



EC LEG FEB 13 '23 PM 3:27

COUNTY OF ERIE

MARK C. POLONCARZ

COUNTY EXECUTIVE

February 13, 2023

Erie County Legislature
92 Franklin Street – Fourth Floor
Buffalo, New York 14202

Re: Temporary Reduction in Qualifications for Burial Assistance of Claimed Decedents During December 2022 Blizzard State of Emergency

Dear Honorable Members:

Please find the enclosed memorandum and resolution from the Department of Social Services seeking authorization to temporarily reduce the qualifications required for Burial Assistance of claimed decedents during the blizzard State of Emergency from December 23, 2022 to January 22, 2023. This proposed resolution authorizes the Department of Social Services to make payments to eligible individuals (families) to help defray the cost of burial.

Should your Honorable Body require further information, I encourage you to contact Commissioner Marie Cannon at the Department of Social Services. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark C. Poloncarz".

Mark C. Poloncarz, Esq.
Erie County Executive

MCP/mmk
Enclosure

cc: Commissioner of Social Services Marie Cannon

MEMORANDUM

To: Honorable Members of the Erie County Legislature
From: Erie County Department of Social Services
Re: Temporary Reduction in Qualifications for Burial Assistance of Claimed Decedents During December 2022 Blizzard State of Emergency
Date: February 13, 2023

SUMMARY

When a recipient of Public Assistance or other person dies leaving no funds or insurance sufficient to pay the cost of their burial and there are no relatives, friends, or personal representatives liable or willing to take responsibility for the burial expenses, such expense is the responsibility of the local district of Social Services that was responsible for furnishing those benefits. This responsibility extends to persons who had been receiving federal SSI payments and/or additional state payments at the time of their death.

Erie County has a maximum contracted rate of \$3,495 for unclaimed decedents or for claimed decedents of persons who had been receiving Public Assistance or SSI Benefits. However, no assistance is provided for claimed decedents of persons receiving other forms of income-based social services benefits (such as HEAP, SNAP, Medicaid, etc).

Due to the unprecedented number of deaths as a result of the December 2022 Blizzard, the Medical Examiner's Office and local hospitals cadaver storage space began filling up and there was a need for the deceased to be taken elsewhere. Many of the deceased were taken to the Erie County Emergency Operations Center where three cold storage trailers were parked. Funeral home directors and staff were challenged to retrieve decedents as quickly as possible from wherever they were. The conditions presented immediate and serious challenges. Many families were experiencing financial hardship and were unable to claim the body which resulted in some of the pick-ups from funeral parlors being delayed and further stressing morgue capacity.

The Erie County Executive's Office and the Department of Social Services worked together to assist families in need and help alleviate the back log of decedents. Assistance up to \$3,495 was extended to those that were receiving any form of social services benefits, as their poverty level was already determined through the benefit approval process.

For interested parties that were not receiving Public Assistance or SSI Benefits, the County required an application to determine if the person had readily accessible liquid resources to fund the funeral expense. If there were readily accessible liquid resources available to fund the funeral costs the applicant would be deemed ineligible for the benefit. This assistance was provided to decedents during the Erie County State of Emergency which began December 23, 2022 and ended on January 22, 2023.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

Funding for this temporary Burial Assistance has been allocated through the December 2022 Blizzard Fund (Fund 255).

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

To aid families in the County of Erie, who could demonstrate financial hardship, claim and bury loved ones who passed during the December 2023 Blizzard State of Emergency. These actions helped to alleviate the back log of decedents at the Erie County Medical Examiner’s Office and local hospitals. This aligns with the Department of Social Services goals to serve the community and families with dignity and respect in the most efficient, non-intrusive way while being fiscally prudent to the taxpayers.

CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE ACTION

These important services could not be provided.

STEPS FOLLOWING APPROVAL

The Department of Social Services will provide spreadsheets showing eligible decedents, eligibility information, and approved amount to the Comptroller’s Office for check processing.

A RESOLUTION SUBMITTED BY:

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Re: Temporary Reduction in Qualifications for Burial Assistance of Claimed Decedents
During December 2022 Blizzard State of Emergency

WHEREAS, the Department of Social Services is current responsible for burying unclaimed decedents

WHEREAS, the Department of Social Services also provides Burial Assistance for only claimed decedents who received Public Assistance or SSI Benefits; and

WHEREAS, Erie County experienced an unprecedented Blizzard in which a State of Emergency was declared from December 23, 2022 to January 22, 2023; and

WHEREAS, due to the unprecedented number of deaths as a result of the December 2022 Blizzard, the Medical Examiner's Office and local hospitals cadaver storage space began filling up and there was a need for the deceased to be taken elsewhere; and

WHEREAS, in an effort to alleviate this backlog, the Department of Social Services assisted families that lost loved ones during the State of Emergency who could show financial hardship but otherwise would not have qualified for Burial Assistance under the current program.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT

RESOLVED, the Erie County Legislature authorizes a temporary reduction of qualifications for Burial Assistance for claimed decedents during the December 2022 Blizzard State of Emergency to include decedents that receive any form of social services benefits; and be it further

RESOLVED, that authorization is hereby given for payments up to \$3,495 for burial costs be made for qualified individuals identified by the Department of Social Services whose deaths occurred between December 23, 2022 to January 22, 2023; and be it further

RESOLVED, that sufficient funding is available to make these payments within the December 2022 Blizzard Fund (Fund 255), Funds Center 120, Account 516020 – Professional Services, Contracts & Fees; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the Director of Budget and Management is hereby authorized to make any additional budget adjustment which may be required in order to match incurred expenses; and be it further

RESOLVED, that certified copies of this resolution shall be forwarded to the Erie County Executive's Office, the Comptroller's Office, the Department of Social Services and the Division of Budget & Management.