Opioid Crisis Drives A Grim Business In West Virginia: Body Transport

The state’s bill for moving dead bodies has doubled in the last few years.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/opioid-overdoses-dead-bodies-west-virginia_us_59c92612e4b06ddf45f9f23a?ncid=APPLENEWS00001>

Business is booming for one somber industry in West Virginia: [the transportation of dead bodies](http://www.wvgazettemail.com/news-health/20170927/opioid-crisis-drives-a-grim-business-in-wv-body-transport).

The state’s Department of Health and Human Resources paid private contractors $881,620 in fiscal year 2017 to shuttle corpses from one place to another ― more than double the expense two years before. The number of body transports went from about 2,200 in fiscal year 2015 to some 4,200 in fiscal year 2017 (which ended June 30).

Public health officials and funeral directors alike blame West Virginia’s soaring number of fatal drug overdoses for those sharp increases.

Jim Lowry, who’s been in the funeral business for 62 years, came out of retirement three years ago to help Charleston Mortuary Services handle the increase in bodies that must be shipped to the state morgues. Needle marks on arms and hands and body bag tags that read “Pending Tox” identify those who likely died of a drug overdose. They are mostly younger adults, ages 18 to 30.

“Now, it’s nothing for us to have two or three in the same day … or six or seven in a week,” said Lowry, a licensed embalmer. “It’s just out of sight.”

More than [880 people died of drug overdoses](http://big.assets.huffingtonpost.com/WV-drug-overdose-fatal-2016.pdf) in West Virginia last year ― a record number. The state has the worst drug overdose death rate in the nation.

Every fatal overdose requires at least two trips ― from the place of death to a state morgue and then from the morgue to a funeral home. Each corpse must be autopsied, and a toxicology report must attempt to pinpoint the drugs that caused the death.

Some overdoses involve even more trips ― to a hospital, for instance, where a county medical examiner conducts a preliminary exam before referring the body to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for autopsy.