



# THE WHITE PAPER

## Your Guide to Life Planning

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### Advance Directives: Planning Ahead for Your Own Care

Although the thought may not be pleasant, you may someday face a sudden health crisis that leaves you unable to make your own medical decisions. Fortunately, there is a legal means, known as an advance directive, to address this potential concern.

An advance directive is a written statement that you complete prior to a serious illness. Generally speaking, this document names someone to act on your behalf or outlines how you want medical decisions to be made when you are no longer able to make decisions for yourself. Some types of advance directives may do more for you than others, so it is important to know the differences.

#### Why a Health Care Proxy?

The two most common forms of advance directive are a living will and a durable power of attorney for health care, commonly referred to as a health care proxy. A living will explains in writing the care you wish to receive or avoid in the event you are incapacitated. For instance, it can express your wishes for controlling pain, receiving nutrition, or making life-support decisions.

But unlike a living will, a health care proxy allows you to legally designate someone, a proxy, to make medical decisions for you. In some states you may even be able to combine a health care proxy and living will into a single document.

Hospitals and nursing homes are required to ask about the existence of an advance directive when you are admitted. In most states, a health care proxy does not take effect until you can no longer make medical decisions for yourself; until then, only you can legally consent to any treatment. In addition, you can always change or cancel the document as long as you are mentally alert. If you decide to make changes to these documents, be sure to do so in writing.

#### Know the Potential Drawbacks

Though it is a legal document, a health care proxy cannot handle every medical situation. For instance, the advance directive may not be followed by emergency medical services (EMS). If EMS is summoned to treat you, they are usually required to resuscitate and stabilize you until you reach the hospital, regardless of an existing advance directive.

A lawyer can provide you with additional information about advance directives. Though you cannot anticipate an unexpected health care crisis, you can prepare ahead of time to ensure that you are cared for in a manner that coincides with your intentions.

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