

Only a handful of funeral directors remain in northwestern Ontario, raising concerns on future losses and burnout

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In recent months, Northridge Funeral Home Ltd has seen their workload triple, leading to the last remaining funeral home directors in northwestern Ontario to sound the alarm to provincial leaders and voice concerns to their licensing body.

Jason Lilley, founder and funeral director at Northridge Funeral Home, said they typically served around 100 families a year.

"And now we are tripling that," he said.

As one of the few remaining funeral directors in the district, many concerns are raised as to the future of the funeral service industry in northwestern Ontario. Northridge currently has 13 on-staff, most who work on a part-time basis, but only one licensed funeral director in charge of the establishment.

"And that's me, and that's the problem," said Lilley. "If something happens to me, then that's the end of funeral services in the Rainy River District."

Lilley said that besides him, there is currently one funeral home director at the Dryden Community Funeral Home, and two others at the two locations in Kenora—Brown Funeral Home and Alcock Funeral Home. All which require a seven-hour, round-trip drive from the Rainy River District.

"Less than 10 years ago, this district was served by no less than six funeral directors. And now we have one funeral director actively working—that's me. So we've gone from six to one actively," Lilley said.

"That means there's no holidays. You know, that means that if somebody gets sick, the funeral home has to shut down because you can't operate without a licensed director."

Lilley hasn't taken a day off since 2006 when he first opened Northridge.

"Northwestern Ontario is

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- Jason Lilley

in a very concerning situation," he said. "If one of those funeral directors goes down, then all of Dryden could have to come here, or all of the Rainy River District could have to go to Dryden, or down to Thunder Bay."

John-Bryan Gardiner, a fourth generation funeral director at Everest of Thunder Bay, reached out to members of parliament on behalf of northwestern Ontario indicating that there is an urgent need for local funeral director training.

"We're really worried about that. And we have reached out to our members of parliament, and also our licensing body to voice our concerns that Northwestern Ontario needs help to get people into positions," Lilley said.

Northridge's recent increase in workload comes in multiple parts, Lilley said, mentioning both the closure of Green Funeral Home located in Fort Frances and the increasing death rates.

He was officially made aware of the closure of Green Funeral Home located in Fort Frances last November through the press release that indicated the funeral home was closing due to staff shortages. However, during early July that year, Lilley said he felt like something was going on because families from the far east end of the Rainy River District started contacting his funeral home.

Lilley said they were sad-



Northridge Funeral Home near Emo is the last remaining facility of its kind in the Rainy River District. The shortage of licensed Funeral Directors in northwestern Ontario has those in the industry concerned. - Facebook photo

dened by the news as they had "good harmony" with Green Funeral Home and their services often overlapped.

He said that Northridge is working hard to honor pre-arranged funerals that were arranged with other funeral homes.

"I think families need to be aware that we are here, we will do our best to serve them. With the volume that we're seeing, we will endeavor to make sure that everybody is served at their time of need," he said.

While Lilley and his team at Northridge are up for the task, he noted that it isn't an easy one. Northridge now provides funeral services for a substantial area on their own. Rainy River may not be the largest population-wise; however, geographically, many communities are dispersed.

"Covering from Rainy River to Nestor falls to the other side of Atikokan. And also, our Indigenous communities that many of them are off

the Highway 11, to distanced areas," he said. "It certainly started spreading us very thin."

Death rates have been increasing in the Rainy River District, he added. And where Northridge and Green Funeral Home once shared the responsibility of partnering with police investigations for unexpected deaths and looking after "coroner removals," Northridge now carries the weight of responsibility alone.

"We're seeing a lot of youth," Lilley said, adding that he has seen a tremendous increase in opioid-related deaths, causing another source of strain for families when the closest location for post-mortem examination is in Toronto. "[This] delays things by a week, maybe two weeks, for the families that we're serving, which just puts undue stress on those families. And for us to do the logistics of that."

The pathology department in Kenora closed down as

of September 1, 2022, he said. Those requiring autopsies had to be transferred to Toronto, adding the burden of coordinating logistics with airlines and distant funeral homes to Northridge's daily operations.

"So now all of northwest Ontario, including for the most part Thunder Bay, all post mortems are going to Toronto. It's not unusual to see 30 people leaving the entire Northwestern Ontario every month to go to Toronto."

Finding enough staff is an issue not only for funeral homes but also for many other industries in the northwest, Lilley said. However, unlike other industries, funeral services provide support to families when they are at complete loss.

"And the reason for some of that shortfall is that it's an industry that's not for everyone. You have to have a certain vocation that you're up to this task—the grieving part of it, the long hours, be-

ing on-call 24 hours a day," Lilley said.

"That takes its toll, and then there's also the financial remuneration to those employees, you know, we only have so much to work with. So many times people aren't going into the field, and they're going into other industries where there's better benefits, there's better pay, there's better hours, and so far, we've seen that."

Most of the staff members from Green Funeral Home retired after its closure, Lilley said, except for one staff member who has now joined Northridge and will soon take the funeral director class at Humber College.

The new addition to Northridge is Bryce Kabatay, who Lilley described as the district's "silver lining."

"We're hoping that he's going to come through and finish things and be able to work with us and the community," Lilley said.

Park gets cash for extensive upgrades

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but at the end of the day, it's about families and it's about communities. It's why we invested in the Rec Centre, it's why we invested along the riverside, it's why we invested along the riverside, it's a destination for other people to come and visit but for us, day in and day out, season in and season out, to explore and enjoy the things that we have in our communities."

Rickford then announced that the Town of Fort Frances had received \$499,000 to go towards both the revitalization and upgrade of the Legion Park and the final installation of the proposed splash pad. Rickford noted that in addition to the splash pad, the money would also go towards installing a new playground, improved lighting and installing accessible walkways and washroom facilities to ensure people of all ages and ability would be able to enjoy the park and everything it will have to offer.

"It's one of the criteria for me approving these projects, that they are accessible and, when and where possible, they have washrooms," he explained.

"The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund is going to cover 74.9 percent of this project. We understand the duress of some of the community's resources for things like recreational infrastructure, so 75 percent of the costs made sense for the town to go ahead with this. We're proud to support recreational infrastructure that makes life fun and exciting for all of our families and our little kids."

The town's operations and facilities manager Travis Rob said the goal is to have the splash pad installed and operational by late summer of 2023, though that will rely on the availability of materials and other necessary upgrades that need to be planned and executed at the park.

"We're going to start working on the other components of this, the park rehabilitation," Rob explained.

"We're going to start looking at design work for play structures, the other components of the overall project. We do still have some fundraising we need to do to make up the remaining 25 percent that will fill out the whole project, so we're still working on that and getting ready for



MPP Greg Rickford, far right, made a special stop at Legion Park on Tuesday to announce an injection of nearly \$500,000, to overhaul the green space. It will be the home of Fort Frances' new splash park, along with playground, accessible walkways, parking and washroom facilities. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund grant represents nearly 75 per cent of the total funds needed for the project. - Ken Kellar photo

hopefully late March, early April, start to procure materials and goods so we can be ready to start construction once the frost is out of the ground. The hope is we'll be ready to open late this summer."

Rob said other improvements to the park and immediate area include running water and sewer services in to the splash pad and new washrooms, as well as some roadwork to install a new crossing and road reconstruction.

"There's lots going on in the background to getting ready for construction start," Rob said.

Members of the splash pad committee were on hand for Rickford's announcement, and they noted the announcement put them one step closer to realizing their goal, with a goalpost currently set at March 31st to have realized all the necessary funding.

"The Make a Big Splash Committee wants to thank Minister of Indigenous Affairs and Northern Development, the Honorable Greg Rickford for the support

shown today to our project," the committee chair Becky Andrusco said in a release.

"The funding from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund is a significant and much needed boost in overall fund raising for the splash pad which will be part of the Legion Park Rehabilitation Project."

For his part, Fort Frances mayor Andrew Hallikas thanked Rickford for his penchant to show up for the town and district when it came to significant funding announcements and representing the region on a provincial level.

"Minister Rickford can always be counted on to visit his constituents on a regular basis, and he always makes himself available for discussion and consultation," Hallikas said.

"I want to say how fortunate we are to be represented in government by such a conscientious minister who always fights for his constituents."

Cows are home, with calving drawing near

I moved my cows home now, and we are getting close to calving time. I am shocked to see how quickly they are changing now and showing the official signs of popping out a baby. Though I think the cattle are in a much better place near the bush with plenty of shelter, we have the windbreaks all situated with straw for bedding. If the weather stays like this, they will have no complaints at all. Neither will I. But there is always the worry of a cow that is very heavy in calf now getting too far over on her side and not being able to get back up. That is a worry almost any time of the year but more of a concern now. The yard is uneven but I do my best to try to keep them away from the worst areas but usually the worst spots aren't the concern - it is a little dip of even 4 to 6 inches that can cause you some grief! You have to remind yourself constantly that you can't be with them all the time! My official due date is the 16th but usually something sneaks in before that, just to get you going. I worked on getting my calving book ready and made some notes on some the cow breeding dates that I had noted. I did forget to get my tag order in, but I do have enough to get started. Just a quick note to others - if you are looking to purchase Rainy River Raised Tags you can do that through Aaron at Emo Feed. There are many options for you with tags these days, you can add your farm name, management #, RFID #, and of course the great Rainy River Raised logo!

I was in Winnipeg last week attending the Manitoba Beef Producers AGM. They were concerned about attendance being this was first



MOO'S FROM THE HERD
KIM JO BLISS



time back in person. Personally, I think the Beef Farmer's of Ontario host a much better meeting but I could be biased. As always there are a few people that tend to dominate the meeting with some negative comments, but we all have those! I met a few interesting producers and had some good conversations. Most of these guys consider themselves ranchers not farmers. And I found it funny that one old timer who was born and raised in Manitoba told me that everyone in the room with a cowboy hat was an import from Alberta that thought they would come to Manitoba and show them up! As I was driving home I was thinking that I should belong to the Manitoba Beef Producers because it was a much quicker, easier trip that going to Guelph!

This Friday our local 4-H Association is hosting their annual Awards Night. It has been moved up a month so it may catch a few people off guard. Our Leaders attended the Flint House last week for their AGM. A big thank you to the Flint House for accommodating us and serving us a great meal! It is nice that we were able to get out and support one of our long standing steer buyers!

Wishing everyone a great week and I hope you get a chance to get outside and enjoy some of this great weather!