



## Getting your Financial and Estate Planning Documents Organized

Take a moment and think: Where is your last W2? Your mortgage documents? Your social security card? What about passports, bank records, address book? Even in today's "paperless" society, the amount of physical records and paperwork we accumulate can be intimidating. It is important to revisit organizing and storing your important documents and financial records on a regular basis, rather than only when you are searching for a document or filing taxes. Developing an orderly home filing system has many benefits and need not be complicated or elaborate. You should consider both security and ease of access when deciding on your system of storing documents and personal records. It is also important that you communicate your system to family members or another trusted person who may be relied upon to act quickly in an emergency, but will otherwise respect your privacy.

A simple home filing cabinet can house the items you receive and refer to frequently, such as bills, warranties, bank statements, and credit card statements. Remember to also file contact information for family members, employers, financial advisors, attorneys, and health care professionals so a person appointed to act on your behalf can reach out to the appropriate individuals if you become incapacitated.

Systematic record keeping is a key component in estate planning and general financial planning. Carefully organizing your documents can save you (or, ultimately, your family members and Agent acting under a Durable Power of Attorney) time and money in say, processing insurance claims and preparing income tax filings. Consider using the following list to label the files in your system, then add as needed:

- Addresses/Dates
- Correspondence
- Financial Records
- Insurance Policies
- Organizations/Clubs
- Auto/Vehicles
- Employment Records
- Housing
- Investments
- Personal Records
- Bank Records
- Equipment/Appliances
- Income Tax
- Online Accounts
- Reference Materials

You should designate one family member to oversee managing the files and keeping them up-to-date and consistent. However, in case of an accident, illness, or emergency, everyone in the household should be familiar with the filing system, and it is imperative that your appointed Agent is able to find your legal documents.

Remember to consider security versus ease of access during an emergency when deciding on how and where to store the legal documents. Many people believe that the safest place for their Estate Planning documents is in a safe deposit box at a bank. Although very secure, the ease of access to a safe deposit box is limited to the business hours of the bank and the availability of the person granted access to the box as your Agent and holding the key. Having key documents in a safe deposit box at a bank could be a problem if you suddenly become incapacitated and a family member needs to access your Living Will or Health Care Power of Attorney documents. Often a bank will seal the safe deposit box upon a person's death, leaving your heirs with cumbersome and time-consuming process to gain access. While a safe deposit box at a bank may be the appropriate place for heirloom jewelry,

irreplaceable collectible items, or detailed family histories and photographs, it is not recommended for documents needed at a moment's notice.

Of course, a filing cabinet in your home office is only as safe as the lock on your front door. It is also susceptible to potential disasters such as fire and flood. Therefore, you should consider using a fire safe and watertight box in your home for your most important personal and legal documents, such as your Will, General Durable Power of Attorney, Health Care Power of Attorney, Living Will, and Trust.

Having a document-locator binder or file which describes where and how your personal documents are stored is another organizational tool that will assist your family and/or agents in the event of an emergency. It should contain a list of your important documents and where they are located. Here are examples of the documents and records that should be accounted for:

- Estate Planning Papers (Will, Trust, Power of Attorney, Advanced Directive, Health Care Power of Attorney)
- Insurance Policies (Health, Life, Auto, Homeowners)
- Property Titles (house, car, boat)
- Bank Account and Brokerage Account Statements
- Retirement Plan Statements and Beneficiary Designations
- Mortgage Papers
- Credit Card Statements
- Social Security Card, Medicare Card
- Birth Certificate, Marriage Certificate, Divorce Papers, Death Certificate
- Passports
- Adoption Papers
- Armed Forces Discharge Papers
- Funeral/Burial Policies and Instructions

This list is not exhaustive and may include many other important documents specific to you and your family. You may also wish to complete a Digital Assets Inventory to be kept with your important estate planning papers that contains a list of all your paperless online accounts, including usernames and passwords. Password services such as Last Pass ([www.lastpass.com](http://www.lastpass.com)) can also help you with organizing your passwords and make it easier for those you trust to access your online accounts.

Being prepared can make all the difference for you in a moment of crisis. Taking the time to organize your family's documents and financial records can save you and your loved one's time and money. As you organize and properly store your family documents, if you realize you haven't revisited your Estate Planning Documents within the last three to five years, or since significant life events or changes in your health status, you may want to arrange a meeting with your Elder Law Attorney to ensure your documents still agree with your current situation as well as your plans for the future.