

Austin sends bodies to Tucson tissue bank

Two local funeral homes assisting with donations in competitive tissue industry

By [Mary Ann Roser](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Thursday, June 29, 2006

More than a half-dozen times a month, a commercial jet leaves Austin for Tucson, Ariz., with a large rectangular box strapped to a wooden base in the cargo hold. One end is usually marked "head." Dry ice keeps the contents cool.

Someone is donating a body to science.



Deborah Cannon
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

All Faiths Funeral Services president, Joe F. Solansky, left, and funeral director Sheri Lewman demonstrate, with an empty container, how they secure a package to ship a body.

MOST POPULAR STORIES

[Man found dead in hotel pool; Austin police forum Tuesday](#)

[Hunting the wily TxTag](#)

[Health officials make little headway against "superbug"](#)

[Group criticizes Effexor maker for lack of warning](#)

[Freescale announces a breakthrough](#)

A van picks up the body in Tucson and takes it to LifeLegacy Foundation, where surgical staff members remove organs and tissues for shipment to doctors, universities and corporations that use them for education or research. LifeLegacy then cremates the remains and sends them back to Austin, usually within two weeks.

Medical and dental schools have long used cadavers for teaching students about human anatomy, but the nonprofit LifeLegacy Foundation offers an alternative: Donors or their families can designate body parts for specific research or education programs, or they can donate all the tissues and organs.

Created in 1997, LifeLegacy works with hospices and hospitals to find donors. About a year ago, it began enlisting funeral homes to help it meet a growing demand for tissue and organ donations. That outreach started in Texas, said Cynthia Parziale, LifeLegacy donor development manager.

LifeLegacy works with two to five funeral homes in each of the state's largest cities, including Austin's All Faiths Funeral Services and Austin-Peel & Son Funeral Home, Parziale said. The company has similar relationships with funeral homes in 10 to 12 other states, she said.

It will consider elderly donors and people who had cancer and other serious diseases, because no donated tissue is ever implanted in anyone.

Joe F. Solansky, president of All Faiths, said LifeLegacy donations have been popular with families who can't afford funeral and burial costs and with families who want to salve the loss of a loved one. LifeLegacy covers all costs of donation and cremation.

"I would think that a lot of people who are made aware of some of these options, they would elect to do it," he said.

LifeLegacy said people of all incomes donate.

"I don't think a person would ever choose that based on being indigent," Parziale said. "A lot of people who are ill choose to go this route. What they want to do is make a contribution back so their children and grandchildren don't get that same disease." All Faiths and Austin-Peel are sending more than dozen bodies a month to LifeLegacy, according to Solansky and Joel Evans, funeral director at Austin Peel. Marc Griesenbrock, director of business development at LifeLegacy, said that the average number of donations from Austin funeral homes in the past year is 6.7 bodies a month and that donations are rising. But he declined to give more details, citing competition and other concerns, including news media depictions of tissue donation.

Some newspaper articles have portrayed a virtually unregulated industry in which private companies make big profits using body parts supplied by tissue banks. A now-closed New Jersey tissue bank is accused of stealing body parts that were later implanted several of them in Austin patients.

The University of Texas Medical Branch closed its willed body program three years ago after learning that ashes from different bodies had been commingled. A supervisor was fired and placed under investigation, accused of selling body parts.

LifeLegacy has not been involved in any scandals, and little has been written about the organization. In December, it became the first nonprofit research-centered tissue bank to win accreditation from the American Association of Tissue Banks, meaning it voluntarily underwent a months-long review and inspection, tissue bank association CEO Bob Rigney said.

"We like to look at our accreditation as a good housekeeping seal of approval," he said. "It's some assurance they're working under appropriate standards."

Rigney said he was familiar with LifeLegacy but did not know about its work with funeral homes. But working with funeral homes makes sense, he said, because tissue donations are increasing nationally, and more people are dying outside hospitals.

Donations to LifeLegacy are up 10 percent to 12 percent over last year, Griesenbrock said, declining to release precise numbers. He said LifeLegacy receives 300 to 700 bodies a year.

John Aschenbrenner, chairman of the state's anatomical board, which regulates willied body programs at medical schools in Texas, said he had not heard of LifeLegacy and has no authority over tissue programs. Willied body programs have seen a slight decrease in donations recently, and he said he would be watching to see if LifeLegacy affects donations to Texas medical schools.

"That's the most valuable gift we can give a medical student, a human body," he said. "We can look at a computer, but there's nothing like looking at the diversity of a real human body. . . . We hope nothing impacts that very valuable gift in the future."

Families as well as people who agree to donate their bodies when they die are not paid by anyone; that would violate federal law.

At All Faiths, Solansky said some donor families can't afford cremation, much less a funeral, which averages \$6,500 in the United States, not including cemetery costs.

LifeLegacy pays the funeral home its normal fees for preparing the body, which does not involve embalming but does include storage, packing the body in two thick cardboard boxes and shipping with dry ice.

It also pays for ground transportation, Solansky and Evans said.

Solansky said his funeral home charges \$1,200-\$1,300 for those services; Austin-Peel's fees are \$1,299, Evans said.

LifeLegacy also covers plane fare and all costs of removing tissue and organs and cremation. It returns the cremated remains and provides a \$150 allowance toward an urn if the family wants one. Many decline, Solansky and Evans said.

"Most want to be scattered," Evans said.

Medical school programs don't help pay for urns, Aschenbrenner said, but cover most donation costs. In some cases, certain transportation or cremation costs might not be covered. "The family is usually out no more than \$200 to \$250," Aschenbrenner said.

He sees the potential for competition between willied body programs and LifeLegacy, but Griesenbrock doesn't, because the cadavers are used differently.

At LifeLegacy, a donor's tissue might be specified for a brain bank, say, if the person died of Alzheimer's disease, or for a medical device company if the person specifies an interest in surgical device development. Sometimes, all tissues and organs are donated.

"More and more educated people don't want to go through the normal procedure of having a funeral," said Texas Funeral Service Commission Chairman Harry Whittington.

Cremations have risen steeply in Texas, up from 7 percent of all deaths in 1989 to 20 percent in 2003.

Whittington thinks funeral and burial prices are a reason; cremation usually costs several thousand dollars less than a funeral. Nationally, 29 percent of those who die are cremated. In Travis County in 2003, nearly one-third, or 32 percent of all deaths, resulted in cremations, according to state data.

Evans and Solansky said they have been very satisfied with LifeLegacy.

Solansky told of a man at Hospice Austin's Christopher House who had no family and no money for a burial. A hospice nurse called All Faiths for help. An All Faiths staff member visited the man and told him about LifeLegacy. The man was grateful to be able to do a good turn and not be buried in a potter's field by the county, Solansky said. He died hours later.

"We helped that gentleman die easy," Solansky said. "He was contributing something to the world."

maroser@statesman.com; 445-3619