

Suggestions to Get Started with Your Estate Plan

By: Stella Knight

You've heard the old saying: "Don't put off until tomorrow what you should do today." Because of your busy lifestyle, there are many people, places, and activities vying for your time and attention. It's up to you to prioritize your tasks. Don't wait until a crisis before deciding to take action and prepare a will or other estate planning documents. If you wait, some of your options may be limited or off the table. Relax. You have time to prepare – here are some suggestions to get started with developing your estate plan.

1. Identify your (and your spouse's) assets and liabilities.

Remember to include 401(k) and 403(b) plan balances, as well as life insurance, jointly owned assets, and your individual retirement accounts (IRAs). If you bought your home years ago, it may have a significantly higher value in today's market. This is the size of your estate.

2. Determine how each asset is titled (individually, joint with rights of survivorship, etc.) Many assets will pass by operation of law, outside of your will or trust. For example, bank accounts with rights or survivorship will pass to the surviving co-owner. Be sure your individual assets are coordinated to achieve your overall estate plan objectives.

3. Decide on your estate plan objectives. Are there special circumstances to consider: family members with special needs, farming operations or other business operations, or an incompetent or incapacitated spouse? Who are your heirs? Are tax strategies one of your objectives? Unless you have a will, your special friend, charity, or distant cousin will not receive anything from your estate at your death.

At this point, you may be concerned with just getting something in place. A simple will may serve your needs for now and you can always amend or change your will later to reflect changes in your circumstances or family situations. Having something in place will give you peace of mind. At a later date you may consider other legal documents such as: durable power of attorney, health care power of attorney, and revocable living trust. These documents are extremely valuable tools and useful during a person's lifetime.

Visit my website at www.stellaknightlaw.com for an estate planning worksheet to get you started.

Stella Knight is an attorney practicing in Hertford, North Carolina – Perquimans County. She is licensed in North Carolina and Florida, with a major area of her law practice emphasizing estate planning, probate, trusts, wealth preservation and elder law. The information contained in

this article is one of a general nature and does not constitute legal advice. If you have questions, consult with a qualified attorney.