

Survivors must dig graves for their dead

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HOCKINGPORT, Ohio -- Jesse Hayes' family, already overcome by grief after he died in a house fire last month, quickly had to come to grips with another unthinkable reality.

With no money for a funeral, they would have to bury him themselves.

And so the day before Hayes' graveside service Oct. 15, his cousin and a handful of volunteers gathered with their shovels at Stewart Cemetery, a quiet spot in the woods not far from the Ohio River in southern Ohio.

They spent four hours digging with the shovels before finally being forced to bring in a backhoe when they hit rock about 3 feet down.

After a brief graveside service the next day, the family went to the nearby Lions Club for a meal provided by friends while the volunteers returned to cover the casket with dirt, finishing the grim task.

Hayes, 26, died after being overcome by smoke in an early-morning fire in the Parkersburg, W.Va., home he shared with his girlfriend, Amanda McClain, 21, and her 11-month-old son, Connor. Hayes and the infant were found just inside the door of the small frame home; McClain never made it out of the bedroom.

Firefighters said Hayes' hands were covered with blisters, likely from when he tried to open the door to escape the deadly heat and smoke.

"He died trying to save a baby. He died a hero, and he didn't even get a funeral," said Lisa Roberts, a cousin whose husband, Kenny, helped dig the grave.

"What has it come to when we can't even afford to bury our dead?" Mrs. Roberts asked. "Nobody should have to go through this."

Hayes' grave has no headstone. That will come later, when and if money is available.

The state once provided assistance for indigent funerals, but the aid was eliminated a few years ago and not restored in this year's budget. The burden had fallen to counties, townships, churches and community groups to bury the dead when money is short. But many of those sources are running dry, too.

"Now, what's started happening is people are digging their own graves to make it more affordable it's the result of a long cycle of picking away at programs and cutting benefits, and because the economy is bad, other resources that may have been available before just aren't anymore," said Jack Frech, director of the Athens County Department of Job and Family Services.

The problem of people unable to pay for burials, coupled with bodies that go unclaimed by family members, was discussed last week at a meeting of the Ohio State Coroners Association.

"We've had to ask the funeral homes to help out indigent families that don't have any money," said Dr. David Applegate, Union County coroner and president of the association. He said churches, community groups and veterans associations are chipping in.

"I don't think the government has to help everybody. I am happy to see there are other ways to do this," Applegate said. "We've warned coroners that they may see more of it and asked them to be helpful and become part of the solution."

Lisa Roberts said the poor have been burying their own for years.

"It's not new," she said. "It's just become acceptable."

She said a friend from nearby Meigs County had no money when her teenage son drowned a few years ago. After a church service, the mother, who was widowed, her daughters and their boyfriends loaded the inexpensive casket onto the back of a truck and drove to a cemetery two counties away. The teen would be buried in his mother's plot, next to his father.

They dug for hours, hit rock and had to return with a rented jackhammer.

"They finally got the casket down in there and start filling it with these big rocks. There was this big crack and (the mother) started screaming,"

Roberts said.

"The casket had caved in."

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