
DSS Policy Bulletin #2023-007

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DISTRIBUTION: ALL STAFF

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GENERAL SUPPORT SERVICES (GSS) – HART ISLAND OPERATIONS

■ AUDIENCE

This Policy Bulletin provides instructions for the Department of Social Services (DSS) General Support Services (GSS) Hart Island Operations staff and are informational for all others.

■ BACKGROUND

DSS, through GSS, has recently assumed the responsibility for substantially all operations of the Hart Island municipal cemetery.

For over 150 years, Hart Island has served, amongst other things, as the City's public cemetery or "potter's field" for the burial of deceased individuals for whom no estate, nor any living relatives, friends, or other individuals were identified that could pay for the expenses associated with their burial, as well as those whose remains went unclaimed. The Island is the final resting place of over one million individuals, including mass burials of disease victims. Over the last 20 years, the number of burials at the island has averaged about 1,500 per year (amplified recently by the COVID pandemic).

After numerous years of advocacy and study, the City of New York has determined that the burial of the remains of indigent individuals whose bodies went unclaimed would be best managed by DSS and GSS.

On July 1, 2021, jurisdiction of Hart Island was transferred from the New York City Department of Corrections (DOC) to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks), which manages cemetery visitations (see [§ 21-110 of the NYC Administrative Code](#)). The responsibility for all other cemetery operations was subsequently transferred to DSS through the Office of Burial Services (OBS) on October 1, 2021, and ultimately to GSS. This procedure outlines that new responsibility for GSS, particularly the operations directly related to burials on the Island.

■ POLICY

MUNICIPAL CEMETARY OPERATIONS: BURIALS

The operations that are primarily related to burials on Hart Island can be divided between what's required in advance of, and on the day of, either the interment or disinterment of bodies centrally held by the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME). The City of New York has 3 OCME offices, one each located in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. Staten Island cases are submitted to the OCME in Brooklyn, and Bronx cases are submitted to the OCME in either Queens or Manhattan.

GSS has contracted a vendor (Contractor) for substantially all the work performed on the island, including the burials, as well as for the landscaping and groundskeeping, infrastructure and equipment maintenance, and transportation requirements on the property.

The Department of Transportation (DOT) is responsible for the ferry operations required to reach Hart Island, from its fenced-off dock facility on City Island, located next to the Promenade on Fordham Street.

■ REQUIRED ACTION

OPERATIONS IN ADVANCE OF INTERMENT

Mapping

The Contractor, in coordination with GSS, must maintain an updated map of the layout of the cemetery over its 131 acres. This map serves as a tool for GSS to locate existing and new burial sites, and to install markers for easy identification of burial plots.

Site Excavation

The Contractor is responsible for determining the location and the excavation of the mass burial trenches in consultation with GSS as part of a predesigned burial plan. Trench sizes vary (based upon location, accessibility, and land condition) and usually contain multiple burial plots.

Scheduling

Each week, OCME will email GSS the estimate of burials that need to take place the following work week. (Infant/Fetal remains are scheduled for burial once a month and are buried in a separate site from Adult/Non-infant Child remains.)

GSS, together with the Contractor, OCME, and DOT coordinate via email the scheduling of burial dates.

DOT staff is responsible to monitor the weather or any other condition that would prevent their ferry from running to the island on the scheduled date. Should the ferry be unable to reach Hart Island, the parties would have to reschedule the burial date.

OPERATIONS ON THE DAY OF INTERMENT

On the scheduled date of interment GSS, the Contractor, OCME, and DOT staff meet at the City Island dock to take the DOT ferry to Hart Island, after they all sign the **GSS Visitor logbook (Attachment B)** and GSS reviews the OCME's transfer documents, referred to as the **OCME Manifest (Attachment A)** and the Burial Permits. GSS has an administrative building on the DOT dock facility.

OCME staff drive their refrigerated loading truck to the location of the excavated trench where the mass burials are to take place. Capacity of refrigerated loading truck is 24 adult coffins.

The coffins containing the remains are then removed from the truck by the Contractor and engraved with a number designating where they are to be buried per the **Burial Schematic (Attachment D)**. Each coffin's location is then noted in both the **OCME Manifest (Attachment A)** and in the **GSS Burial Logbook (Attachment C)** by GSS. General decedent information is found on the decedent's **DOHMH Burial Permit (Attachment E)**. The pine box coffins come in three sizes: Infant/Fetus - 20"x7"x6", Adult/Non-infant Child - 20"x77"x14", and Oversize – 27"x 78"x17".

Each coffin is then placed and positioned in the trench by the Contractor using the established systematic numbering system, using grave markers installed in line with the burial plan and cemetery map. Each grave marker signifies a plot of 150 bodies interred, arranged in 25 rows of 6 (2 wide stacked 3 high in the trench). Approximately 4 inches of space filled with sand are observed between the stacks to facilitate the removal of a coffin in the event of disinterment, and four (4) to six (6) inches of sand is laid on top of the stacks. Coffins containing the remains of unidentified individuals are placed on the uppermost level, as they are the most likely to require disinterment.

As part of the burial process, plywood is temporarily placed around the coffins in the trench to conceal and protect them from the elements prior to their permanent interment. When a row is completed, the plywood used to cover the coffins is substituted by soil. Once the trench is filled with coffins, the Contractor backfills and covers it with soil (which is later leveled and reseeded for grass).

Next, GSS, the Contractor, and OCME return to the office on Hart Island to verify the paperwork to ensure that the remains of all the individuals that were to be interred have, in fact, been interred. Any discrepancies will be reconciled.

Upon completion of the burials on Hart Island, GSS and OCME sign off on the **OCME Manifest (Attachment A)**, documenting that the remains have been received by GSS.

On return to the DOT dock on City Island, individuals sign out on the **GSS Visitor Logbook (Attachment B)**.

OPERATIONS IN ADVANCE OF DISINTERMENT

Requesting Disinterment

Disinterment can be requested at any time. However, disinterment is conditioned on the recoverability of the remains, and requests for disinterment will normally not be honored if the remains:

- a. are too decomposed to safely recover, e.g., they have been interred for twenty-five (25) or more years.
- b. have been interred for more than ten (10) years, e.g., the coffin may be decomposed.
- c. may be disrupted during the disinterment.

Disinterment can be requested either by OCME, for forensic reasons, or by a licensed Funeral Director on behalf of a relative or friend who wishes to have the remains of a deceased individual exhumed and be cremated or buried elsewhere.

- OCME disinterment requests are made directly to GSS via email, indicating the name of the individual whose remains they need disinterred. GSS will initiate the process as soon as possible.
- A licensed Funeral Director must make a formal request to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) Bureau of Vital Records to obtain a **DOHMH Disinterment Permit (Attachment F)**. The original copy of this DOHMH Disinterment Permit must then be mailed by the Funeral Director, along with a formal request for the disinterment on their letterhead, to:

New York City Human Resources Administration
 General Support Services – Hart Island Operations
 375 Pearl Street – 24th Fl.
 New York, NY 10038

Scheduling Disinterment

GSS, together with the Contractor, OCME or the Funeral Director, and DOT cooperate to schedule a disinterment date, via email.

Should the DOT determine that their ferry is unable to run from City Island to Hart Island due to inclement weather or some other adverse condition, the disinterment scheduled on that date is effectively canceled and will have to be rescheduled in the same coordinated manner as the original disinterment was scheduled.

Locating the Remains

GSS determines the location of the remains of the individual who must be disinterred with the aid of the **Burial Schematic (Attachment D)** and **Burial map (Attachment G)**.

The coffin's location is then noted on the **OCME Manifest (Attachment A)** and the **GSS Burial Logbook (Attachment C)** by GSS.

OPERATIONS ON THE DAYS OF DISINTERMENT AND TRANSFER

Disinterment occurs at least a day or two in advance of the transfer of the remains to OCME or a Funeral Director, during which time they are temporarily secured in the island's storage tank. Once a disinterment is successful, GSS contacts OCME or the Funeral Director to arrange for the transfer.

During exhumation, the Contractor places plywood around the coffins in the trench surrounding the one being exhumed to conceal and protect them prior to being permanently reburied.

Once the coffin is removed from the trench, the Contractor replaces the voided space where the remains were originally located with sand, acting as an effective placeholder to keep the integrity of the surrounding coffins that remain in the trench. This process also allows for the number sequence of coffins to remain in order. Any plywood used is substituted by soil.

On the agreed upon scheduled date GSS, the Contractor, OCME or the Funeral Director, and DOT meet at the City Island ferry dock to Hart Island. The parties review the **OCME Manifest (Attachment A)** and the **DOHMH Disinterment Permit (Attachment F)** and paperwork, sign the **GSS Visitor Logbook (Attachment B)**, then board the DOT ferry for the ride to Hart Island.

The remains of the disinterred are then placed in a Disinterment Tank and GSS assigns a pickup date to the Funeral Director.

Once on Hart Island, OCME or the Funeral Director drives their vehicle to the location where the disinterred remains are held (and never to the disinterment site). GSS provides Disinterment papers for signature of receipt. The Contractor then prepares and places the remains in the OCME or Funeral Director's vehicle to be transported off Hart Island.

The remains of the individual that was disinterred are then transported off Hart Island, in the vehicle of the OCME or Funeral Director aboard the DOT ferry, for forensic analysis and/or cremation and/or reburial.

Effective Immediately

LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT (LEP) AND DEAF/HARD-OF-HEARING

For Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and hard-of-hearing applicants/participants, make sure to obtain appropriate interpreter services in accordance with [PD #18-10-OPE](#) and [PD #17-19-OPE](#).

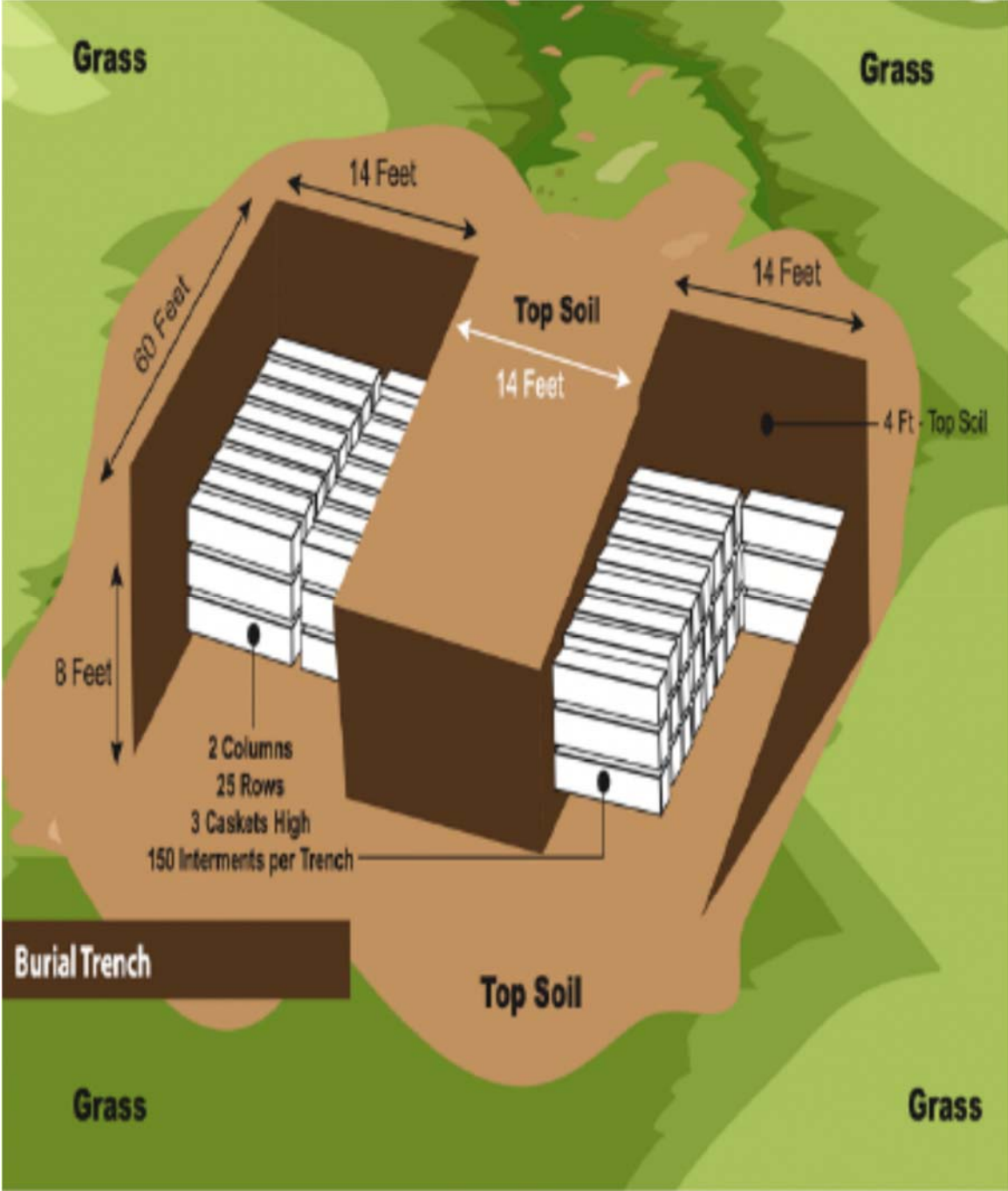
REFERENCE

[§ 21-110 of the NYC Administrative Code](#)

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A	OCME City Burial Manifest
Attachment B	GSS Visitor Logbook
Attachment C	GSS Burial Logbook
Attachment D	Burial Schematic
Attachment E	DOHMH Burial Permit
Attachment F	DOHMH Disinterment Permit
Attachment G	Burial Map

Attachment D



Attachment E

NEW YORK CITY
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND MENTAL HYGIENE

THE CITY OF NEW YORK – DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE
OFFICE OF VITAL RECORDS

PERMIT TO DISPOSE OF OR TRANSPORT HUMAN REMAINS

EVENT: (CHECK ONLY ONE) DEATH SPONTANEOUS TERMINATION INDUCED TERMINATION CERTIFICATE NUMBER

NAME	First, Middle, Last Unknown, Unknown	AGE 99	SEX Female	DATE OF EVENT	MONTH DAY YEAR (YYYY)
PLACE OF EVENT	NEW YORK CITY	BOROUGH Queens	NAME OF HOSPITAL OR INSTITUTION OR STREET ADDRESS		
CERTIFIER	NAME OF PHYSICIAN OR MEDICAL EXAMINER'S NUMBER	METHOD OF DISPOSAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INTERMENT <input type="checkbox"/> CREMATION	CREMATION APPROVED BY: MEMLI _____ M.E. CASE # _____	
PLACE OF DISPOSITION	NAME OF CEMETERY OR CREMATORY (OR DESTINATION)	CITY OR COUNTY AND STATE	DATE OF DISPOSITION	MONTH	DAY YEAR (YYYY)
	City Cemetery At Hart Island	Brox, NY			

THE CERTIFICATE OF DEATH HAVING BEEN FILED AS REQUIRED BY THE HEALTH CODE, AND ALL LAWS AND REGULATIONS GOVERNING THE PREPARATION AND DISPOSAL OF HUMAN REMAINS HAVING BEEN COMPLIED WITH, PERMISSION IS HEREBY REQUESTED TO DISPOSE OF THE REMAINS AS IDENTIFIED ABOVE.

FUNERAL ESTABLISHMENT	NAME OF ESTABLISHMENT	ADDRESS	CITY AND STATE	N.Y. STATE REG. #
APPLICANT	NAME OF N.Y. STATE LICENSED FUNERAL DIRECTOR (PRINT)	SIGNATURE		N.Y. STATE LIC. #
		<small>Signature Electronically Authenticated</small>		

PERMISSION IS HEREBY GRANTED TO DISPOSE OF THE REMAINS AS REQUESTED ABOVE.

NOTICE: This permit is not valid without the seal of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; or if it has been corrected, interlined or altered in any manner.



Stephan VanDye

City Registrar

By Service Evital

VR 21 (REV. 7/09) FEE PAID \$ N/A DATE MM / DD / YYYY

Attachment F

VR 23 (Rev. 1/03)

THE CITY OF NEW YORK – DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE
OFFICE OF VITAL RECORDS
DISINTERMENT PERMIT

Disinterment No. _____ Date _____
(Month/Day/Year-yyyy)

An application having been filed with this Department as required by the Health Code, permission is hereby given
to _____
(Funeral Director's Name/Supt. of Cemetery) (Funeral Establishment/Cemetery)

to disinter the remains of _____
(Name of Deceased)

who died at _____ ON _____
(Month/Day/Year-yyyy)

now buried in _____ ~~Crematory~~* Cemetery and to reinter* them at _____
(Borough, or City and State) (Month/Day/Year-yyyy)

on or before _____
(Month/Day/Year-yyyy)

This permit must be handed to the Keeper of the Cemetery or
Crematory by the Funeral Director in charge of the funeral.
* Cross out one.



City Registrar
Per BVS - Death Registration Unit

