Getting Your Affairs in Order: Six Practical Steps for Peace of Mind

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"Getting your affairs in order" is a euphemism for taking steps to prepare for your own death or a situation in which you become incapacitated and cannot make decisions for yourself. Also called end-of-life planning or advance care planning, it includes actions you can take now that will make things easier for others to carry out your wishes and settle your estate.

Although people in their golden years or diagnosed with serious illnesses are most likely to initiate getting their affairs in order, the process can be started at any age. Life is full of unexpected turns. Be prepared!

Below are some practical steps you can take to get your affairs in order. It is not an exhaustive list and provides only minimal detail. Consult with professional financial and legal advisors for guidance on your specific circumstances.

Step 1: Complete legal documents to direct the management of your assets and end-of-life care. These documents are sometimes called the "essential documents" and include

- a will and/or trust,
- a health care directive (e.g., living will or advance directive),
- a Durable Power of Attorney for health care, and
- a Durable Power of Attorney for finances.

Married or registered domestic partners can complete a community property agreement that passes shared community property to the surviving partner without probate of a will.

Those with serious life-threatening illnesses should discuss and complete Portable Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) with their doctor to record their wishes on use of cardiopulmonary resuscitation and artificial ventilation to prolong their life.

You can prepare many of these documents yourself using standardized templates. Be sure that they align with state law and are executed properly (e.g., notarized or signed in the presence of witnesses who meet certain criteria). Financial or legal assistance can be helpful, especially for large and complex estates and those involving childcare, business issues, nonfamilial heirs, or combined families.

Step 2: Collect personal documents and information needed for administrative processes after death. Find your birth certificate, Social Security card, marriage license, divorce decree, and military discharge papers and store them in a secure place.

Record contact information for your attorney, accountant, financial planner, insurance agent, clergyperson, and executor of your will.

List membership in organizations such as AARP, the American Legion, or professional associations since some offer accidental life insurance benefits or other assistance to survivors.

Create a list of digital accounts and online information—such as email accounts, social media accounts and loyalty cards, online subscriptions, and Cloud storage—along with login details. Also leave instructions about what you want to happen to these accounts after you die.

Templates for a documents organizer and digital file organizer are available on the Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County website under Resources.

Step 3: Inventory both tangible (physical) and intangible (non-physical) assets. Tangible assets include real estate, vehicles, and personal property of significant financial or sentimental value (e.g., jewelry, art, firearms). You may wish to name specific recipients for tangible items in your will or trust or by preparing a property memorandum that is referenced in the former.

The inventory of your tangible assets is a good opportunity to cull through your belongings. Dispose of those without financial or sentimental value so that others will not have to do this after your death.

Intangible assets include bank accounts, investments, retirement funds, pensions, and insurance policies. Record the institution, account information, and how it's owned (e.g., joint ownership with rights of survivorship). Consider consolidation of bank accounts, if possible, simplifying the settlement of your estate.

To help your next-of-kin locate potential creditors after your death, make a detailed list of all outstanding debts including mortgages, auto loans, credit cards, and recurring bills. Consider whether you can address any of these debts now, either by repaying them or planning for their management.

Keep beneficiary designations updated. Assets like life insurance policies, retirement accounts, and payable-on-death bank accounts bypass probate and go directly to the named beneficiary.

Step 4: Share your funeral preferences and desired means of body disposition (e.g., traditional burial, green burial, cremation, terramation). Do you want to have a celebration of life, funeral service, or military honors? Record your wishes in a "letter of instructions" or standardized "disposition of body" form.

If you have arranged with a funeral home or cemetery for the disposition of your body, put a copy of the agreement and/or burial plot deed with other important papers and record whether you have prepaid these services.

Step 5: Make plans for dependents including children and elderly relatives under your care. Your will or trust should outline guardianship and financing of their care, but providing extra details for others stepping in could be helpful (e.g., allergies; food preferences; and contact information for doctors, teachers and care providers).

Make provisions for your furry family members, too, as they are solely dependent on you for their care. Ask trusted friends or family members to act as emergency caregivers as matters are

sorted out immediately after your death. Name a permanent caregiver (i.e., "pet guardian") in your will and establish a trust for your pet based on their life expectancy.

Step 6: Store the above information and documents in a secure place that loved ones can access without your help. Although secure, safety deposit boxes are difficult to access without the key. Choose a place that is both secure and accessible such as a folder or binder in a locked file cabinet or a secure digital file. Be sure to tell your executor or next-of-kin the location and how to access these items.

Getting your affairs in order is about much more than paperwork. It's an opportunity to reflect on your values, communicate your preferences, and organize important information and documents that others will need to settle your estate. It is also an act of kindness and will bring peace of mind to both you and your loved ones.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.