**Office of Cemetery Oversight**

**Advisory Council On Cemetery Operations**

*Meeting Minutes*

*Thursday, March 27, 2025*

*9:30 AM*

In-Person Information:

**Meeting Location**: 100 S. Charles Street, Baltimore, MD (Virtual)

Virtual Sign-on Information:

**Sign on information:** Join with Google Meet- meet.google.com/ ean-zoxr-zgt

-Up to 250 participants

**Meeting ID:** https:// meet.google.com/ean-zoxr-zgt

Phone Numbers/

To call in: **Dial** **PIN**:

HOUSEKEEPING

COMAR 09.01.11.03, [http://](about:blank)[www.dsd.state.md.us/comar/comarhtml/09/09.01.11.03.htm](http://www.dsd.state.md.us/comar/comarhtml/09/09.01.11.03.htm)

.03 Public Attendance.

* + 1. The public is invited to attend and observe any open session of the unit within the Department.
    2. Except in instances when the unit expressly invites public testimony, questions, comments, or other forms of public participation, or when public participation is otherwise authorized by law, a member of the public attending an open session may not actively participate in the session.

1. Roll Call/Quorum Announced

**Advisory Council Members**

Yvonne Fisher

David Zinner

Erich March

Mike Bennett

Chris Palmer

Craig Huff

**Absent Advisory Council Members**

Ron Pearcey

Walt Tegeler

Bruce Hultquist

**Staff**

John Dove, Commissioner of Occupational and Professional Licensing

Deborah Rappazzo, OCO Executive Director

Matthew McKinney, Director of Government Affairs-Occupational and Professional Licensing

Matthew Venuitti, OCO Counsel

Kathy Jenkins-Simmons, Temporary Licensing Specialist

Dreama Anderson, OCO Investigator

Visitor

Glenn Easton, MDCCA

2. Meeting Called to Order by Executive Director 9:34 am

3. Approval of Today’s Agenda

Motion-Chris Palmer, Second-David Zinner, Vote-Unanimously Approved

4. Approval of October 24, 2024 – Minutes

Motion-Chris Palmer, Second-David Zinner, Vote-Unanimously Approved

5. Executive Director’s Report

a. Introduction-Executive Director Rappazzo welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**New Building** - Office has moved and is settling into 100 South Charles Street, Baltimore. The Office continues to move to paperless. Currently, the office is down to 10 boxes and one file cabinet to be scanned. There are only a few renewals that are paper, most are sent via email. Most payments are received online, with only a few manual deposits.

1. **Position Postings** – The Licensing Specialist and Financial Compliance positions will be posted within the next week. Leila Whitley retired 12/21/24 and Lucas Manes left 12/31/24. The link for job postings will be sent to Advisory Council members.
2. **New Chairperson** – Executive Director Rappazzo Spoke to Chair Porter and he nominated Consumer Member Fisher as his successor. Consumer Member Palmer nominated Consumer Member Zinner. Consumer Member Zinner nominated Consumer Member Fisher. Consumer Member Zinner supports Consumer Member Fisher based on her years on Council, experience of science and government background, and her passion for caring for abandoned cemeteries. Consumer Member Palmer seconded Fisher’s nomination. For-Profit Representative-Cremeterian March motioned for acceptance, Consumer Member Palmer second. Consumer Member Fisher was voted unanimously as Chairperson of the Office of Cemetery Oversight (OCO). Executive Director Rappazzo will escalate the information to the Commissioner’s Office.

6.Advisory Council Business **–** Currently there are openings for 2 Consumer Members and 1 Crematory Representative. Executive Director Rappazzo has recently received an email from a potential Crematory Representative, for which paperwork has been sent to that person.

7. Old Business

Everyone on Council has given an oral autobiography.

Council Member Zinner introduced a discussion of the contract Fee impact of increase effective July 1, 2025. The Executive Director explained that notifications were sent to all licenses via email and a newsletter. Both communications announced an increase from $15 to $30 per retail contract over $250, which could be retroactive based on the renewal period. Council Member Zinner remarked that the wording regarding previous contracts was not included in the bill. Council Member Fisher inquired about the impact on the Office budget. The Executive Director explained that the funds were being used to cover increased expenses for salaries and overhead. Executive Director Rappazzo further explained that previously, each month, it was stressful having to check the budget to ensure that expenses were being covered, without exceeding the Office’s budget. Council Member Fisher inquired if the fees would bring us to a level playing field. Executive Director Rappazzo confirmed that the increased fees would allow the unit to meet expenses, however it will take a few renewal periods. Council Member Zinner inquired whether imposing fees retroactively is fair. Executive Director Rappazzo explained that this is how previous contract fee increases have been implemented. Council Member March believes that is not fair, as it would cause businesses to have to go back to families. Council Member Zinner commented that it may have been unfair previously, therefore, perhaps it needs to be reviewed. Executive Director Rappazzo reported that most of the larger cemeteries have already paid for renewals. Council Member Bennett commented that it did impact businesses having to pay retroactively, but going forward would like to have more prior notice.

Visitor Glenn Easton, President of the Maryland Cemetery & Cremation Association (“MDCCA”) and the director of Garden of Remembrance, raised the retroactive issue a year ago with Executive Director Rappazzo on behalf of MDCCA who advised that it was difficult for a cemeteries, especially small cemeteries, to pay the increased fee retroactively. Executive Director Rappazzo confirmed that there had been a prior conversation between Visitor Easton and Mr. Nardy.

8. New Business

Currently there is new legislation coming regarding increased inspections for crematories regulated by the Office and the Board of Morticians and Funeral Directors. Council Member Zinner is interested in making sure that Office is not impacted in the same way. Council Member Zinner inquired if the Board of Morticians had offered to give all Mortician Board regulated crematories to the Office of Cemetery Oversight.

9. Investigator’s Report

Currently there are the following Opened Complaints (Prior Months and Current Month):

**Prior Complaints Opened:**

October - 77

January - 85

February - 87

March - 98

**New Complaints:**

November - 7

December - 6

January - 3

February - 3

March - 13

**Inspections**

January - 1

February - 13

March -9

One unlicensed pet cemetery has the majority of complaints. The owner of the cemetery is planning to develop one-third of the property. The Office is working through the process of determining whether the cemetery is required to be licensed. The Office is pursuing all its available authority. The owner is intent on moving forward with development.

Executive Director Rappazzo was asked where the Office’s authority end and where cemetery’s responsibilities begin and explained the complaint process. First, when the Office receives a complaint, the complaint is sent to the Responsible Party of the cemetery to review and investigate the allegations. Once the Office receives a response from the cemetery, the Office will conduct its own investigation into the merits. If the complaint has merit, the Office will attempt to mediate between the cemetery and the complainant. If the mediation is unsuccessful, the Office can pursue civil penalties or close the complaint. If the matter is egregious, the Office will take immediate action is taken. Typical complaints pertain to maintenance, contracts, and matters regarding heirship. However, heirship matters are beyond the Office’s jurisdiction and Complainants typically must pursue action in court. If a cemetery is violating the Office’s statute or regulation, then a meeting is required, followed by civil charges.

Visitor Easton made the point that only one cemetery had a large number of complaints. Council Member March remarked that many complaints sound high, but with 40,000 deaths a year in Maryland of which, cremations versus burials are 50/50, it is a small percentage. March continued highlighting that cemeteries maintain millions of graves and service 20,000 burials a year. Therefore, the number of complaints when compared to the number of services rendered is very small. Council Member Zinner commented that the last meeting minutes reflected 54 complaints are from one cemetery, for which Council Member Zinner has received copies of the complaints and added that it is less than 50 for the remainder of complaints. Executive Director Rappazzo explained that in the spring is when complaints increase. Council Member Bennett is impressed with how few complaints there are. Post holidays complaints increase due to weather and heightened emotions. Executive Director Rappazzo explained that most complaints are handled at the cemetery, before they reach our office. Executive Director Rappazzo also explained that there are many inquiries. Council Member March explained that cemeterians consider what they do to be on hallowed ground and sacredness of property. Executive Director Rappazzo explained that deathcare comes with emotions, for which there may be a disconnect between counselors and family members, in that family members are still grieving. However, Executive Director Rappazzo has great respect for the services that the cemeteries provide.

10. Financial Compliance Administrator’s Report\*

11. Licensing Specialist’s Report

New applications are going out and renewals are being processed with most of the applications and invoices are being sent via email.

12. Legislative Update

The Alkaline Hydrolysis regulations draft was submitted last week to the Secretary’s Office. The OCO continues to work with the Board of Morticians and Funeral Directors. Once the Secretary reviews and approves the regulations, there will be a 30-day public comment period. The final regulations should be ready by the June meeting.

As for the Natural Organic Reduction regulations, the OCO is working with the Board of Morticians and Funeral Directors to create regulations.

General Assembly Session Recap:

Currently, there have been 9 bills proposed that impact the OCO. The 2025 Legislative Session ends on April 7, 2025.

HB 535-Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries Fund, passed with 139 votes in favor. There is no budget, and the voluntary tax option was removed. However, the Governor has put funding in and hopefully a deposit of up to $250,000 will be deposited in the fund in the coming years. The Bill will allow work with groups through grants to fund maintenance. Council Member Zinner reported that the Bill was proposed by Maryland Cemetery Advocates with sponsors in both the House and Senate. The Bill must pass the Bys Ways and Means Committee that has made some changes but is still able to receive donations in the fund. HB 535 has a good chance of passing. There was opposition from the Chesapeake Bay Fund, but the Committee is scheduled to approach them after the session. Council Member Palmer inquired about the number of abandoned cemeteries in Maryland. Executive Director Rappazzo remarked that the OCO doesn’t have an exact number of these types of cemeteries. Most of them are discovered by drive byes and consumer inquiries. The Bill is another way that the OCO and its members can help. Although the OCO has no licensing jurisdiction, the Office still tries to help others. Council Member Palmer inquired about whether abandoned cemeteries are religious. Executive Director Rappazzo responded that many are family or former functioning cemeteries that are now abandoned.

Council Member Zinner made a request for a letter that explains the requirements for testimony by an Advisory Member, as his link permission request was not granted and is seeking clarity for the rules. Judiciary Rules are set by the Governor’s Regulatory Office, but I am willing to discuss them.

13. Public Comment

None.

New comments

Council Members would like to go to other cemeteries and burial goods businesses for meetings. Visitor Easton is willing to host Gardens of Remembrance in Clarksburg, Maryland and supply Kosher lunch. Executive Director Rappazzo is willing to consider doing so in May or June.

14. Adjournment

Council Member Palmer made the motion to adjourn, and it was seconded by Council Member Zinner. Meeting adjourned 10:58 am

Next meeting 4/24/25 Virtually for now.

\*The starred items will be deferred to a future 2025 meeting

\*\*\*A portion of this meeting may be closed pursuant to the General Provisions Article

Annotated Code of Maryland, §3-305(b)