

The Paper Trail: Getting affairs in order takes the stress off everyone

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By Eileen Beal

If an emergency situation strikes, do you know where your mother keeps her durable power of attorney; where your father keeps the military-related records he'd need to be admitted to a Veterans Administration Hospital; where your favorite aunt keeps her will; or where your spouse keeps the key to the safety deposit box at the bank? Or even if *they* know where the records, documents, and/or key are?

Whether you are 40, 60, or 80, you need to be prepared for the uncertainties of the future. And one way to face them head-on is to make sure all your personal papers are in order and available to those who need them at a moment's notice.

According to the National Institute on Aging, there are three kinds of "paper" you'll need to corral for any eventuality:

Personal Information This includes birth certificates; marriage licenses and divorce decrees; citizenship papers; social security documents; house, car, and other property papers; education, military, and employment related documents; medical, Medicare and/or Medicaid information; funeral and/or burial plans; and the names and contact information, including e-mail addresses, of all family members, friends, doctors, lawyers, financial advisors, and clergymen who should be notified in an emergency.

Financial Records This includes recent tax records; bank, credit union, charge/credit card contact information and account numbers; information about personal debts and loans, insurance policies, investments, annuities and pension funds; the location of all personal items of value (jewelry, antiques, negotiable stocks and bonds); and the location of safe deposit boxes and their keys.

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“Most people worry the most about these kinds of assets getting lost, but the truth is that they are always going to turn up because there is always a yearly [rental, management, policy] fee. When the annual bill comes, you have found them,” explained Marcia Wexberg, an elder law specialist with Calfee Halter & Griswold.

Legal Documents This includes: wills, trusts and guardianship agreements; durable/revocable power of attorney (for legal and/or financial matters); durable/revocable power of attorney for health care; and/or advance medical directives and living wills.

When all documents have been rounded up, your work is only half done. “Though it may seem like a tedious task, make copies of everything,” says Alberta Chokshi, a Benjamin Rose social work administrator.

Then, store the documents in a safe, but still easily accessible, location. “That could be a locked box at home, a safety deposit box at a bank or in a special drawer in the dresser at home,” says Chokshi.

Finally, make a master list of all documents and give a copy, with instructions on how to find the originals, to a “designated responsible person”—a family member, spouse, legal advisor, or member of the clergy. “Increasingly banks, insurance companies and funeral homes are making these kinds of lists available,” said Wexberg. (see starred items below)

Laying a paper trail is a win-win for everyone. “For seniors, it gives tremendous peace of mind,” said Chokshi. “And,” she adds, “because they know where things are and what their loved one wants, for family and caregivers—who are going to feel over-whelmed when an emergency hits—it means that they can be pro-active, rather than reactive.”

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Sources and Resources

For more information on getting your affairs in order, consult the following:

Arranging Your Financial and Legal Affairs, Julie A. Calligaro, J.D.

Getting Your Life in Order, E. Petterle

**My Survivors' Guide*, Nikki Evans (*available locally at Joseph-Beth Books*)

The Widow's Resource, Julie A. Calligaro, J.D.

Advance Care Planning www.hospicewr.org/template.asp?id=49

*Family Caregiver Alliance www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=851

Ohio-specific legal documents www.partnershipforcaring.org/Advance/documents_content.html