



A Checklist: What to Do When a Relative Dies


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When a loved one dies, the details that need to be taken care of by survivors may be overwhelming because it is such an emotional time. This checklist is intended to be a reminder of some of the details that may need to be attended to, both immediately and afterward.

Immediately

There are tasks that family members will need to take care of very soon after a relative's death.

- Arrange for a funeral or memorial service.
- Determine if the decedent made his or her wishes regarding his or her funeral or memorial service known, either in writing or verbally.
- Contact a funeral home or memorial society.
- Tell friends and family what the plans are. Ask them to help you contact people.

- Determine if all or part of the decedent's funeral costs have been prepaid. (You can refer to agreement documents the decedent may have kept or ask at the funeral home.) Also check with the cemetery to see if the decedent paid for a plot or burial insurance.
- Submit an obituary to the decedent's local paper(s). You may want to include a charitable organization for donations if that is preferred over flowers.
- Make a list of everyone who sends donations, flowers or cards so acknowledgments can be sent.

BY THE NUMBERS

- The national median cost of a funeral in 2023 was between **\$6,000** and **\$10,000**.¹
- The executor has **30 to 90** days (depending on state law) from date of death to file an inventory and appraisal of the decedent's assets with the probate court.²

¹ "The National Funeral Directors Association, "2023 NFDA General Price List Study Shows Inflation Increasing Faster than the Cost of a Funeral," December 8, 2023.

² irs.gov.

KEY POINTS

Immediately

- Determine the decedent's wishes.
- Contact the funeral home and determine costs.
- Create an obituary.
- Track donations, flowers and cards received.

After the funeral

- Notify the decedent's attorney of the death.
- Determine if there is a will and if so, who the appointed executor is.

Down the road

- Probate can be lengthy. Work with your financial advisor or investment professional along with your legal professional to deal with the many issues involved.



This material should be used as helpful hints only. Each person's situation is different. You should consult your investment professional or other relevant professional before making any decisions.

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- If the decedent was a veteran, contact the Department of Veterans Affairs about benefits the estate may be eligible for. Veterans, service members and their dependents can be buried in a national cemetery for free. If a veteran is buried elsewhere and was entitled to receive Veterans Affairs (VA) disability payments up to the time of death, his or her estate can receive an allowance toward burial and funeral expenses. Other benefits may include a ceremonial American flag, headstone or presidential memorial certificate.
- Secure the decedent's tangible property, such as silverware, dishes, furniture or artwork. Later on, you and the executor will need to have these items appraised and distributed according to the decedent's wishes. This may be a difficult task if the property has already been distributed to various family members.

After the funeral

There are several financial matters that need to be taken care of when a relative dies. However, you may not need to take these steps immediately. You and your family will need time to grieve. Most financial advisors or investment professionals may recommend that you do not make any changes in or long-term decisions about finances for at least six months to a year after your loved one's death. But there are some issues that have to be dealt with within legal time periods. Here are some of the initial steps that may need to be taken.

- Notify the decedent's attorney about the death.
- Find out if there is a will and who was appointed executor.
- If you are named executor in the will or by the court, contact witnesses to the will. Contact the executor of the estate if someone else has been appointed to that role.
- Organize a meeting to review the will and handle the estate settlement. If interested parties are unable to attend, they can obtain copies of the will.
- The executor needs to determine the contents of the decedent's safe deposit box, if there is one, and acquire permission to remove the contents.
- Meet with the attorney (or your own attorney) to review the steps necessary to administer the decedent's estate (the probate process). Bring as much information as possible about finances, taxes and debts. Do not worry about putting the papers in order first; the lawyer will have experience in organizing and understanding complex financial statements.

Documents you should bring include the following:

- **Copies of the decedent's death certificate** (You can get these from the funeral director, and it is a good idea to get at least 10 to 20 copies.)
- **A copy of the decedent's birth certificate** (and your marriage license if the decedent is your spouse)
- **Financial statements**, including those from banks, brokerage houses and insurance agencies
- **Other financial documents**, including tax forms from prior years, unpaid credit card and utility bills and mortgage payments
- **The decedent's Social Security number and Veterans Affairs identification number**, if applicable
- Find a financial institution (i.e., a bank or credit union) in your area that can provide you with signature guarantees for certain documents, if necessary.
- Notify the decedent's creditors. Close any credit card accounts.
- Bills and bequests may be paid from a single checking account. The estate, not surviving family members, is responsible for any debts of the decedent. Paying off the debts yourself only increases the net value of the estate, which may mean higher inheritance taxes.
- The executor is responsible for distributing property to heirs and legatees. Generally, executors do not pay out all the estate assets until the period runs out for creditors to make claims, which can be as long as a year after the date of death. However, once the executor understands the estate and the likely claims, he or she can distribute most of the assets, retaining a reserve for unanticipated claims and the costs of closing out the estate.
- The executor must file an account with the probate court listing any income of the estate since the date of death and all expenses and estate distributions. Once the court approves this final account, the executor can distribute whatever is left in the closing reserve and finish his or her work.

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Deactivating Social Media Accounts

- Take inventory of the decedent's digital footprint and familiarize yourself with each platform's terms of service.
- Be aware that each platform has its own rules and conditions for getting accounts removed or memorialized.
- Decide whether to remove or memorialize the account, which often requires proof of identification of the executor and a death certificate or obituary.
- Depending on the platform, you may need to fill out an online form as part of the account removal process.

Additional steps you may need to take

- Check into whether any homeowner's or auto insurance policies offer coverage during the probate process.
- Restructure any homeowner's, casualty and life insurance policies as necessary.
- Change the registration of investment securities by contacting the decedent's financial advisor or investment professional or the brokerage firm and make sure any orders are immediately suspended.
- Change the title on any property (including real estate and automobiles) owned by the decedent.
- Contact financial institutions to determine what information they need and how to change the registration on any accounts the decedent may have had.
- If you have any joint bank accounts with the decedent, have the latter's name removed.
- Review your own estate plan, including insurance policies, legal documents, investment plans, etc., and revise as necessary.
- File a federal estate tax return within nine months of the death if the estate's value exceeds the estate tax exemption for the year of death. It is essential to seek advice from an experienced estate planning professional. It may also be necessary for a final tax return to be filed on behalf of the decedent.
- Contact the employee benefits department of the decedent's employer to determine what death benefits may be payable and to whom. It may be necessary to provide several certified copies of the death certificate as well as other requested documentation.

Understanding benefits

Determine how to arrange for any income you may be getting from the decedent's retirement plan, union survivor, Social Security or veterans' benefits or life insurance policies.

■ Social Security benefits

If the decedent was receiving Social Security benefits, notify the Social Security Administration (SSA) promptly. In most cases, the funeral home will report the person's death to the SSA. You should provide the funeral home with the decedent's Social Security number if you want them to make the report.

If you are the spouse of the decedent and want to inquire about Social Security survivors benefits, you need to go to your local Social Security office in person. Bring the decedent's Social Security number, death certificate (a certified copy) and proof of relationship (such as a marriage license).

A one-time lump-sum death payment of \$255 can be paid to the surviving spouse if he or she was living with the deceased. The widow or widower can also receive monthly benefits, generally beginning at age 60 (50 if disabled), or at any age if he or she is caring for an eligible minor (under age 16 or disabled).

The SSA can be reached at 1-800-772-1213 where you can take advantage of automated telephone services 24 hours a day or speak to a Social Security representative between the hours of 8 a.m. and 7 p.m., Monday through Friday.³

■ Veterans' benefits

You should go to the office in person and bring the decedent's birth certificate, Social Security number, death certificate and Veterans Affairs records. Benefits going to a spouse and heirs may include pension payments and financial aid for education costs. Please call the Department of Veterans Affairs first at 1-800-272-1000 to confirm services or get help by phone or video. Help is available Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. ET.⁴

³ SSA.gov.

⁴ Va.gov.

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■ Insurance benefits

If you are the beneficiary under an insurance policy, contact the insurance company or agent to obtain the death claim forms you will need to complete and submit. With the forms, you will need to include a certified copy of the death certificate.

■ Retirement plan and pension benefits

If you are the beneficiary of any retirement or pension plan of the decedent, call the employee benefits department of the company that sponsors the plan and determine what your payment options are and what paperwork the plan requires you to submit.

Down the road

The probate process can be lengthy, sometimes stretching to two to three years or longer. In some instances, however, probate may be avoided completely, such as when an estate consists of trust assets. The executor should be able to anticipate how long the settlement of the estate will take.

There is no quick fix for the grief and stress experienced after the death of a loved one. Survivors are often counseled to put off making any extraordinary changes in their lives — such as moving, reinvesting assets or selling the family home — too soon after a loss. Making important decisions immediately could mean having regrets later. Instead, it may be best to take time to grieve and heal from one of life's inevitable, but most traumatic, experiences.

Resources

AARP

1-888-687-2277 aarp.org

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping older Americans achieve lives of independence, dignity and purpose. AARP's website has online publications and links for funeral planning information.

Funeral Consumers Alliance

1-802-865-8300 funerals.org

FCA is a consumer organization that provides information about alternatives for funeral or non-funeral dispositions. It encourages advanced planning and cost efficiency.

Selected Independent Funeral Homes

1-800-323-4219 selectedfuneralhomes.org

Selected Independent Funeral Homes is a national association of funeral firms. Membership is by invitation only and conditioned upon the commitment of each firm to comply with the association's Code of Good Funeral Practice. Consumers may view a variety of publications in the site's Smart Consumer Information section.

Federal Trade Commission

1-202-326-2222 consumer.ftc.gov

The FTC offers a consumer guide to funerals. Click the "Shopping and Donating" tab, select "Funerals" from the menu then "Shopping for Funeral Services".

USAGov

1-844-872-4681 usa.gov/report-a-death

USA.gov provides a list of government agencies and programs to notify after a death.

Contact your financial advisor or investment professional for more information or visit mfs.com.

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