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Death of a Family Member Checklist

If your loved one was a veteran, you may be eligible for burial and memorial benefits. Call 1-800-827-1000 to find the nearest VA regional office.

Duplicate copies of marriage and birth certificates are available at the county clerk's office where the marriage and births occurred. Veterans and the next of kin of deceased veterans can submit an online request for separation documents and other service personnel records via eVetRecs, a service available through the National Archives at www.archives.gov.

If there is no one authorized to open the decedent's safe-deposit box, petition the probate court for an order to open.

Losing a loved one can be a difficult experience. Yet, during this time, you must complete a variety of tasks and make important financial decisions. You may need to make final arrangements, notify various businesses and government agencies, settle the individual's estate, and provide for your own financial security. The following checklist may help guide you through the matters that must be attended to upon the death of a family member.

Note: *Some of the following tasks may have to be completed by the estate's executor.*

Initial tasks

- Upon the death of your loved one, call close family members, friends, and clergy first--you'll need their emotional support.
- Arrange the funeral, burial or cremation, and memorial service. Hopefully, the decedent will have made arrangements ahead of time. Look among his or her papers for a letter of instruction containing final wishes. Such instructions may also be stated in his or her will or other estate planning documents. Arrange any cultural rituals, and make any anatomical gifts.
- Notify family and friends of the final arrangements.
- Alert your loved one's place of work, union, and professional organizations, and any organizations where he or she may have volunteered.
- Contact your own employer and arrange for bereavement leave.
- Place an obituary in the local paper.
- Obtain certified copies of the death certificate. The family doctor or medical examiner should provide you with the death certificate within 24 hours of the death. The funeral home should complete the form and file it with the state. Get several certified copies (photocopies may not be accepted)--you will need them when applying for benefits and settling the estate.
- Review your family member's financial affairs, and look for estate planning documents, such as a will and trusts, and other relevant documents, such as deeds and titles. Also locate any marriage certificate, birth or adoption certificates of children, and military discharge papers, which you may need to apply for benefits. These documents may be found in a safe-deposit box, or the decedent's attorney may have copies.
- Report the death to Social Security by calling 1-800-772-1213. If your loved one was receiving benefits via direct deposit, request that the bank return funds received for the month of death and thereafter to Social Security. Do not cash any Social Security checks received by mail. Return all checks to Social Security as soon as possible. Surviving spouses and other family members may be eligible for a $255 lump-sum death benefit and/or survivor's benefits. Go to www.ssa.gov for more information.
- Make a list of the decedent's assets. Put safeguards in place to protect any property. Make sure mortgage and insurance payments continue to be made while the estate is being settled.
- Arrange to retrieve your loved one's belongings from his or her workplace. Collect any salary, vacation, or sick pay owed to your loved one, and be sure to ask about continuing health insurance coverage and potential survivor's benefits for a spouse or children. Unions and professional organizations may also offer death benefits. If the death was work-related, the decedent's estate or beneficiaries may be entitled to worker's compensation benefits.
- Contact past employers regarding pension plans, and contact any IRA custodians or trustees. Review designated beneficiaries and post-death distribution options.
- Locate insurance policies. The policies could include individual and group life insurance, mortgage insurance, auto credit life insurance, accidental death and dismemberment, credit card insurance, and annuities. Contact all insurance

Do not be hasty when settling your loved one's estate. Important decisions need to be made regarding distributions, which must be made in compliance with the will and applicable laws. Seek an experienced estate planning attorney for advice.

If your family member didn't already make final arrangements or leave final instructions, go to www.funerals.org for some helpful information about funerals, burials, and memorial services.

companies to file claims.

- Contact all credit card companies and let them know of the death. Cancel all cards unless you're named on the account and wish to retain the card.
- Retitle jointly held assets, such as bank accounts, automobiles, stocks and bonds, and real estate.
- If the decedent owned, controlled, or was a principal in a business, check to see if there are any buy-sell agreements under which his or her interest must be sold.

Within 3 to 9 months after death

- File the will with the appropriate probate court. If real estate was owned out of state, file ancillary probate in that state also. If there is no will, contact the probate court for instructions, or contact a probate attorney for assistance.
- Notify the decedent's creditors by mail and by placing a notice in the newspaper. Claims must be made within the statute of limitations, which varies from state to state (30 days from actual notice is common). Insist upon proof of all claims.
- A federal estate tax return may need to be filed within 9 months of death. State laws vary, but state estate tax and/or inheritance tax returns may also need to be filed. Federal and state income taxes are due for the year of death on the normal filing date, unless an extension is requested. If there are trusts, separate income tax returns may need to be filed. You may want to seek the advice of a tax professional.

Within 9 to 12 months after death

- Update your own estate plan if your loved one was a beneficiary or appointed as an agent, trustee, or guardian.
- Update beneficiary designations on your retirement plans, including IRAs, and transfer-on-death accounts on which the decedent was named beneficiary.
- Reevaluate your budget, and short-term and long-term finances.
- Reevaluate your insurance needs, and update beneficiary designations on insurance policies on which the decedent was the named beneficiary.
- Reevaluate investment options.

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