



HB869 – Department of the Environment - Study on Deathcare and Funeral Practices

**Testimony before
House Health and Government Operations Committee**

March 7, 2023

Position: Favorable

Dear Health and Government Operations Members,

My name is Ruth Auerbach, and I represent the 750+ members of Indivisible Howard County. Indivisible Howard County is an active member of the Maryland Legislative Coalition (with 30,000+ members). We are providing written testimony today to **support HB869**, to study the environmental and public health impacts of deathcare and funeral practices in the state. We are grateful for the leadership of Delegate Boyce for sponsoring this critical legislation.

For many people, making decisions for one's self and one's loved ones about funerals and the deceased body can be extremely stressful and expensive. One difficulty can be aligning one's choices with one's values. The National Funeral Directors Association reports that more than half of Americans are seeking greener funerals. Casket burials and cremation account for 94% of funerals in America, but are the worst choices for the environment. In a typical year, casket burials in the United States use 64,000 tons of steel and 1.6 million tons of concrete, according to the non-profit Green Burial Council. Additionally, each body cremated releases the same amount of greenhouse gases as driving 500 miles. Other end-of-life options, such as human composting, natural burial, and water cremation, are believed to have much less, or even a slightly positive, environmental impact.¹

When I made these decisions for my loved ones, I helped convince my family to select a pine casket, which is a tradition of my family's religion and which could be better for the environment. However, decades earlier, the deceased family members decades chose burials in concrete lined cemetery plots which met the legal requirements of the Commonwealth of Virginia. For myself, I am considering more environmental options.

This bill directs the Maryland Department of the Environment to conduct a study of the environmental and public health impacts of deathcare and funeral practices. Currently, many of the options that are better for the environment are only legal in certain states. The results of this study would help Maryland legislators decide if there are practices that should be legalized in Maryland that would allow people to make choices for the end-of-life that they prefer and that are better for the environment.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation. **We respectfully urge a favorable report on this bill.**

Ruth Auerbach, Ph.D.
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¹ Michael J. Coren, "Comparing green funeral options, from composting to natural burial to water cremation", *The Washington Post*. January 31, 2023.