

Even when we've been preparing ourselves mentally and emotionally for the loss of a loved one, death usually takes us by surprise. Most of us are not quite sure what to do and when to do it.

The full range of tasks to be completed between the time someone passes away and the time their estate administration is complete is extremely long and overwhelming. Here, we will focus on the initial steps to take after the passing of a loved one. Your estate or trust administration lawyer can help you understand many of the other critical tasks in the days and weeks to come.

Get a Legal Pronouncement of Death

When a loved one dies at home without a doctor or nurse present, you will need to contact someone to come to your home and officially pronounce your loved one to be deceased. If your loved one was receiving hospice care, you usually call the hospice nurse. Call as soon as you realize death has occurred, even if it is in the middle of the night. In non-hospice situations, you usually need to call 911 and have your loved one transported to the hospital, and they will be pronounced dead there.

You need an official declaration of death to obtain a death certificate, plan a funeral, and begin the process of winding up your loved one's affairs.

Make Funeral Arrangements

Look through records to determine if any arrangements have been made for a funeral or if your loved one recorded any preferences for a funeral or memorial. Your loved one may have a pre-paid funeral contract or at least have made some notes about companies they would or would not want to handle their funeral. If you run across any

estate planning documents or notes, set those aside, too.

Even if you want to hold off on a memorial service, you will still need to establish arrangements for burial, cremation, or entombment. Legally, the deceased person's estate has the obligation to pay for these and other funeral expenses. If you pay for them from personal funds, you can be reimbursed from the estate.

Get Help from Family and Friends

The process of trying to notify everyone about the death can easily become overwhelming. Start by contacting one or two people, and ask them to make calls, and keep a list for you of who has been notified. You should notify your loved one's doctor and their employer if they had one.

Don't be shy about asking for help with everything from taking care of pets to writing the obituary. Your family and friends know this is a painful time and they will be looking for ways to feel like they've been able to assist. Allow yourself time to grieve—both now and in the days ahead.

Look for Documents

Besides looking for information about funeral arrangements, you will also need to look for documents that indicate whether there are life insurance policies and a will, trust or other estate plans. Anything with an attorney's name should be examined carefully. If there are files with bank information, check to see if the deceased person had a safe deposit box.

If you locate a will or trust, see who has been designated as the representative of the

estate or the trustee and determine whether that person is still able to serve. The court will need to approve and authorize a personal representative, but the trustee will not need court approval to act.

Talk to an Estate or Trust Administration Attorney

Handling the financial affairs of a deceased individual can be a complex process involving a long-term commitment. Having experienced legal guidance can reduce the burden considerably and help avoid mistakes that could delay the process or even lead to personal liability.

If your loved one worked with a law firm to create a will, trust, or other estate planning documents, you can contact that firm to assist you with the next steps, but you are not obligated to use that firm. You should find an attorney you are comfortable with and who can guide you through the duties of probate.

The Nordhaus Firm Can Help When You Are Facing the Death of a Loved One

Knowing what you need to do and when it needs to be done is often very challenging, particularly at a time when you are overwhelmed with grief and family matters. The experienced team at The Nordhaus Firm can guide you through obligations step by step, handling any necessary contact with the probate court, and work to ensure that all matters are handled efficiently and in line with legal requirements.

To learn more about the ways we can assist in your time of need, we invite you to

Steps to Take After a Loved One Passes Away

schedule a free consultation.