

## PART 2: DEATH DOULAS

# Who Is Your Community's Deathcare Resource?

*It should be you! Increase community trust, raise firm visibility and create new revenue streams.*

BY MATILDA GARRIDO



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Death doulas – or end-of-life doulas, as they are sometimes referred to – are becoming more commonly used to help with advance life planning. As our society ages and more and more adult children witness their parents' last days, there is increasing momentum toward being more intentional about end-of-life choices.

You only have to speak to a couple of people who have cleared out their parents' homes, dealt with the fallout of a loved one passing intestate or had to make disposition choices for others (with no idea of the deceased's preferences) to understand that planning and curating the end-of-life experience is taking on increased urgency. Of course, as funeral directors, you have always been familiar with the benefits of planning and preneed arrangements.

Death doulas, whose practices advocate and support this kind of decision-making (and similar end-of-life choices), can represent a powerful alliance for you and offer exposure to an expanded base of potential families to serve.

### **Who Are Death Doulas? Why Do People Hire Them?**

More and more individuals are training as death doulas – people who companion and support both those approaching the end of life and the healthy who want to proactively face their mortality.

Gabrielle Elise “Gabby” Jimenez, a hospice nurse and practicing end-of-life doula who writes and teaches under the banner, “The Hospice Heart,” said, “I like to think of my role as a doula as being a choreographer of someone's last dance, helping them design their last few months, weeks, days and hours... sometimes even years, as there is no specific start date to bring a doula in.”

Doulas do not provide medical support or traditional psychotherapy. Instead, they serve as neutral sounding boards and sources of emotional and spiritual support for their clients. They can also assist with

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practical tasks, such as helping with senior moves, putting together meal trains and referring their clients to such outside providers as attorneys, home healthcare agencies and – yes – funeral directors.

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Help with filling out advance directives, creating legacy projects, planning final days and hours with a vigil plan – those searching out end-of-life doulas don’t want to leave these choices and decisions to the last minute or to those who survive them. Thus, the doula client base represents a population that funeral directors are uniquely positioned to support.

By affiliating with death doulas, directors can tap into a group of individuals that wants and needs help and guidance in making choices for their funerals and final dispositions. Stressed Jimenez: “Some people utilize the skills of a doula to specifically help prepare an end-of-life plan for them, which is designed according to their wishes. People are questioning their mortality more now than ever before, which leaves many people wondering what they will want when it is their time to die.”

### **Mutually Beneficial Affiliation**

Since many who hire death doulas wish to include funeral planning in their work agreements, doulas are very open to the idea of working with funeral directors. Angela Shook, a death doula whose firm, Dragonfly End-of-Life Services, serves those living in Michigan (and all over the country via Zoom), said, “As a death doula, I try to nurture relationships with the funeral homes and directors in my community. Often, I am asked by my clients to help with final arrangements, and having trusted rela-

tionships with funeral directors helps me serve my clients better.”

Being able to refer to and work with funeral directors increases a doula’s value. It also offers an opportunity to fully support clients who wish for a home funeral in states that mandate the involvement of a funeral director.

Said Shook: “Although I can educate the dying and their loved ones about the option for a home funeral and how to care for a body after death, I do not perform those duties myself. Working collaboratively with a funeral director on home funerals provides further options for our mutual clients and ensures that all parties comply within their own scope of practice.”

Partnerships can extend beyond funeral planning as well. As most people find a funeral director through word of mouth, a family with a good experience working with a death doula/funeral director team is highly likely to spread the word since one main goal of working with a death doula is to make the end-of-life experience into something more positive.

Funeral directors are also likely to know families that could benefit from a death doula, especially among those that have already engaged in some level of planning. Being able to provide these referrals helps frame the community funeral director as supportive of the quality of the entire end-of-life experience, not just the actual funeral.

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### **Finding Death Doulas in Your Community**

A wonderful place to locate death doulas serving your area is the National End of Life Doula Alliance ([nedalliance.org](http://nedalliance.org)). It offers a state-by-state directory, and the website is chock-full of information about death doulas and their services. Also provided is a guide for evaluating a doula’s training.

Since there is no state or federal licensure/certification for death doulas, where a doula has trained will give you an idea of the depth and breadth of their knowledge. Since training programs differ significantly – some are eight weeks long, others just a weekend – this is an important way for you to evaluate a doula’s credentials.

Once you’ve identified candidates in your area, consider meeting with them at your funeral home so

you can show them your facilities and discuss ways to collaborate. An excellent way to do this is to host a doula information session for your community, inviting local practitioners to present a program on the benefits of working with a doula. This not only brings people through your door but offers a way for doulas to reach out personally to those who might be interested in learning more about their services and the ways you can work together to create a curated end-of-life experience for their – and potentially your – clients.

Or consider holding a death café – an informal get-together where people gather to talk about any and all feelings about death and dying – with your local doulas. Either way, you are positioning yourself as a partner to help promote a more positive end-of-life experience for your community.

### And Finally...

Society is changing, and specifically changing the way it seeks to envision death and dying. People are becoming more intentional about the way they approach their own deaths, and staying current with these trends can help better position you as a resource

for your community not only after a person has died but throughout the entire end-of-life trajectory.

Becoming part of a circle of practitioners who accompany people on all aspects of this journey will increase your visibility and potential referrals and cement your reputation as a community resource. Partnering with death doulas is a wonderful way to do this compassionately and effectively.

*Editor's note: Gabrielle Jimenez (thehospiceheart.net) and Angela Shook (angelashook.com) are practicing end-of-life doulas and co-authors with Diane Button of the recent book, *The Doula Tool Kit* (2003, Better World Publishing). ☰*

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*Matilda Garrido, MS, CT, holds a Master of Science in thanatology (study of death, dying and bereavement), a Master of Science in bioethics and is certified in thanatology by the Association for Death Education and Counseling. She has extensive experience working with the dying, families of the dying, and the bereaved, and is focused on normalizing the experience of grief and reducing death fears through education, focused action and increased community supports for the dying and grieving.*

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