

Norwegian funeral homes turn to the state to avoid an early grave

July 15 2020, by Pierre-Henry Deshayes



Norwegian funeral homes have been struggling as measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus have helped reduce overall mortality

While the novel coronavirus pandemic is ravaging the world, some of Norway's funeral homes have found themselves without work and have

turned to the state for aid.

Due to declining mortality and cancelled funeral ceremonies, half a dozen Norwegian undertakers, according to a public registry, have turned to the state for help after the initial success of Norway's handling of COVID-19 left them struggling to make ends meet.

For the Lande family, who have made caring for the dead their livelihood for three generations, this has never happened before.

"When the measures against the coronavirus were imposed, it turned out that it not only broke the back of the coronavirus but other viruses too," Erik Lande, now head of the family business in the south of the country, told AFP.

"So much so that some of the old and sick people who would have died in normal circumstances are still around," he added.

Usually the firm handles around 30 funeral arrangements a month, but after the introduction of Norway's semi-lockdown in March, that fell to less than ten in following weeks, with not a single one from COVID-19, Lande explained.

To cover fixed costs such as rent and insurance, Landes Begravelsesbyra (Lande's funeral home), has received almost 32,000 Norwegian kroner (about \$3,400 or 3,000 euros) of economic aid.

On March 12, Norway's Prime Minister Erna Solberg announced what she dubbed "the strongest and most intrusive measures" the country had seen in peacetime.

Those included the closure of schools, bars and many public spaces, a ban on sports and cultural events and a curb on foreign travel.

Since then nearly all of the measures have been lifted and the virus has been mostly contained, in stark contrast to neighbouring Sweden which is still seeing community spread.

Return to normal

Of the some 573,000 deaths linked to COVID-19 worldwide, only 253 have been recorded in Norway and this week the country said it had no COVID-19 patients on ventilators and only a handful in hospital.

Presumably thanks to the isolation of the elderly and social distancing measures mortality even seems to have declined.

Norway for instance had six percent fewer deaths in May than a year earlier, and 13 percent fewer in June.

In the capital Oslo, Verd Begravelsesbyra received almost 37,000 kroner in [government support](#) as its business model was disrupted.

The funeral home didn't actually struggle due to a lack of customers, but because the funerals it did arrange took on a new format.

"With the outbreak of the coronavirus, many customers gave up the ceremony," director Henrik Tveter said, adding that the ceremony represents 60 to 70 percent of the price of a [funeral](#).

In part this has been by choice to limit the spread of the disease, but also because of the limits on the number of participants imposed by authorities and some chapels being too small for social distancing.

In Alesund in the west of the Norway, Alfa Begravelsesbyra cut the working hours of its five employees and also had to ask for government aid after a 70 percent drop in revenue between March and May.

But owner Odd Sverre Oie, like his colleagues, believed things were returning to a more grim normal as society reopens.

"We know that, given the age pyramid, a certain number of people will die in Norway this year," he said.

"So we'll probably catch up in the autumn when the flu and other such diseases reappear."

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