

Dying in Dallas: You Could Do Worse *Prices Are About 9 Percent Below the National Average, Comparison Service Says*

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By Bob Moos

Dallas residents may gripe about the rising cost of living, but they should have less of a complaint about the cost of dying.

The typical charge for a traditional funeral here falls about 9 percent below the national average of \$9,492, says a new report from Everest, a Houston-based company that keeps tabs on funeral prices.

The average price of a Dallas funeral runs \$8,631, according to Everest's data. That covers the funeral home's charges, a steel casket, a burial vault and ancillary items such as death certificates, flowers and obituaries.

A competitive market keeps prices down here, Everest said.

Everest rates Chicago as the most expensive place to die. There, the average cost is \$9,990.

Los Angeles turns out to be the biggest bargain, with a typical funeral charge of \$7,786. Of course, to cash in on those savings when you finally cash out, you'll have to figure out some way to afford to live in Southern California.

The rankings of the nation's top 50 markets, which industry experts say are the first of their kind, were drawn from an online price-checking service that Everest has just launched for funeral shoppers.

Everest PriceFinder Report's Web site, www.funeralpricefinder.com, enables consumers to download comparisons of local funeral homes' charges. Customers pay \$29 per visit or \$48 for an annual subscription.

Everest president and chief executive Mark Duffey said the price-checking tool is aimed at Internet-savvy boomers who like to do research online before they make big purchases.

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"We think there's quite a market for this," he said. "Boomers have reached that time of life when they're beginning to make funeral arrangements for their parents, and they're looking for a convenient way to gather information."

Funerals rank among the most expensive purchases anyone will make in life, after a house, car and college.

In response to pressure from consumer groups, federal law requires funeral homes to give out itemized prices when consumers visit or call.

Now, Mr. Duffey predicts, consumers will turn to the Internet to check funeral prices, as they do to shop for a car or book a trip.

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Some nonprofit consumer groups already provide funeral prices online, either free or for a membership fee.

The Funeral Consumers Alliance of North Texas – at www.texasfuneralconsumers.org – charges \$35 for a lifetime membership.

"Today's consumers are more price-conscious than earlier generations," said Jim Bates, president of the North Texas alliance. "They're not as trusting and compliant as their parents were when it comes to funeral planning."

Mr. Duffey said Everest's nationwide database is more comprehensive than consumer groups' regional lists and contains prices from 19,000 of an estimated 20,000 U.S. funeral homes.

Many of the homes that didn't respond to price checkers are in rural areas.

Consumers will see big price differences in the same market. A traditional funeral in Dallas runs from \$6,800 to \$12,135, according to Everest's Web site. Those prices don't include cemetery costs.

John Reed, a spokesman for the National Funeral Directors Association, said the price differences are due partly to big differences in such overhead expenses as funeral homes' salaries, property taxes and construction costs.

"Some funeral homes also provide more personalized services than others," he said.

The association's most recent estimate of the average price for a funeral nationwide was \$6,580 in 2005.

Everest's current estimate is higher because of inflation and because it includes charges for ancillary items such as flowers, obituaries, some professional fees and police escorts.

Mr. Duffey says the online service will give consumers leverage with funeral directors.

"Funeral homes have bundled products and services into packages that make comparison shopping difficult," he said.

"Now, people can easily ask why one funeral director is charging twice as much as another guy down the street."