



Executor's Guide and Checklist

Steps to take when a loved one dies



Jewish Council for the Aging®
Helping All Seniors Thrive®

Preparing a will is widely recognized as an essential, responsible step in caring for our loved ones after we pass. Through a will, we can specify the distribution of remaining assets and secure our legacy. However, for those tasked with carrying out our wishes—the executor—the process is time-consuming, complicated, and expensive. This guide serves to minimize the complexity and expense of the executor’s workload. This guide is written with the executor in mind, but anyone preparing a will or choosing an executor will benefit as well. In the pages that follow, you will find checklists, helpful resources, and several links to buriedinwork.com and estateexec.com, online tools developed by third parties to streamline and clarify the process. Frequent reference will be made to sections of Buried In Work™ and EstateExec™. *(note: While Buried In Work™ and EstateExec™ have proven to be useful tools to us, they are paid services. JCA has an agreement with Buried In Work™ to provide their product at a discount. Purchasers should carefully examine the product and determine its usefulness for themselves.)*

Starting the process: Have that difficult talk in a relaxed atmosphere

Although death is an uncomfortable subject, talking about it with your loved ones is a respectful and caring act. You will be better prepared to honor their memory without the stress of trying to second-guess and track down details about last wishes.

Gathering important information before death occurs

For those choosing an executor, the first step is to gather important information. Sometimes called a [roadmap for heirs](#), this can be a binder or file containing the name and contact information for doctors, banks, gardeners, accountants, and social security number, Medicare policy number, and healthcare instructions. Include a list of all social media accounts and access information. Bad actors could mine photos or other personal information from the late account owner. Each platform has [its own requirements](#) for closing an account.

(from AARP, [How to Be a Good Executor of a Will or Estate](#))

Five things to tell your future executor

1. Where the original will is located. Identify the exact spot in your home or attorney’s office. Don't put it in a safe deposit box, which can be difficult to access after death.
2. Whom to notify. List people your executor or family might not think to tell or know how to reach, such as doctors, your employer's HR chief, or clubs you belong to. Include contact info to make things easier for the person delegated with this task.
3. Your passwords. Share [passwords and access codes](#) for email, social media, other online accounts, and cellphones or computers. Provide instructions about how to handle the accounts and devices. If you don't want your executor to be able to access all this while you're alive, give the passwords to someone else you trust.
4. Who gets what. Specify what happens to personal items such as keepsakes, photos, pets, and mementos. (note: For guidance in making these decisions, see the [Who Gets Grandma's Yellow Pie Plate? Workbook](#) from University of Minnesota Extension or the [video summary](#))

5. Where your secrets are hidden. Point the executor — or another trustworthy person — to any skeletons you want cleaned from your closets, such as love letters from an ex, compromising photos, or medicine you have been covertly taking.

See **Worksheet 1**, [Buried in Work Estate Preparation 101](#), or [EstateExec – In Advance](#) for a checklist of information to collect while you still have the opportunity to talk to your loved one or client.

The real work begins: Immediate steps to take after a death occurs

The overall duties of the executor are listed below. The executor must act within the law and in the best interest of the estate and complete the tasks in a reasonable time frame.

- Collect and inventory assets, often referred to as “marshaling the assets”
- Initiate probate (if necessary)
- Protect and manage assets
- Notify government agencies, heirs, creditors, insurance, service providers and others with financial interests
- Pay outstanding taxes
- Pay outstanding debts
- Distribute remaining assets
- Prepare a final accounting of estate settlement

Several helpful checklists are available online

- [Someone Has Died – Now What?](#) from Buried in Work™
- [Immediate Steps to Take When a Loved One Dies](#) from the United Way
- [After a Death Occurs: A Checklist](#) from Legal Voice
- [First Week After Death](#) from EstateExec™
- See also **Worksheet 2** from this guide

In short, the immediate steps for the executor are as follows

- Get a legal pronouncement of death
- Contact the funeral home and/or clergy
- Contact family, friends, and employer
- Locate any written final instructions

Within the first week or two:

- Locate financial documents – this includes the will.
- Get copies of the death certificate. You will need 10-20 copies.

- Notify insurance companies, Medicare, credit card issuers, landlord, mortgage holders, and utilities

Worksheet 3 outlines the remaining tasks for the executor.

A few words about Buried in Work™ and ExtateExec™: These services came up while doing research for this guide. If you decide to purchase the [Buried in Work™](#) estate preparation package, you can use the code **JCA20** for a 20% discount. The cost of this or a similar package can be *paid for out of the assets of the estate*. A few statistics illustrate the utility of a program like this.

- On average, it takes almost 16 months to settle an estate.
- It takes an executor roughly 570 hours of effort on average to settle an estate.
- The average estate spent \$12.4K on legal and accounting fees.
- An executor has a fiduciary duty to follow the correct processes.

Whether you use one of the web-based guides or not, you may print out the remaining checklists to keep track of important information and track tasks as you go. Print as many copies of each worksheet as you wish and attach additional documents.

Templates for correspondence you will need to submit can be found on the [Buried in Work website](#). The templates fall into 9 categories:

1. Account Access, Closure, and Transfers
2. Charitable Bequests
3. Executor/Transfer of Estate Related
4. Guardianships
5. Medical/Healthcare Related
6. Notifications of Passing
7. Obituaries & End of Life Events
8. Offering Condolences
9. Power of Attorney

Worksheet 1: For the principal to present to the executor or to fill out together

Primary Contacts	Phone	Address	Email
Spouse/Partner			
Child 1			
Child 2			
Child 3			
Parent(s)			
In-law 1			
In-law 2			
In-law 3			
Other Dependent			
Employer			
Attorney			
Accountant			
Clergy			

	Instructional Documents	Location
	Living Will	
	Advance Directive	
	Ethical Will	
	Roadmap for Heirs	
	Organ Donation Instructions	
	Pre-paid Funeral Contract	
	Funeral Wishes	
	Spiritual Will	

Legal/Financial Documents	Documentation Location
Will	
Trust Agreements	
Deeds	
Mortgage or HELOC Documents	
Promissory Notes or Loans payable to the principal	
Vehicle titles and registrations	
Auto Insurance Documentation	
Life Insurance Policy	
Accidental Life Insurance Policy	
Veterans' Insurance Policy	
Pension Documents	
Funeral Insurance Policy	
Credit Card Insurance	
Health Insurance Documentation	
Property Insurance Documentation	
Workers' Compensation Insurance Policy	
Survivor Annuity Benefit Documentation	
Disability Payment Documentation	
Income statements for the current year	
Federal Income Tax Returns	
Federal Gift Tax Returns	
State Income Tax Returns	
State Gift Tax Returns (CT & MN only)	
Property Tax Records	
Social Security Card	
Passport	
Naturalization Documents	
Birth Certificates	
Marriage Certificate	
Divorce Papers	
Prenuptial Agreement	
Military Service Papers	
Domestic Partnership Registration	
Adoption Documents	
Community Property Agreement	
Driver's License	
Firearm License(s)	

	Durable Assets	Location
	Safety Deposit Box	
	Offsite Storage Unit	
	Jewelry	
	Art	
	Firearms	
	Vehicles	
	Vacation Home/Timeshare	
	Other Real Estate	
	Pets	
	Computers + passwords	
	Mobile phones + passwords	

	Debts	Documentation Location
	Mortgage 1	
	Mortgage 2	
	Home Equity Line of Credit (HELOC)	
	Lease 1	
	Lease 2	
	Vehicle Loan 1	
	Vehicle Loan 2	
	Personal Loan or Promissory Note	
	Credit Card 1	
	Credit Card 2	
	Medical Debt	
	Student Loan	

Financial Assets	Institution and Account numbers and Passwords
Bank Accounts	
Investment/Brokerage Accounts	
Stocks/Bonds	
Mutual Funds	
Annuities	

	Automatic Payments
Utilities	
Mortgage/Car Loan	
Credit Cards	
Donations	
Memberships/Dues	
Streaming Services	
Subscriptions	

Online accounts		Username and Password
Email provider:	U:	
	P:	
Facebook	U:	
	P:	
LinkedIn	U:	
	P:	
X (Twitter)	U:	
	P:	
Google Account:	U:	
	P:	
Apple (iCloud):	U:	
	P:	

Worksheet 2: Timeline Checklist

When death occurs (pre-funeral and funeral) These may fall to the family, executor, or both

Task	Date completed
Obtain a legal pronouncement of death	
Arrange for transport of the body	
Obtain and consult instructional documents (see Worksheet 1)	
Make arrangements for care of dependents and pets	
Contact other family members, friends, employer, and clergy	
Secure the home and valuables of the deceased	

First week

Task	Date completed
Obtain copies of the death certificate	
Locate the original Will	
Obtain a letter of testamentary/administration/representation from the probate court	
Locate financial and legal documents	
Notify doctors and attorney(s)	
Notify the post office and department of motor vehicles	

First month

Task	Date completed
Gain access to bank accounts to pay outstanding bills	
Cancel autopayments	
Make final utility payments and close accounts	
Make final credit card payments and cancel cards	
Apply for any appropriate death benefits	
Notify Social Security Admin, financial institutions, IRS, insurance companies, credit card companies, utilities, OPM (for federal workers)	
Publish death notice	

First quarter

Task	Date completed
Gain access to bank accounts to pay outstanding bills	
Cancel autopayments	
Make final utility payments and close accounts	
Make final credit card payments and cancel cards	
Apply for any appropriate death benefits	
Determine and notify heirs	
File IRS Form 56	
Request Employer Identification Number (EIN)	
Open estate bank account	
Inventory assets	
Inventory debts	
Conduct estate sale/dispose of unwanted assets	
Cancel prescriptions and dispose of unused medication (at pharmacy or police station)	
File outstanding medical claims	
Notify credit bureau (Experian, Equifax, or TransUnion)	

Resolve Debts and pay taxes

Task	Date completed
Gain access to bank accounts to pay outstanding bills	
Cancel autopayments	
Make final utility payments and close accounts	
Make final credit card payments and cancel cards	
Apply for any appropriate death benefits	

Closing the estate

Task	Date completed
Cancel subscriptions	
Distribute/donate/sell items from the home	
Resolve debts	
Pay local property taxes	
Submit final estate and descendant income tax forms (1040 and 1041)	
Submit final state tax filing	
Submit personal liability discharge (5495)	
Submit federal and state estate tax returns (706) if needed	
Submit heir forms (8971) if needed	
Request estate tax closing letter (627) if needed	
Make final distributions	
Compensate executor	
Submit probate final accounting	
Submit probate closing statement	
Close estate bank account	
File Final IRS Form 56	

A note on record-keeping

It's important to practice good record-keeping during this process, since you may need to account for your actions to the court or to other heirs. Whether you use Buried in Work™, another service, or your own method, you will save time, money, and aggravation if you keep meticulous records.

Worksheet 3

Calculating compensation: An executor is entitled to monetary compensation for their work. Sometimes the amount is specified in the will. Otherwise, the amount [varies from state to state](#). Compensation to an executor must be reported as taxable income on the executor's income tax return.

Finding assets and determining their value:

Check the following sources for estate assets.

	Will
	Instructional Documents (Worksheet 1 or similar)
	Decedent's lawyer or tax accountant
	Financial statements and legal documents found in the home or safe deposit box
	Statements for the decedent received by mail
	Tax returns

Date of Death value is used to calculate estate taxes, and to determine cost basis (depending on asset type) when an asset is eventually sold, either by the estate or by the heirs. Most assets will receive a step up in cost basis to the date of death value.

Value at Disposition is used to calculate estate income taxes if the asset was sold, or to calculate any state inheritance tax and appropriately allocate to heirs if the asset was distributed.

When calculating the value of an estate, the *gross* value is the sum of all asset values, and the *net* value is the gross value minus any debts: in other words, the actual worth of the estate.

Probate rules for estate valuation vary by state. Some states look at gross estate value, some at net estate value, and some have other calculations.

Online resources that can help you determine asset values:

- Stocks & Funds: Stock or fund holding company, [Yahoo Finance](#), [MarketWatch](#)
- Precious Metals: [Kitco](#), [APMEX](#)
- Vehicles: [Kelly Blue Book](#), [Edmunds](#), [Cars.com](#)
- Collectibles: [Greatest Collectibles](#), [Kovel's](#)

The valuation of household items is dictated by what a buyer would pay for those items "as is," not the original purchase price or the replacement cost and is determined as of the decedent's exact date of death.

Determining debts: The executor is required to publish a death notice so creditors can be notified. Creditors typically have 3 to 9 months to contact the estate about any debt claims. Other bills will arrive by mail over time. It is good practice to check the decedent's credit report for outstanding debts.

If the estate owes more than it is worth, it is considered *insolvent*. In this situation, the executor should seek legal assistance. The executor will need to arrange payment of federal income tax, state tax, and property tax.

What remains after expenses, debts, and taxes is distributed to the specified heirs. It is good practice to require all heirs to sign a receipt for any distributions.