



What's New in Shipping Cremated Remains?

by Barbara Kemmis

General (OIG) contacted CANA. He was researching strategies to address the unidentified and misdelivered boxes of cremated remains in the possession of the United States Postal Service (USPS). After a preliminary conversation, I understood that there was a problem, but with the Annual Symposium looming in February, we agreed to continue the conversation in March 2020. Understandably, that delay lasted three years beyond the initial three-week postponement.

In early 2023, different staff at the OIG launched an audit of the US postal service's handling of cremated remains. As part of their work, they contacted CANA for recommendations from CANA members who ship a high volume of cremated remains. Not only were cremation professionals interviewed, they were also shadowed as they prepared cremated remains for mailing. The OIG Audit Report 23-018-R23 was published in July 2023 with some interesting findings and recommendations. The full report is available for download [here](#).

The report is very long and takes a lot of time to read, but the main takeaway is that the post office will focus on training mail handlers, clerks, carriers, and other staff on existing procedures without adopting recommendations to create new procedures.

The United States Postal Service remains the only legal carrier for mailing human cremated remains. The OIG's audit report provides useful insight into the internal workings and priorities of the USPS. Following is my summary of the report and CANA's take on how this may impact cremation operations.

FINDING #1

NONCOMPLIANCE WITH CREMATED REMAINS ACCEPTANCE PROCEDURES

The auditors interviewed postal workers and customers and reported finding inconsistencies in generating the Cremated Remains mailing label and affixing that label in such a way as to cover other bar codes on the box. Additionally, the interviews also indicated that the Orange Cremated Remains label was not consistently affixed on all six sides of the shipping box.

OIG Recommendation #1 We recommend the Vice President Retail and Post Office Operations, develop and implement a process for reoccurring communication of Cremated Remains acceptance procedures to retail clerks nationwide.

USPS Management disagreed with this Finding because the interview results were not statistically significant to indicate the scope of the problem. However, Management accepted the Recommendation, issuing the report and emphasizing the existing guidelines in staff training will address the proper handling of cremated remains.

CANA'S TAKEAWAY

CANA includes the USPS guidelines for shipping cremated remains in the Crematory Operations Certification Program (CANA COCP™), and CANA members generally have a high level of knowledge and understanding of these guidelines. Despite this, operators encounter delivery delays and supply shortages of Cremated Remains Kits. This shortage may result in staff using fewer than the required six orange labels in order to stretch supplies or substituting subpar boxes or packing materials. Ensuring your business has a small supply of USPS kits on hand – and reaching out to a fellow local business when the need is urgent – can help prevent the results discussed in Finding #2.

FINDING #2

OPPORTUNITIES EXIST TO IMPROVE CREMATED REMAINS ACCEPTANCE

PROCEDURES

The auditors described the risk of damage to packages containing cremated remains by the machines that process mail. Any damage can prevent recovering the contents and identifying the sender or recipient. That's why, as of February 27, 2023, the OIG identified 452 sets of undeliverable or unidentifiable cremated remains in their Mail Recovery Center.

OIG Recommendation #2 We recommend the Vice President Retail and Post Office Operations, develop and implement guidance requiring retail clerks to verify cremated remains are prepared and packaged in accordance with Postal Service policy.

OIG Recommendation #3 We recommend the Vice President Retail and Post Office Operations, update the Cremated Remains acceptance procedures requiring retail clerks to place Cremated Remains packages in individual Priority Mail Express sacks at acceptance.

USPS Management partially accepted this Finding again due to lack of statistically significant data, but supported Recommendation #2 with plans for staff communication and training. However, they rejected Recommendation #3 since the proper packaging and handling should prevent damage where additional handling and separation could increase the potential for delay and damage.

CANA'S TAKEAWAY

There are some cremation providers who remain skeptical about or refuse to use the labels and/or cremation kits. They express concern that the labeled packages will be stolen. However, the OIG audit report describes in detail how labeled packages are processed by hand in order to limit risk of damage. With the high risk of damage during electronic sorting, CANA's recommendation to use the USPS labels and packing materials is now backed up by facts – so use them!

Also, 452 undelivered and unidentified sets of remains is shocking. In my conversations with the OIG, they described their storage facility in Atlanta with shelves containing these boxes. I answered a variety of questions to help them determine if these were human or animal remains. It looks like the USPS has the same challenge that many funeral homes have. If you have instances of lost cremated remains please consider working with the USPS to get those packages delivered.

FINDING #3

CREMATED REMAINS NOT MONITORED IN POSTAL FACILITIES

This was a technical finding related to the USPS processes for tracking packages and minimizing delays in delivery.

OIG Recommendation #4 We recommend the Vice President Processing and Distribution, reiterate the procedures for monitoring Cremated Remains and develop a process for validating that In-Plant personnel review the Informed Visibility report daily for delayed Cremated Remains packages in accordance with policy.

Management rejected this finding and the related recommendation but plans to investigate to find a more effective process for monitoring delays.

CANA'S TAKEAWAY

I found this part of the report surprising: “From October 1, 2020, through September 30, 2022, the Postal Service reported 45,765 (14.6 percent) delayed Cremated Remains packages, averaging 1.4 days late.” You may not react as I did, because it may validate your experiences, but read the report for a detailed explanation.

This is also the first time I have seen data on how many cremated remains are shipped. Using the data references above, during the same time period there were roughly four million cremations, meaning that approximately 313,500 cremated remains were shipped via USPS, representing almost 8% of the total cremations over those two years.

FINDING #4

OPPORTUNITIES EXIST TO ENHANCE CREMATED REMAINS PACKAGING REQUIREMENTS

This Finding focused on shippers that use their own packaging and the problems this generated. This excerpt from the report sums it up well: “When Cremated Remains kit boxes are not readily available and take an extended period to reach customers after they place an order, customers are more likely to use their own packaging supplies.”

OIG Recommendation #5 We recommend the Vice President Business Solutions, evaluate the feasibility of requiring customers to use the Cremated Remains kit boxes when shipping cremated remains and revise policy as appropriate.

OIG Recommendation #6 We recommend the Vice President Business Solutions, develop a plan to ensure Cremated Remains kit boxes are readily available to customers.

Management partially accepted Finding #4 but rejected Recommendation #5 since Publication 139 (pdf download) properly describes how cremated remains should be shipped. However, they accepted Recommendation #6 to make their shipping supplies more accessible to ensure ease of compliance.

CANA'S TAKEAWAY

This is yet another opportunity for CANA members to share their expertise with the families they serve and pass along information about shipping or even maintain a supply of USPS cremated remains kits to keep on hand. It takes three weeks, on average, for the USPS to fulfill a request for Cremation Kits, so plan accordingly.

DIY – CONSUMER SHIPPING OF CREMATED REMAINS

In the US, the only way to ship human cremated remains (aka cremains or ashes) is by the US Postal Service, whether you are a funeral professional or a member of the public. If you are a consumer reading this article, you can ship cremated remains to share ashes among family members or send to a company to use when making keepsakes. The number one consideration for you is to use the Cremated Remains package freely available from the USPS. Otherwise you must be sure to label and pack the box securely. You can find details on preparing your shipment here, and you can always reach out to your cremation provider, or any local funeral provider, for assistance in selecting keepsakes and arranging for shipment.


If you have experienced the mis-delivery or loss of shipped cremated remains, you may have options and should contact the USPS directly.

PET CREMATED REMAINS

When my cat died last year, her cremated remains were sent to me via UPS (that's the United Parcel Service, not the USPS). The cremation was conducted by a CANA member, so I reached out to find out why they used UPS rather than the USPS. Fearing the worst, I learned instead that UPS was conducting a trial-run of shipping animal cremated remains. Sure enough, only human remains, not pet, are still prohibited for shipping by UPS.

INTERNATIONAL

When shipping cremated remains internationally, be cautious. The United States is one of very few countries with a postal service that handles packages. Most countries outsource parcel service to other providers such as DHL, FedEx, UPS, etc. that have policies prohibiting shipment of cremated remains.

Additionally, when shipping internationally, you must get permission from the consulate to do so since each country will have their own rules about the proper handling of human remains. A number of consulates closed during the pandemic and many have yet to reopen. Shipping to countries experiencing wars and other instability is increasingly difficult. CANA highly recommends that you consult with a shipping company that has experience and resources to help you. You can learn more about those options here. 

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