

Important Records Survivors Should Keep

This information is meant to be a general introduction to this topic. The purpose is to provide a starting point for you to become more informed about important matters that may be affecting your life as a survivor and to provide ideas about steps you can take to learn more. This information is not intended nor should it be interpreted as providing professional legal and financial advice. You should consult a trained professional for more information.

As a survivor, you may have a lot of paperwork in your life. You might think that keeping and organizing this information is too time consuming or even unnecessary. Yet, having copies of important documents such as employment records, insurance policies, medical reports, receipts, invoices, tax records and financial statements will probably be of great benefit to you. For example, some of this information is required at tax time, and it is also likely to be needed during the process of applying for medical benefits. In addition, these records can also help you to keep track of your medical progress.

Although you might not welcome the idea of dealing with paperwork and record keeping, keep in mind that you do not have to do everything all at once. If you do not feel well enough to find and organize your records by yourself right now, ask someone you trust to help you. In the end, the planning and organizing that will go into your record keeping process will make life easier for you and your loved ones.

A review of the records you already have is a good starting place. You will most likely want to get copies of the documents you do not have. That way, you or a trusted family member or friend will be able to quickly access the information that is needed, especially in case of an emergency.

This document focuses on keeping records that are likely to be important to survivors, including:

- Employment benefit records
- Insurance policies
- MIB reports
- Social Security benefit records
- Health records
- Credit reports
- Personal financial records
- Advance care directives
- Will and living trust
- Other important documents

1. Employment Benefit Records: Employer-provided benefits include health insurance and disability plans, vacation time, sick leave and personal days. A written record of these policies will help explain the benefits provided by your employer that would be related to your medical condition.

An employee handbook or company Web site should have your company benefit information in one place. If not, ask your benefit coordinator for a copy as well as an explanation of the employer-provided benefits you are eligible to receive.

2. Insurance Policies: An insurance policy spells out your coverage, as well as the procedures that must be followed to file a claim for benefits.

The insurance policies you have may include:

- Health and hospital insurance
- Excess liability insurance
- Life insurance
- Long-term care insurance
- Long-term disability insurance
- Property and casualty policies, including fire, liability and auto
- Short-term disability insurance
- Workers' compensation if you have in-home employees

If you do not have a copy of each of your insurance policies, contact your insurance company and request a copy. **Remember, you do not have to disclose your cancer history when asking for these policies.** Simply explain that you have misplaced your copy of the policy and need another.

3. The MIB Group, Inc. Report (formerly known as the Medical Information Bureau): Although you may not be familiar with the MIB Group, the medical and other information they have about you could affect your ability to get insurance coverage.

An association of more than 500 insurance companies from the United States and Canada, the MIB was created by insurance companies to protect themselves from fraud. They do this by sharing information about applicants for insurance policies with their member companies. The results of investigative reports (underwriting) done by the insurance companies are combined with the information in the MIB report and compared with your application for life, health or disability insurance.

An error in your MIB records could prevent you from obtaining insurance coverage, or impact how much you have to pay for a policy, so it is a good idea to check your MIB report to ensure that it is accurate. If you discover a mistake, you can request a correction from the MIB, as well as a reinvestigation by the insurer that provided the inaccurate information.

4. Social Security Personal Earnings and Benefit Record: The Social Security Administration (SSA) keeps track of your taxable earnings throughout your work life. The amount and timing of your earnings determine your Social Security benefits. Benefits may include disability income if you become unable to work, or retirement payments that you may be able to collect even before you retire if you become disabled.

A copy of your work history and earnings (Personal Earnings and Benefits Estimate Statement) should be sent to you each year by the SSA. If you have not received this report in the last year, contact the SSA to verify that your name, social security number, date of birth and address on file are correct.

When you receive the information from the SSA:

- Check your work history and earnings to make sure that this earnings history information is correct.
- Be sure you understand what government-sponsored benefits you would receive if you retire or become disabled. For example, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is based on disability and having limited income and resources, not on your work history.

5. Health Records: Keep information about your health organized and easily accessible, such as in a journal, file folders, or 3-ring binder. Keep this information organized by date of the services received.

Keep the originals or copies of the following records and information about your health history:

- Copies of medical records, receipts, invoices and statements for prescriptions, medical equipment, and doctor and hospital visits
- Contact information for all the of the professionals, including social workers, physical and occupational therapists, nurses and doctors you see now or have seen in the past
- Information about medications, vitamins and allergies
- Medical treatment history, including dates, diagnoses, and other information
- Lists of medical symptoms and concerns

Your health information can be used in many situations, including:

- Asking for a reasonable accommodation or adjustment to your work environment or schedule so that you can continue to work

- Filing a claim if you experience discrimination at work
- Completing applications for insurance policies
- Preparing your tax returns

6. Credit Reports: A credit report includes information on where you live, how you pay your bills, and whether you have been sued, arrested, or filed for bankruptcy. There are three rating companies that are likely to have a file on your borrowing history, including how much you have borrowed and whether or not you have paid your debts on time. These companies sell the information in your report to creditors, insurers, employers and other businesses that use it to evaluate your applications for credit, insurance, employment or renting a home.

The Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) promotes the accuracy and privacy of information in the files of the nation's three major consumer reporting companies or credit bureaus: Equifax, Experian and TransUnion. The FCRA requires that each of these companies provide you with a free copy of your credit report, at your request, once every 12 months.

Each of these bureaus also gives you a borrowing score, called a credit score or a credit rating, which is a brief way of describing your credit history. Lenders check with these bureaus before agreeing to lend you money.

Be sure to check your information with all three bureaus as they do not necessarily have the same information on you. Lenders may use any of the three when considering your application. You may order your reports from each of the three nationwide consumer reporting companies at the same time, or you can order your report from one company at a time.

Check your credit history and the rating assigned to you by the credit rating companies at least once a year to be sure each report is accurate, and to keep errors from becoming a part of your record. Keep in mind that if you apply for a mortgage or loan, you are entitled to a copy of the credit report received by the lender.

If you are concerned about a sudden need for cash or the possibility of credit fraud, consider checking your credit history, but not necessarily your credit rating, every three to six months. There are companies that offer to correct your credit for a fee. However, there is nothing they can do about your credit that you cannot do yourself for free.

7. Personal Financial Records: Keeping good financial records is not only useful, but is required if you are ever audited by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Being organized will also help you accurately assess and present your financial condition if you apply for disability benefits or for financial assistance, such as a loan.

The length of time you should keep your records varies with the type of document and from individual to individual. Contact your accountant or state tax commissioner for specific information related to your situation.

The following is a basic list of personal financial records you need to keep:

- A record of all your bank accounts and investments, including stocks, bonds, real estate, and your retirement accounts and other assets.
- A record of all your designated beneficiary information for each bank account, investment account, life insurance policy and other accounts.
- A list of all your debts, including credit cards, mortgage, vehicle loans and other obligations.
- Instructions and computer passwords relating to automatic payments, such as home rent or mortgage, utilities, insurance, credit cards, auto and other loans.
- Titles and ownership documents for your boat, automobiles and other vehicles.
- Notation of anticipated future income that is out of the ordinary for you, such as expected inheritances.
- Notation of any expected future losses that would not be typical, such as future debt that you anticipate.
- Statements for bank, credit card and investment accounts for at least the last year. These can provide an idea of expected expenses and a record of purchases.
- Records of your tax returns for at least seven years. Keep in mind that there is no time limit on an IRS audit if they suspect a fraudulent return or if you did not file your return.
- Keep paycheck stubs for at least one year and check the information against the W-2 form you receive from your employer at the end of the year to ensure it is accurate.

8. Advance directives: These signed legal documents give you the control and legal ability to state exactly how you want to be cared for and who you want to make decisions for you if you become incapacitated.

Check the laws of your state to learn the legal requirements for advance directives because there are many types, and they can be very complicated to set up. Workshops providing information on preparing advance directives are often offered through local education and medical programs. If you would like help, discuss your thoughts about

advance care directives with an attorney and trusted loved ones. Remember to also discuss your wishes concerning health care and treatment directives with your doctors(s).

The following are common types of medical and financial advance directives:

Medical Advance Directives

- **DNR (Do not resuscitate order)** - An advance directive that states that no life-saving medical procedures, including CPR, are to be used if the heart or breathing stops.
- **Out-of-hospital DNR** - An advance directive that is available in some states for hospice patients to specify their wishes that no life-saving medical procedures be used if the heart or breathing stops.
- **Durable power of attorney for health care** - A document that allows you to transfer your legal right to make health decisions to your agent or proxy only while you are incapacitated.
- **Living will** - A statement that tells your family and your doctor that you do not want your life prolonged by medical procedures if you are near death without any chance for recovery.

Financial Advance Directives

- **Conservator** - A person appointed by the court to make decisions for you if you are unable to do so and do not have a durable power of attorney for financial affairs and/or a durable power of attorney for health care.
- **Guardian** - A person appointed by the court to make necessary decisions for minor children for a specified period of time should you become unable to do so.
- **Durable power of attorney** - A document that lets you appoint a trusted person to speak and act on your behalf (your agent or proxy) to make financial decisions for you only while you are unable to do so.
- **Revocable living trust** - An arrangement you make for the management and distribution of your property. You can provide instructions to hold or distribute your property for the benefit of a beneficiary or beneficiaries.
- **Directives concerning minor children** - Documents that ensure that in the event of your incapacity or death, your children are taken care of in accordance with your wishes rather than those of a court-appointed guardian.

You can modify or eliminate arrangements at any time through a trust. Keep in mind that if you become unable to make your own choices and do not have an advance directive, a

person that you may want to make your decisions as your agent may not be considered. This is particularly true if the person is not related to you, such as an unmarried partner.

9. Will: A will is a very important legal document that states how you would like your property to be distributed when you die. A will can also state who you want to name as the guardian(s) of your children.

Your will should specify:

- Who is to receive your assets or who your beneficiaries will be
- What the beneficiaries will receive
- When the beneficiaries will receive the assets
- How the distribution of your assets is to be done

10. Other Documents and Information a Survivor May Need: To help a trusted family member or friend locate your important records in an emergency, write down where the following can be located:

- Information concerning family members and beneficiaries, such as:
 - Social Security numbers
 - Birth certificates
 - Marriage and divorce records
 - Immunization records
 - Military records and discharge papers
- Your "list of instructions" with information about important matters in your life
- The location of keys or lock combinations for lock boxes or filing cabinets
- Notification list for emergencies, including names, phone numbers, addresses and email addresses.

Keeping Originals and Copies of Important Documents

Give copies of important legal documents directly to the person who is responsible for carrying out those provisions, including your will, the signed durable power of attorney forms and other advance directives. You should have a copy of these documents for yourself, but do not keep any advance directives in your safe-deposit box as they would not be easily accessible when needed.

Store your will and other important documents in a safe place, but make sure that trusted family or friends know where these documents are and how they can get to them in an emergency. It is often recommended that original documents be kept with your attorney, while a copy that tells the location of the original is stored in a safe place in your home.

Guidelines for storage of important documents vary from state to state, but are generally as follows:

Documents	Where to Store Documents
Directives concerning minor children	<p>Original(s): In possession of the named guardian</p> <p>Copies: With your attorney</p>
DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) Order	<p>Original: With your doctor</p> <p>Copies: With the representative or agent you have designated to act on your behalf or a close family member ("next of kin")</p> <p>Next of kin is defined differently in each state but the legal order is usually: 1) spouse, 2) children or parents, 3) grandchildren, 4) siblings, 5) nieces or nephews</p>
Durable power of attorney for financial affairs	<p>Duplicate Signed Originals: With you and your attorney</p> <p>Copies: With your appointed representative and alternate(s)</p>
Durable power of attorney for health care	<p>Duplicate Signed Originals: With your representative and your attorney</p> <p>Copies: With your primary doctor, pharmacist, nursing home and/or hospital</p> <p>In addition, talk with close relatives about your wishes.</p>
Living will	<p>Duplicate Signed Originals: With your doctor and your representative</p> <p>Copies: Other copies are not needed, but talk with close relatives about your wishes.</p>
Out-of-hospital DNR	<p>Duplicate Signed Originals: Signed original document posted where the hospice patient resides</p> <p>Duplicate signed original with the doctor</p> <p>Copies: With representative and/or close relative(s); also talk with close relatives about your wishes</p>

Revocable living trust	Duplicate Signed Originals: In your possession and with your attorney Copies: With your trustee(s)
Will	Signed Original: In your possession or with your attorney Copy: In a safe place that can easily be accessed by your representative

Making the effort to collect important records and information now can actually save you a lot of time, stress and even expense in the future. If this task seems overwhelming, you may want to ask trusted people in your life to help you get what you need. Organized records will help you or others to quickly locate the information when it is needed.

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