MEMORANDUM [version for public release]

DATE: March 19, 2020 / 23 Adar 5780

TO: Jewish Federation of Greater Portland
    Oregon Board of Rabbis
    Chesed Shel Emet

FROM: Chevra Kavod HaMet Steering Committee, Portland, OR

cc: Funeral Home A
    Funeral Home B

RE: Suspension of traditional tahara due to COVID-19 concerns

With deep sadness, the Steering Committee of Portland’s Chevra Kavod HaMet has decided that, for the foreseeable future, we will suspend the provision of traditional tahara in response to the COVID-19 virus and current social distancing guidelines from government and professional organizations. This decision was reached after extensive deliberation within the Steering Committee and participation in national webinars and weekly calls sponsored by Kavod v’Nichum, our national chevra kadisha association.

We reached this decision based primarily on the following considerations related to pikuach nefesh / saving a life:

- We believe the requisite Personal Protective Equipment (isolation gowns, gloves, face shields, shoe coverings) needed by our volunteers to safely perform tahara is more critically needed by front-line health care providers and emergency responders for care of the living. There are severe shortages of this PPE nationally and internationally at this time.
- Most of our volunteers are in the more susceptible age groups for COVID-19, and many have pre-existing conditions that may put them at additional risk, either from exposure to an infected body and/or through close contact with other tahara team members.

Therefore, we are currently developing virtual tahara rituals, as is also being done in parts of the country where shelter-in-place regulations are being enforced. We will continue to receive notifications from [the funeral homes with which we work] about families who wish tahara done for the deceased, so that we may continue to assemble volunteer teams to provide prayer support from a distance for the soul of the deceased. We will also discuss with the funeral homes having them place into the casket the winding sheet, soil from Israel, and perhaps a siddur that is no longer usable and needs to be buried, as is our custom.

Chevra Kavod HaMet remains committed to continuing this holy work, supporting the souls of our departed community members, and offering comfort to their families and friends through our attention to the deceased.

Please let us know your thoughts or concerns about this. With blessings for health and safety, calm and courage, compassion and hope.