

Getting Your Affairs in Order: Helping Clients Prepare for Emergencies

By National Institute on Aging

Ben has been married for 50 years. He always managed the family's money. But since his stroke Ben can't walk or talk. Shirley, his wife, 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.

Eighty-year-old Louise lives alone. One night she fell in the kitchen and broke her hip. She spent one week in the hospital and two months in an assisted living facility. 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 talked about what to do in case of a medical emergency.

Plan for the Future

No one ever plans to be sick or disabled. Yet it's just this kind of planning that can make all the difference in an emergency. Long before she fell, Louise had 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, investment firm, and insurance company. She made sure he had copies of her Medicare and other health insurance cards. She added her son's name to her checking account, allowing him to write checks on her account. Finally, Louise made sure Medicare and her doctor had written permission to talk with her son about her health or any insurance claims.

On the other hand, because Ben always took care of family financial matters, 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 his wife would have to take over. His lack of planning has made a tough situation even tougher for Shirley.

Steps for Getting Your Affairs in Order

- Gather everything you can about your income, investments, insurance, and savings.
- Put your important papers and copies of legal documents in one place. You could set up a file, put everything in a desk or dresser drawer, or just 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 your personal business, but someone should know where you keep your papers in case of emergency. If you don't have a relative or friend you trust, ask a lawyer to help.
- Give consent 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 permission in advance to Medicare, a credit card company, your bank, or your doctor. Sometimes you can give your OK over the telephone. Other times you may need to sign and return a form.

Legal Documents

There are many different types of legal documents that can help you plan how your affairs will be handled in the future:

- *Wills and trusts* give you a way to say how you want the things you own given out after you die.
- *Advance directives* describe your health care wishes in case you can't speak for yourself. Advance directives such as a living will or durable power of attorney for health care can say how you

want your health managed and may help avoid family conflict over your care. They also may make it easier for family members to make hard health care decisions on your behalf. For example, your aunt may not wish to have her life extended by being placed on a breathing machine (ventilator), or your brother may want to be an organ donor. Advance directives help people plan for these situations. Different States have different forms for advance directives.

- A *power of attorney* lets you give someone the authority to act on your behalf. There are different types:
 - A *standard power of attorney* lets you name another person to handle your personal or financial matters. This is useful only if you can still make your own decisions.
 - A *durable power of attorney* lets you name another person to make decisions for you if you become unable to make your own decisions.
 - A *durable power of attorney for health care* lets you name another person to make medical decisions for you if you are unable to make them yourself.
 - A living will says how you want your health care handled if you are in a life threatening situation and cannot make medical decisions for yourself. It gives you the right to refuse certain types of care. It also gives those caring for you the legal right to follow your wishes.

State laws vary, so check with your Area Office on Aging, a lawyer, or a financial planner about the rules and requirements in your State.

What exactly is an “Important Paper”?

The answer to this question may be different for every family. The following lists can help you decide what is important for you. Remember, this is just a starting point. You may have other information to add. For example, if you have a pet, be sure to

include the name and address of your vet or someone who could care for him or her.

Personal Records

- Full legal name
- Social Security number
- Legal residence
- Date and place of birth
- Names and addresses of spouse and children (or location of death certificates)
- Location of "living will" or other advance directive
- Location of birth certificate and certificates of marriage, divorce, citizenship, and adoption
- Employers and dates of employment
- Medications you take regularly
- Education and military records
- Your religion, name of church or synagogue, and names of clergy
- Memberships in groups and awards received
- Names and addresses of close friends, relatives, doctors, clergy, and lawyers or financial advisor

Financial Records

- Sources of income and assets (pension funds, IRAs, 401Ks, interest, etc.)
- Information about insurance policies, bank accounts, deeds, investments, and other valuables, such as jewelry or art
- Social Security and Medicare information
- Investment income (stocks, bonds, property) and stock brokers' names and addresses
- Insurance information (life, health, long-term care, home, and car) with policy numbers and agents' names
- Name of your bank and bank account numbers (checking, savings, and credit union)
- Location of safe deposit boxes
- Copy of most recent income tax return
- Copy of your will
- Liabilities—what you owe, to whom, and when payments are due
- Mortgages and debts—how and when paid
- Location of deed of trust

	and car title <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Credit card and charge account names and numbers• Property tax information• Location of all personal items, such as jewelry and family treasures
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When Your Caregiver Lives Far Away

The person you choose to help you may live far away. In that case, a little more information can make it easier for him or her to help. For example, make sure she or he has the names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of people near you who could be helpful in an emergency, such as:

- Family members, friends, and neighbors who live nearby
- Your apartment manager
- Your doctor and other health care providers
- Your clergy
- Your lawyer, accountant, or other advisors

Update this information every year.

Resources

You may want to talk with a lawyer about setting up a power of attorney, durable power of attorney, joint account, trust, or advance directive. Be sure to ask about the cost before you make an appointment. You should be able to find a directory of local lawyers at your library. An informed family member may be able to help you manage some of these issues.

For more information, the following organizations may be helpful.

AARP

601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049
1-800-304-4222
www.aarp.org

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging

1730 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-842-0888
www.n4a.org

National Association of State Units on Aging

1201 15th Street, NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
202-898-2578
www.nasua.org

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244-1850
1-877-267-2323
1-866-226-1819 (TTY)
www.cms.gov

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
1-800-222-2225
1-800-222-4225 (TTY)
E-mail: niaic@jbs1.com
www.nia.nih.gov

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