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March 1, 2024

The Honorable Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk, Chair
Health and Government Operations Committee
Maryland General Assembly
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: HB 1168 / SB 1028 – The Green Death Care Options Act - FAV

Dear Chair Peña-Melnyk,

I am writing to register our enthusiastic support for HB 1168 / SB 1028, The Green Death Care Options Act – legislation that would authorize both Natural Organic Reduction and Alkaline Hydrolysis – commonly called “human composting” and “water cremation.”

As a licensed mortician and funeral director in Maryland with about decade of experience serving families, the capacity to say “Yes” to families is a big part of my passion for serving in death care. I routinely see one type of family get left out of the equation with death care options - these are the “green” families. The families who attempt to live sustainable lives by driving electric vehicles or putting solar panels on their houses; those who vigorously recycle and who try to reduce their personal carbon footprint. These same families are forced to choose between the only two options currently legal at death – fire cremation and burial. It’s time to offer Marylanders what people in so many other states already have access to: Natural Organic Reduction and Alkaline Hydrolysis.

The only “green” option that exists today in Maryland is called natural burial – which means the body is not embalmed and is placed in a casket of natural material, or even just shrouded, and buried directly into the grave without a concrete liner or vault. However, natural burial is only available in a handful of cemeteries across the entire state. Cemetery plots are often costly and there are simply many families who do not wish to take up space in the land for an eternity. They want other options.

The Green Death Care Options Act is not about taking away traditional choices with funeral service, it is truly about expanding options to families who want them. There are safe alternatives to traditional death care available right now and Marylanders should have access to them. Water cremation, also known as Alkaline Hydrolysis, is legal in more than 20 states, and yet, for Maryland families who want this cleaner form of cremation that produces no emissions and burns no fossil fuels, they must transport their bodies down to North Carolina to get it.

Additionally, Natural Organic Reduction (NOR), commonly called “human composting” allows for families to transform their bodies gently and naturally into nutrient rich soil – this process is now legal in New York, Vermont, Washington, Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, and soon perhaps in Delaware. At least 13 other states are considering NOR bills this session. Recompose, a NOR operator in Washington state, reports that 30% of their business comes from out of state. And the National Funeral Directors Association

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reports that over 60% of families are interested in greener funeral options. The NFDA also estimates that by 2040, 75% of people who die in Maryland will choose fire cremation, which will continue to only increase CO2 emissions unless other options become available. The time to act is now.

We can offer safe, beautiful, dignified greener funeral options that are kinder to our planet right now – options that help address Maryland’s urgent climate change goals. These new funeral alternatives are based on decades of solid science and research as well as the many current operators offering these services in other states. Families who choose NOR or water cremation will still be able to participate in the death care of their loved one – whether that means helping with body care, or being present as their loved ones are laid to rest. They will still be able to have traditional visitations and funerals when selecting Natural Organic Reduction or Alkaline Hydrolysis as their disposition method.

There is a movement happening all over the country – Marylanders are paying attention and they want access to all the options – not just fire cremation and burial. There is no reason to continue to send Marylanders out of state to access these safe proven effective alternatives.

I urge to you to vote favorably on The Green Death Care Act. Because families want it. Because it is safe. Because there are decades of research behind it. Because it is beautiful. Because it can lower CO2 emissions. Because it is dignified. And it puts Maryland families in the driver seat to choose what they want. Because Maryland families want to honor the way they live – they do not want their last act on this earth to be one that pollutes it.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the committee’s deliberation. We urge each member of the committee to vote green on HB 1168 / SB 1028. Say “Yes” to Maryland families who need green funeral options.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lily Buerkle', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lily Buerkle

Green Legacy, Co-Founder