

Get it Together!

This spring, our team is focusing on an educational series of events focused on preparation for estate planning. Our first goal is to give you some practical, DIY things that you can do for yourself that pave the way for you to get it together.

Yes, this project will take a couple of hours, but it can pay dividends as you work with us on your financial plan and/or get ready to see your attorney to update your estate plan, and will be appreciated by the important people in your life who will need to step into your shoes if something happens to you, whether it's death, disability, or even an extended illness.

No matter where you are in the planning process, it's important to put together an emergency notebook.

Step 1. You need a notebook.

- Get a three-ring binder and 5-10 section dividers.
- You will need a 2- to 3-inch binder.
- I like using plastic sheet protectors, especially for larger documents, such as Wills and Insurance Policies.
- Keep a pad of post-it notes with your notebook so you can easily make updates each year.
- Pick a notebook that fits your personality or that's easy to find—this doesn't have to be a somber project!

Step 2. Your section dividers are really up to you, but I organize my notebook as follows:

Intro – In front of your personal information section, set the tone by writing an instruction letter, this is something that can and should be deeply personal, it doesn't have to be formal or legal.

- Address your biggest concerns: child care, pet care, unresolved matters
- What are the things you MOST want to share with family/friends when you are no longer able to share them yourself?

Personal Information – Copies of the following (along with instructions on where to find the originals):

- Birth Certificate
- Social Security Card
- Marriage Certificate
- Driver's License/Photo ID
- Military ID
- Adoption/Divorce Decrees
- Copies of Passports
- List of Prior Names (maiden, previous marriages, etc)
- Family Tree (especially helpful for blended families)

Financial Information:

- Contact Information for your Financial Team:
 - Your Executor/Personal Representative (and Successor)

- If you have a POA, list the Attorney-in-Fact's contact info (and Successor)
- Attorney
- Financial Advisor Contact Info
- CPA
- Personal Banker/Loan Officer
- Insurance Agents: Life, Health, Property
- HR Director: Employee benefits, pension info, group life insurance, etc.
- Beneficiary Info
- Employee Benefits Info
 - Health Insurance
 - 401k, 403b statements, HR contacts
 - Profit Sharing Statements
 - ESOP Statements
 - Group Life/Disability
 - Executive Comp Benefits
 - Stock Plan Benefits
 - Flexible Spending Account Benefits
 - Health Savings Account Info – may or may not be held with an employer
 - Pension/Survivor Benefits through existing/former employer
- Military/Veteran Benefits
 - Who can help you?
 - DD-214 (Military Discharge Papers)
 - Military Pension Info (along with Survivor Benefit info)
 - VA Disability
- Real Estate Info
 - Title/Mortgage
 - Investment Properties –
 - should have a simple inventory here and a separate notebook for those properties if you have multiple properties
 - If you use a property manager, include their information
 - Homeowner/Valuable property insurance
- Other Property Inventory:
 - Vehicles (Type, Make, License Plate/Title/VIN)
 - Vehicle Loan/Payment Info – whose name is it in?
 - Safe Deposit Box
 - Safe Combination where you store valuables, docs
 - Social Security Benefits
 - 1-2 years of Tax Returns (if you store them for 7 years, tell where they are stored)
 - Household inventory
- Liabilities/Payments:
 - Credit Cards
 - Credit Monitoring (should your credit be frozen?)
 - Vehicle Loans
 - Personal Loans

- Auto-Pays/Subscriptions (credit card, ACH auto-drafts)
- Banking Information – account numbers and location of accounts
- Safe Deposit Box Info (where to find a key, where located)
- Documents:
 - Will
 - Trust
 - Non-probate transfer notes (TOD/POD/Beneficiary)
 - Life Insurance Info (including any employee/group benefit information)
 - Long-term Care Policy Info
 - Health Insurance Info
 - Annuities
- Vehicle Info—Titles, Type/Make/License Plate Numbers
- Liabilities Info
 - Credit Cards
 - Lines of Credit (Home Equity, Securities Based Loans)
 - Vehicle Loans
 - Personal Loans
 - Utilities/Bills that are set up on Auto-Pay (and when/how they are paid)
- Household Inventory (such as jewelry, art, musical instruments, firearms)

Personal Contact List

- Executor/PR Contacts
- Medical Contacts:
 - Pharmacy Contact Info
 - Physician Contact Info
 - Dentist Contact Info
- Your close friends/family who you want notified
- Who else should be notified in an emergency (friends, family, neighbors, church, organizations), along with HOW they should be notified
- Who should NOT be notified in an emergency (or not allowed hospital visit privileges)
- Other Considerations:
 - Pet Care/Custody
 - Digital Assets
 - Personal Care/Chore Service/Social Services/In-Home Care Contact Info
 - Housekeeper/Personal Services Contact Info
 - Social Media Log-In Info: Let your wishes be known about how you want social media “announcements” about your status to be handled.
 - Tech/Devices: does somebody have your log in?

Funeral/Arrangements

- Pre-Paid Burial/Funeral Info
- Other considerations:
 - Cremation vs Burial
 - Cemetery/Location/Cost

- Military honors?
- Celebration of Life
- Memorial Gifts

Step 3. Leave a “love letter,” describing your specific bequests. This can be as simple as taking a photo of a valuable or sentimental item and writing a brief history of the item. Do say who you want to receive the item, along with some nice words about why you want the recipient to have that item. This process will remind people why your things have value to you and it will often decrease in-fighting among those who are left behind, whether they are friends or family.

You can also put this “love letter” in the beginning of your notebook to set the tone for your family and friends who might be stepping in to fill your shoes.

Some people take this opportunity to write their personal or family history. It’s okay to be creative.

Step 4. PRO TIP! Set a calendar reminder every year to review your notebook and make changes. I update my notebook in November, because that’s when I update my employee benefits. I have post-it notes on items that change and simply update the post-it notes as necessary. The post-it notes help me keep it updated without too much trouble.

Step 5. Find a secure (but easy to find) place for your notebook. I put my notebook in a personal fireproof safe and have attached a post it that says, “In Case Something Happens to Me.” I have made sure that the combination to my safe is accessible to the few people who might need it someday.

Putting together your notebook is a lot of work the first time you put it together. It’s also a welcomed and effective way to leave your estate in order so that your loved ones can focus on fulfilling your wishes and grieving, rather than guessing and leaving your wishes to chance.

Step 6. If you are someone who likes the idea of having your forms be in a protected digital format, that’s easy to reference, it’s a good idea to also store some of your critical documents in your encrypted, secure Digital Vault on Morgan Stanley Online.

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