



What Is Racial Misclassification On Death Certificates, And How Does It Affect American Indian And Alaska Native People?

People are often asked about their race and ethnicity on businesses or government forms, especially when completing legal documents. This helps experts identify who is using services, track business and public health trends, and identify where resources are needed. However, many people self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) but end up recorded as another race in official government documents. Public health experts call this phenomenon: “Racial Misclassification”. When this happens on death certificates, the lack of complete and accurate data harms AI/AN people. It becomes hard to track demographic trends of who is dying from preventable deaths, where, and what resources are needed to address these problems. Death certificate racial data is recorded by funeral directors, coroners, or medical examiners - sometimes based merely on appearance or assumptions. When collecting racial data, funeral directors may be hesitant to ask the family questions about the decedent's race, or not be trained on how to ask or why it is important to do so. This leads to large errors in death record data, which harms the community.



What can Funeral Directors do to prevent Racial Misclassification of AI/AN People on Death Certificates?

- ➔ **Remember that any family you serve could have members who identify as AI/AN**, regardless of their appearance, other things you already know about them, and whether you are in an urban area or near a tribe's reservation lands.
- ➔ **Always verbally ask about race, Hispanic origin, and tribal affiliation.**

When you ask:

- Have [definitions of race and ethnicity](#) categories handy.
- Prepare satisfying answers to common questions such as “why do you need to know this?” ahead of time.
- Prepare for occasional discomfort by family members. This question might reignite old tensions for some families at first, bring up distrust of the government (or you for asking), or simply be confusing. But that doesn't mean this discussion will necessarily interrupt your rapport, won't be productive, or can be avoided.
- Learn how to manage your own discomfort. Remember, learning more about the family can be an opportunity to ultimately build rapport.
- Pay attention to non-verbal communication like body language. It might feel like paperwork, but some people feel “investigated” in an interview. Funeral directors often are a source of compassion to guide people through a difficult time, and can apply these skills when asking about race too.



- ➔ **Collect racial information yourself, and do not copy** from other professionals' data whenever possible.
- ➔ **Avoid copying identification from hospital or medical records, face sheets, and/or transport documents as much as possible.** They can be less accurate.
- ➔ If you do use worksheets to collect race, Hispanic origin, and Tribal affiliation:
 - **Use standard forms from your state, when possible.**
 - If you cannot use a state template, **make sure the demographics section matches the choices on [the standard death certificate](#)**, and match the wording of these categories.
 - **Ensure your worksheets and forms allow for multiple races, ethnicities, and tribal affiliations to be entered.**
 - **Verify the worksheet item-by-item with the family after you collect it,** preferably as you enter the electronic death registration.
- ➔ If you do work with members of a specific tribe repeatedly, proactively **familiarize yourself with customs or benefits they may offer after death.**
- ➔ **Learn how to contact tribes or the Bureau of Indian Affairs for burial assistance.**
- ➔ **Do not require families to “prove” race or ethnicity.** Tribal IDs are useful legal identification, and documentation of ancestry may help you get the details right about what a family wants to put on a death certificate. They may indicate that someone is likely to self-identify as AI/AN, but they are not “proof of AI/AN race”.