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Getting Your Affairs in Order

Ben's Story

Ben has been married for 47 years. He always managed the family's money. But since his stroke, Ben is not able to walk or talk. His wife, Shirley, feels overwhelmed. Of course, she's worried about Ben's health. But, on top of that, she has no idea what bills should be paid or when they are due.

Louise's Story

Across town, 80-year-old Louise lives alone. One night, she fell in the kitchen and broke her hip. She spent a week in the hospital and 2 months in a rehabilitation nursing home. Even though her son lives across the country, he was able to pay her bills and handle her Medicare questions right away. That's because, several years ago, Louise and her son made a plan about what he should do in case Louise had a medical emergency.

Plan for the Future

No one ever plans to be sick or disabled. Yet, it's this kind of planning that can make all the difference in an emergency.

Long before she fell, Louise put all her important papers in one place and told her son where to find them. She gave him the name of her lawyer, as well as a list of people he could contact at her bank, doctor's office, insurance company, and investment firm. She made sure he had copies of her Medicare and other health insurance cards. She added her son's name to her checking account and safe deposit box at the bank. Louise made sure Medicare and her doctor had written permission to talk with her son about her health and insurance claims.

On the other hand, Ben always took care of family money matters, and he never talked about the details with Shirley. No one but Ben knew that his life insurance

policy was in a box in the closet or that the car title and deed to the house were filed in his desk drawer. Ben never expected that his wife would have to take over. His lack of planning has made a tough job even tougher for Shirley.

What Exactly Is an “Important Paper”?

The answer to this question may be different for every family. Remember, this is a starting place. You may have other information to add. For example, if you have a pet, you will want to include the name and address of your veterinarian. Include complete information about:

Personal Records

- Full legal name
- Social Security number
- Legal residence
- Date and place of birth
- Names and addresses of spouse and children
- Location of birth and death certificates and certificates of marriage, divorce, citizenship, and adoption
- Employers and dates of employment
- Education and military records
- Names and phone numbers of religious contacts
- Memberships in groups and awards received

- Names and phone numbers of close friends, relatives, doctors, lawyers, and financial advisors
- Medications taken regularly (be sure to update this regularly)
- Location of living will and other legal documents

Financial Records

- Copy of most recent income tax return
- Sources of income and assets (pension from your employer, IRAs, 401(k)s, interest, etc.)
- Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid information
- Insurance information (life, health, long-term care, home, car) with policy numbers and agents' names and phone numbers
- Names of your banks and account numbers (checking, savings, credit union)
- Investment income (stocks, bonds, property) and stockbrokers' names and phone numbers
- Location of most up-to-date will with an original signature
- Liabilities, including property tax— what is owed, to whom, and when payments are due
- Mortgages and debts—how and when they are paid
- Location of original deed of trust for home

- Car title and registration
- Credit and debit card names and numbers
- Location of safe deposit box and key

Steps for Getting Your Affairs in Order

- **Put your important papers and copies of legal documents in one place.**
You can set up a file, put everything in a desk or dresser drawer, or list the information and location of papers in a notebook. If your papers are in a bank safe deposit box, keep copies in a file at home. Check each year to see if there's anything new to add.
- **Tell a trusted family member or friend where you put all your important papers.** You don't need to tell this friend or family member about your personal affairs, but someone should know where you keep your papers in case of an emergency. If you don't have a relative or friend you trust, ask a lawyer to help.
- **Discuss your end-of-life preferences with your doctor.** He or she can explain what [health decisions you may have to make](#) in the future and what treatment options are available. Talking with your doctor can help ensure your wishes are honored. Discussing advance care planning decisions with your doctor is free through Medicare during your annual wellness visit. Private health insurance may also cover these discussions.
- **Give permission in advance for your doctor or lawyer to talk with your caregiver as needed.** There may be questions about your care, a bill, or a health insurance claim. Without your consent, your caregiver may not be able to get needed information. You can give your okay in advance to Medicare, a credit card company, your bank, or your doctor. You may need to sign and return a form.

Important Legal Documents You May Need as You Age

There are many different types of legal documents that can help you plan how your affairs will be handled in the future. Many of these documents have names that sound alike, so make sure you are getting the documents you want. Also, State laws vary, so find out about the rules, requirements, and forms used in your State.

Wills and **trusts** let you name the person you want your money and property to go to after you die.

Advance directives let you make arrangements for your care if you become sick. There are two ways to do this:

- A **living will** gives you a say in your health care if you become too sick to make your wishes known. In a living will, you can state what kind of care you do or don't want. This can make it easier for family members to make tough healthcare decisions for you.
- A **durable power of attorney for health care** lets you name the person you want to make medical decisions for you if you can't make them yourself. Make sure the person you name is willing to make those decisions for you.

For legal matters, there are two ways to give someone you trust the power to act in your place:

- A **general power of attorney** lets you give someone else the authority to act on your behalf, but this power will end if you are unable to make your own decisions.
- A **durable power of attorney** allows you to name someone to act on your behalf for any legal task, but it stays in place if you become unable to make your own decisions.

Help for Getting Your Legal and Financial Affairs in Order

You may want to talk with a lawyer about setting up a general power of attorney, durable power of attorney, joint account, trust, or advance directive. Be sure to ask about the lawyer's fees before you make an appointment.

You should be able to find a directory of local lawyers at your library, or you can contact your local bar association for lawyers in your area. Your local bar association can also help you find what free legal aid options your State has to offer. An informed family member may be able to help you manage some of these issues.

Frequently Asked Questions About Getting Your Affairs in Order

Getting your affairs in order can be difficult, but it is an important part of preparing for the future, for you and your loved ones. It is important to gather as much information as possible to help ease the process. Here are a few questions that you may have and some answers that can help.

Who should you choose to be your healthcare proxy?

If you decide to choose a proxy, think about people you know who share your views and values about life and medical decisions. Your proxy might be a family member, a friend, your lawyer, or someone with whom you worship. Learn more about [selecting a healthcare proxy](#).

My aging parents can no longer make their own healthcare decisions. How do I decide what type of care is right for them?

It can be overwhelming to be asked to make healthcare decisions for someone who is no longer able to make his or her own decisions. Get a better understanding of how to [make healthcare decisions](#) for a longer one, including approaches you can take, issues you might face, and questions you can ask to help you prepare.

How do you help someone with Alzheimer's or dementia get their affairs in order?

A complication of diseases such as Alzheimer's is that the person may lack or gradually lose the ability to think clearly. This change affects his or her ability to participate meaningfully in decision-making and makes early planning even more important. Read these [legal and financial planning tips](#) for people with Alzheimer's disease.

I am considering becoming an organ donor. Is the process different for older adults?

There are many resources for older organ donors and recipients available from the U.S. government. Find information for potential [donors and transplant recipients](#) over age 50, including how to register to be a donor.

I want to make sure my affairs are in order before I die, but I'm not sure where to begin.

The National Institute on Aging has [free publications](#) that can help you and your loved ones discuss key issues at the end of life, including finding [hospice care](#), [what happens at the time of death](#), [managing grief](#), [preparing advance directives](#), and other information.

Read about [this topic in Spanish](#). Lea sobre [este tema en español](#).

For More Information About Getting Your Affairs in Order

AARP

1-888-687-2277

1-877-434-7598 (TTY)

member@aarp.org

www.aarp.org/health

CaringInfo

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization

1-800-658-8898 (toll-free)

caringinfo@nhpco.org

www.caringinfo.org

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

1-800-633-4227

1-877-486-2048 (TTY)

www.medicare.gov

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116

www.eldercare.acl.gov

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