



Getting Started....
Some Advice for Families
on Care Giving Issues

Mother had always been quite dependent on Dad. He handled all the family financial affairs, and took care of most of the maintenance around the house, such as when the heater went out and the yard needed mowing. When he had a stroke last fall and became totally incapacitated, no one close to him knew how to provide for his lengthy and expensive convalescent care, or even where to begin to find all the information and resources needed to plan for his long-term care needs.

Today, more than 22 million American households provide some level of support to a family member 50 years of age or older—a 300 percent increase over the preceding decade. Whether you are an older person thinking about your own care and retirement planning needs, or a family member who may become a caregiver yourself, you should begin putting together a legal and financial plan that all family members can live with.

Communication among family members is the indispensable and most critical first step for putting a care plan into action. In many families, talking candidly about money matters can be uncomfortable, dredging up unresolved family tensions. However, delaying the job of sorting out these complex financial matters until a health related crisis strikes unexpectedly can cost precious time and effectively deny parents the opportunity to make several important decisions impacting the quality of their own lives.

The objective of the initial discussion should be to open a dialogue between parents and grown children, with no key family member excluded. Ideally, the parents will recognize the need for their kids to know their financial status, preferences for how resources should be used, and where critical records are kept. For their part, the children need to be mindful that one parent's health may be more precarious than the other's. This can raise the issue of meeting that parent's special needs while ensuring that there are sufficient resources for the surviving mother or father.

At some point, whether to get the conversation going initially or to mediate differences that can arise, the family may require the services of a care management professional. An elderlaw attorney can guide a family through the legal thickets of benefit eligibility and draft wills, trusts, and other legal documents necessary. A qualified geriatric care manager can devise a care plan and estimate its costs, to include serving as a moderator for family planning meetings. The key for maintaining family peace throughout the process is to keep

all immediate family members—including a parent’s second spouse or significant other—informed at every step.

Before deciding on any finalized version of a care plan, you will need to gather and organize key financial and legal documents. These should include records of all income sources: Social Security documents, pension records, IRA statements, and any other investment, bank or brokerage records from institutions where the parent maintains accounts. Determine what insurance coverage parents have, including life, health, disability, long-term care, and supplemental Medicare coverage, as well as homeowners and automobile or other policies.

You should also review the location and content of deeds for the primary residence and any other properties owned individually or jointly with others. It is also helpful to take stock of any significant personal property such as antiques, jewelry, or family heirlooms, along with records that could be useful in establishing their value. And if parents do not have a will or living trust drawn up in conformity to the rules of the state where they reside, have an attorney prepare these documents immediately.

As a precaution and in the event of emergencies, create an inventory of all key records, including the names of financial institutions, account numbers, phone numbers, and addresses. One or more of the adult children should keep copies of this list, with a backup turned over to the parent’s attorney or executor.

The family should begin taking legal steps to ensure that important financial decisions are made consistent with the parent’s wishes. The durable power of attorney is an instrument which even healthier, younger family members should empower a spouse, executor, close friend, or trusted advisor with to make legally binding decisions for them in the event of their incapacity. Unlike a medical proxy, which empowers someone to intervene in decisions involving medical care in case of incapacity, the durable power of attorney can be drawn up by an attorney to reflect the elder’s express wishes for the use of his or her financial resources. Under a “springing” power of attorney, the parent can stipulate under what conditions the power will be activated. The parent, or grantor, can also impose obligations on the person named to act on his/her behalf to continue support of the elder’s companion, for example, or pay a grandchild’s tuition bills.

To learn more about starting a conversation on aging and caregiving concerns in your family, contact your Eldercare Information & Referral Program at 1-800-253-9236. As a Quest member, you are eligible for one free telephonic consultation per contract year.

