

Planning Ahead



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What To Do After Someone Dies

As a practical matter, what do you do after someone dies? First are the calls to loved ones. You don't have to make all the calls yourself – ask others to help.

Next is making arrangements for the body, euphemistically referred to as “disposition of remains”. If the decedent left instructions for burial, cremation or funeral, those instructions must be followed. If no written instructions can be found, then California law gives authority to a surviving spouse, followed by children, followed by other relatives to direct disposition of remains. Death Certificates can be ordered through the mortuary. It is usually better to order more copies than you think you will need. Other immediate actions include caring for pets and securing the home.

The next step is to find the Will. The logical first place to look is in and around a person's desk or bookshelf. It is common for there to be a binder or notebook of documents on a shelf, or large envelope of documents in a drawer. Another usual place is a safe deposit box. If you have the key, you can easily access the safe deposit box to look. If the search is unsuccessful, there may be an attorney's card or name in the person's address book. If no Will is found, it would not be unusual. Statistically, less than half of us have a Will, although the percentage gets higher the older the age group.

Whether there is or isn't a Will, and even if the person had a Trust, you need legal advice. Mistakes can be costly, and the adage is true: “you don't know what you don't know”. But the attorney does know and will guide you through the process of settling the estate. You don't have to, nor should you, “go it alone.”

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