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Comptroller investigating Wilmington funeral home

Pre-arrangement contracts by JCG Reeves Funeral Home raise concerns during auditors' exam

Area funeral director Matt Baskerville has pledged to help anyone who has issues with pre-arrangement service contracts by JCG Reeves Funeral Home Inc., of Wilmington, even though the funeral homes he operates are unaffiliated with JCG Reeves.

His commitment comes in the wake of the investigation now under way by Illinois State Comptroller Judy Baar Topinka and Will County State's Attorney Jim Glasgow in eight areas of concern involving pre-need deposits by customers of JCG Reeves Funeral Home.

Baskerville noted he has no specifics or details on pre-need contracts executed by JCG Reeves. He said Reeves Funeral Homes Ltd., of Morris, Coal City, and Gardner, plus the recent merger that added Freitag-Reeves & Baskerville Funeral Home of Wilmington to those under his direction, have no connection to JCG Funeral Home Inc.

"Different operations - different families," Baskerville said Monday. "The Leo Reeves and Jim Reeves ventures were separate operations."

Leo Reeves of Morris was cousin to the late James Reeves of Wilmington, who died last June. "We share the same last name, and that's about the extent of it," Leo Reeves said. "Our fathers were brothers and we're cousins, but there was never any business connection between me and Jim Reeves."

A day after Comptroller Topinka was sworn into office on Monday, Jan. 10, she learned of at least one complaint regarding the JCG Reeves operation and pre-need deposits made by a customer.

"Our auditors immediately visited JCG Funeral Home on Tuesday, Jan. 11, and they identified eight accounts which caused concern," Topinka spokesman Brad Hahn said. "Our office then contacted Will County State's Attorney Jim Glasgow's office to offer our support of an investigation in any way possible."

Funeral homes in Illinois file annual reports with the State Comptroller's office. The 2009 report indicated about \$150,000 in a trust held by Merrill Lynch.

Pending the outcome of the investigation into JCG Funeral Home, the Comptroller's office is requesting Merrill Lynch freeze any funds being held for the Wilmington business.

"We've been contacted by (James) Reeves family members, who indicated their desire to ensure all customers receive their invested funds," Hahn said. "That's where we stand right now. Our office will continue to work with the state's attorney's office. We'll aggressively pursue this. We're also working to develop a comprehensive policy to investigate any other complaints."

A lifelong member of the Wilmington community, Baskerville noted Monday that Reeves Funeral Homes Ltd., has served residents of Grundy and Will counties and its neighbors with facilities in Coal City, Morris, and Gardner ever since Wilford and Anna Reeves began the business in Coal City in 1924. The recent merger with Freitag-Reeves & Baskerville Funeral home of Wilmington adds to the homes directed by Baskerville.

In his letter to customers inquiring about pre-arranged funerals, Baskerville pointed out the contracts under question were written by "another funeral home."

"We, unfortunately, are unable to verify contacts written by other funeral homes. We would, however, like to ... assure you that your pre-funded pre-arrangement with Reeves Funeral Homes Ltd., and Freitag-Reeves & Baskerville Funeral Home is securely funded," the letter read in part.

The funeral home business is a situation where people have blind faith, Baskerville said.

"Those with any questions about anything done with us, we welcome you to come and we'll sit down and go through the arrangements with you for peace of mind," he said.

Sandy Reeves, wife of the late Jim Reeves, said Monday she had no comment at this time regarding the investigation.

"We're doing our best to straighten things out," she said, without going further.

Wilmington attorney Joe Tryner would not say if he had any clients involved in the issue.

"I really can't comment about that," he said. "I think that's a private matter."

Mrs. James Gale of Wilmington, friend to the James Reeves family, said she'd rather not comment.

"They were friends of ours, and I can't believe this happened," she said. "We really feel bad. He left his family in a big mess."

Glasgow spokesman Chuck Pelkie said the state's attorney's office is "investigating pre-funding at (JCG) Reeves Funeral Home.

"The State Comptroller's office contacted us this week on it," he said late Friday. "We haven't evaluated the materials to see what we have here. I can't say at this time what the next step will be."

Leo Reeves did not know if anyone has proof or wrongdoing at this point.

"There isn't a funeral director I know of that I would suspect of doing something like this. Our whole relationship with families is a sacred trust. They trust us with not just their money, but with someone they have loved and hold very dearly, and literally are handing them to us and say to take care of them," he noted.

"That's a responsibility we actually hold as very sacred. It goes right to the core of everything we do. If we are given money to be put aside for them, we treat it the same way. These people become our families, and they're treated the same way our blood family would be treated. That includes pre-arrangements."

Hahn said Monday the eight cases where the auditors looked at the records involved pre-need deposits.

"We got the complaint, and also a Freedom of Information request that was filed regarding the funeral home's reporting to the State Comptroller's office, and we knew there was a concern," he said.

"We sent the auditors out on Tuesday. They came back with eight instances and found further investigation was important. We told the state's attorney's office what we know, and said we'll help them with the investigation."

When concerns like this are raised, Hahn said it's important the comptroller's office acts.

"And that's where she acted as soon as possible," he noted, saying the case is unusual in Illinois.

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