

Katelyn Estes  
Good Ground Great Beyond  
LD 584

My name is Katelyn Estes, Licensed Funeral Director with over 15 years in the funeral industry, and also a Member of the Board for Good Ground Great Beyond.

I am speaking today in Support of LD 584, An Act to Permit the Conduct of Open Air Cremation at Designated Sites in Maine.

I believe it's important to reexamine our relationship to death and dying and the ways we can improve on traditional funeral practices. There's a movement across the nation toward more meaningful ways of mourning the departed and with it more nature based practices. I feel Maine can be a leader to begin offering new methods of disposition for our dead, especially those that add greater options for those in mourning and are beneficial to Maine's ecosystem.

There is great value and benefit of offering the option of Open Air cremation to the people of Maine. According to the Cremation Association of North America the US cremation rate has grown over 1% between 2020 and 2021. By 2025, the US cremation rate is projected to reach 64.1%. Cremation is by far the most popular method of disposition in Maine with a current rate of 80.2%. I believe there is a percentage of those desiring modern cremation that would choose open air cremation if it was an option.

The reason cremation is so popular in Maine is clear to me. Maine people are typically frugal, simple, and practical. For those who prefer traditional funerals, we have those options. For others, however, there is a need for greater personal involvement, more spiritually affirming practices, and environmentally friendly options. For me, and many others, the appeal of Open Air Cremation is less about the actual cremation process, and more about a sacred, deeply moving ceremony. Gathering in nature, being present for the personal experience of witnessing the open air cremation, participating in placing fragrant branches upon a loved one, sharing stories and songs, hugging each other, and saying goodbye together. It's a powerful experience that facilitates healing, healthy grieving, and symbolizes releasing someone from this life to the next.

As both a Funeral Director and in my private life, I have conducted surveys, made personal observations, and talked to clients and nonclients alike to determine what people like and dislike about current funeral practices. The feedback is overwhelming. People are ready for new options, and ways to better facilitate the grieving process. Open air cremation is a niche, yet it's a niche worth pursuing for the growing number of people who are interested in remaining connected to nature in their disposition options. Speaking as a professional, I see no negative impact this would place on funeral directors or their practices. The environmental impact is minimal and could actually benefit Maine's forests and forestry industry while relying less on fossil fuels. There is no need to overhaul current legislation. The value to those who choose open air cremation and the participants of the ceremony would be immeasurable.

I believe this is only the beginning of what Maine can do to move towards more sustainable options and ceremonies that offer something meaningful to those whose spiritual connection and practice exists in settings outside the traditional funeral home or church.

My goal here is to encourage you to consider passing LD 584 in support of the people of Maine who desire an option that's different, powerful, and beautiful. Open Air Cremation may not be for everyone, but it is certainly worth adding to traditional funeral and direct cremation options.

Thank you for your time and consideration