

Fresh Air

proper ventilation for the prep room

I watched an old movie some time back. You may have seen it. A family lived in the funeral home they operated. One scene took place at the kitchen table with the door open to the basement below. In the basement was an embalming table and other equipment. Not that unusual in the past. Does anyone know whether such a home exists today? I would be shocked, indeed, if one does.

Funeral home owners and directors in this 21st century know that the key to a healthy environment, healthy business and healthy families is air. Specifically air quality – clean and safe air that with today’s technology can be achieved, measured and regulated.

What does an effective air system require? First of all, it must deliver safe air. It must protect the embalmer from exposure to toxic fumes. Second, it must maintain a comfortable working environment in terms of temperature, humidity and air circulation. Finally, it must be separate

from the air system that supplies the public areas of the funeral home.

Not surprisingly, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, watchdog of the workplace, has had a huge effect on funeral homes with preparation rooms. For the preparation room, at minimum the ventilating system must meet OSHA standard 1910-1048 of no more than 0.75 parts formaldehyde per 1 million parts of air as an eight-hour time-weighted average.

Today, with the re-emerging debate on the potential dangers of formaldehyde and society’s growing concerns about health risks, funeral directors are taking a proactive stance to protect staff from the risk of formaldehyde and other alternative solvents.

The National Funeral Directors Association has recommended that funeral directors follow best management practices with regard to the use of formaldehyde in the preparation room. The first formaldehyde best practice is to “ensure adequate and effective ventilation.”



Photo: A preparation room with PrepArm, a localized air exhaust. (Photo courtesy of Duncan Stuart Todd, Ltd.)

In an effort to assist funeral home owners who are planning to upgrade or install a heating, ventilation and air conditioning system, we offer the following guidelines for design and configuration:

- Self-Contained Space – Areas subject to formaldehyde and fumes from other solvents should be physically contained.
- Optimum Room Size – Plan the dimensions of the preparation room so that an embalmer can comfortably perform the necessary operations. Do not make it so large that the cubic air volume cannot be effectively managed.
- Configuration – Configure the shape of the room to allow for effective and efficient evacuation of air volume.
- No Interconnection – Never interconnect the air system for the preparation room with other parts of

the facility.

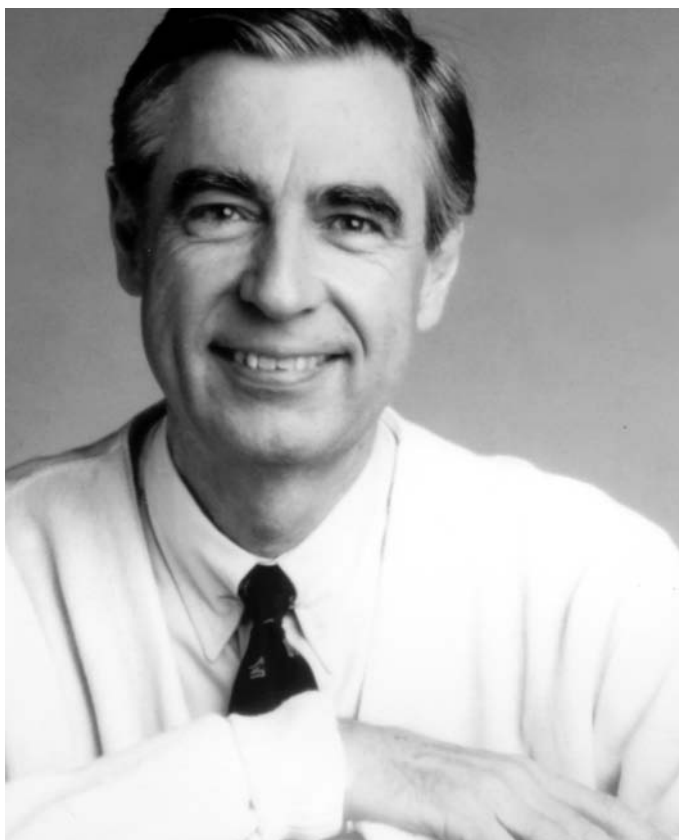
- Heat and Cool – Provide heating and cooling for proper room comfort.
- Air Circulation – Provide fresh air on a regular basis. The amount of recommended fresh air changes varies throughout the industry. It is best to consult an expert.
- Recirculation – Do not recirculate air during embalming procedures.
- Exhaust Levels – Exhaust the air effectively and from more than one level, as compounds rise and fall depending on their weight.
- Balance Air – The air system must be properly balanced, and the room should maintain negative pressure.
- Life Cycle Costs – The system should consider life-cycle costs and be designed accordingly.
- Durability – The system should be durable and reliable.

- Supplemental Exhaust – Provide localized exhaust as a supplement to the room air system.

The long-term effects of formaldehyde exposure continue to be evaluated, and while more research is necessary to confirm specific findings, studies by the National Cancer Institute suggest that such exposure can affect one's health.

Clearly, the best action for funeral home owners and directors is to take positive steps to protect their embalmers and the entire staff from bad air, invisible as it may be. That can best be done by ensuring that facilities are equipped with OSHA-compliant HVAC systems to promote a level of security and sense of well being.

Keep that old movie in mind. Although it was sweet in a family way, it is a scene we would not like to preserve. •

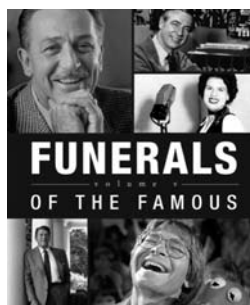


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