.

Consumer Information – ensure all our materials are up to date and reflect the current trends in the funeral industry. Our Funeral Planning in Alberta brochure is being reviewed in the coming year to ensure it clearly reflects the current standards for the funeral industry.

Website – work will continue on the new website and will include additional consumer education material and resources, including webinars on trending topics. Consumers are now able to file a complaint through the website or complete an electronically fillable form and print it off. Work is being completed on the employee portal where funeral service professionals may check their licence status and enter their continuing education requirements. We are also completing a Board member only portal for Board meeting information, key documents, policies, etc.

Electronic licensing system – continue to develop the on-line licensing system, including enhancements which will include inspection and investigation tracking, and other revisions to enhance the ease and clarity of use.

Policy Manual – The AFSRB has committed to continue the work on new policies as recommended in the Operational Review, as well as converting the current policies to a new format which will include an evaluation of those policies for accuracy and relevance.

Continuing Education – the AFSRB has determined the topic for the next mandatory course as decided by the Board. The topic is “The 5 Rs of Funeral Service in the Age of Cremation”, and will be distributed via webinar. There will be a number of sessions of this course starting in September, with the completion date prior to March 31, 2022.

Digitizing records – the AFSRB is moving forward with completing the project to digitize all licensing, complaint, investigation and appeal/hearing files, in order to mitigate the risk of losing those documents to fire, etc.