When you've taken the right steps to protect yourself and your family by creating a will, power of attorney, trust, and other estate planning documents, you deserve a big round of applause. Most people know they should do something, but they never take action. Others start the estate planning process but get overwhelmed and give up without executing those critical documents.

So what do you do after you've reached the finish line? You need to take a few steps to ensure that your estate planning documents can be used as intended.

Digital vs. Print Copies

Your estate planning attorney might have emailed you digital copies of your documents. If you're trying to save trees and cut down on clutter, you might prefer to store all your documents electronically without seeing the need for print copies. While this approach works well for credit card bills and bank statements, it is not appropriate for your estate planning documents. Ideally, you should have both print and digital copies, and here's why.

To begin with, courts and other institutions often need to have the original version of a document with the original signatures. An electronic copy of the original document is often not acceptable. So, it is important to ensure that you have access to the originals.

Another reason it's good to have print copies of your estate planning documents is that they are easier to locate when you pass away or if you become incapacitated. Even if you share information about how to access your online accounts and storage, the increasingly sophisticated security measures that are being used to restrict access to online accounts could make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the necessary people to gain access to electronic documents. Having print documents stored in a place where they are likely to be noticed in case of an emergency is a good idea.

Of course, paper is vulnerable to floods and fires, and it can be misplaced. Having your documents in electronic and print form provides a measure of extra protection and allows you to send or share copies easily.

Secure Originals in a Safe Place

To protect the original copies of your will, trust, powers of attorney, and other documents, they need to be stored in a safe place. Some estate planning attorneys offer storage for a fee, but if you choose this option, make sure you keep up with the payments or your originals could eventually be discarded.

While it might seem logical to store the documents in a safe deposit box at a bank, this can cause some problems. In a time of crisis, loved ones will need quick access to these documents and the bank may not be open. Or they may not allow the right people to have access to the box.

Many people find that the best solution is to purchase a small safe to protect the documents from fire and to store them on a high shelf in a room where they are easily accessible but protected from potential flooding. If you use the safe only for documents, then you can leave the key nearby or even in the lock for easy access.

Inform the Right People About the Documents and Where to Find the Originals

In addition to storing the documents safely, you need to make sure the right people know about them and where to find them. Some examples include:

- Telling your executor about the location of your will
- Informing select loved ones about where to find your schedule of assets listing your property
- Telling your successor trustee about where to find the trust document
- Providing your primary care physician with a copy of your medical power of attorney and advance directives
- Ensuring that those who have power of attorney have a copy of the POA documents

Banks and other institutions may need a copy of your trust documents, so having those in an easy-to-share format or having a Certification of Trust to share can be

very helpful. Many people also help their families understand their roles by holding an “estate planning fire drill.” In this exercise, you pretend that someone has died or become incapacitated, and then you walk through the steps of what needs to happen and where to find critical resources.

The Nordhaus Firm Can Help You Prepare for Whatever the Future May Bring

Whether you are just getting started with the estate planning process or you have a full set of documents and need a checkup to ensure that your plans are still on target to meet your needs, The Nordhaus Firm is ready to assist. We want to ensure that you and your family are fully protected regardless of what happens in the future. You can start with a free consultation by calling us at 214-726-1450 or contacting us online to schedule an appointment today.