After a Loved One Dies

A Financial and Estate Administration Timeline for Families

Name of loved one	Date of death	Executor / primary contact	Checklist last updated

Purpose: This timeline offers a general, practical framework for surviving family members, executors, and trustees. Requirements, deadlines, taxes, and probate procedures vary by state and circumstances. Consult a qualified estate-planning attorney and tax professional before taking significant action.

Important: Do not rush to sell property, distribute assets, close accounts, make investment changes, or pay substantial claims before confirming legal authority and getting appropriate advice. The original will, trust documents, beneficiary designations, account ownership, and applicable state law may affect what happens next.

At a Glance

Time period	Primary focus	What matters most
First 24–72 hours	Protect people, property, and essential records	Locate documents, secure property, arrange immediate care and notifications.
First 1–2 weeks	Gather facts and identify authority	Obtain death certificates, contact professionals, begin benefits and account notifications.
First 30–90 days	Open and administer the estate as needed	Work with counsel, inventory assets, manage bills, address claims and taxes.
Following months	Complete administration carefully	Protect assets, document transactions, distribute only when appropriate, and close the estate.

First 24–72 Hours

☐ Notify close family members, friends, and any person who needs to know immediately.

☐ Arrange for care of dependents, pets, and the home.

☐ Secure the residence, vehicles, valuables, mail, keys, financial papers, and electronic devices.

☐ Locate the original will, trust documents, powers of attorney, health-care documents, and any final-wishes instructions.

☐ Determine whether a funeral, burial, cremation, memorial, or religious service was prearranged or requested.

☐ Do not remove, sell, gift, or distribute property based only on informal verbal instructions.

☐ Make a list of immediate expenses and retain all receipts.

☐ Request multiple certified copies of the death certificate; financial institutions, insurers, and government agencies may require them.

Key facts to record

Item	Information / location	Person responsible	Completed?
Original will and trust documents			☐ Yes ☐ No
Estate-planning attorney			☐ Yes ☐ No
Executor / trustee named in documents			☐ Yes ☐ No
Home, vehicle, and valuable-property security			☐ Yes ☐ No

Funeral or final-wishes information			☐ Yes ☐ No
Death certificates ordered / received			☐ Yes ☐ No

First 1–2 Weeks

☐ Contact the estate-planning attorney to review the will, trust, authority to act, and next legal steps.

☐ Notify the executor, trustee, and any other people named to serve, if they are not already involved.

☐ Contact the deceased person's financial planner, accountant, insurance professional, and employer or benefits office, as appropriate.

☐ Forward or monitor mail and watch for financial statements, bills, insurance notices, tax documents, and account information.

☐ Notify banks, brokerages, retirement-plan custodians, insurers, and other institutions of the death according to their procedures.

☐ Contact Social Security and other benefit providers when applicable; ask each organization about required documents and procedures.

☐ Review automatic payments and recurring charges, but do not close accounts or stop payments without considering outstanding obligations and legal guidance.

☐ Document all conversations, dates, names, claims numbers, and documents sent or received.

Contact and notification tracker

Organization or person	Date contacted	Contact name / reference	Documents requested or sent	Follow-up date
Estate-planning attorney				
Financial planner				
Accountant / tax professional				
Employer / benefits office				
Social Security or other government benefit				
Bank / credit union				
Brokerage / investment firm				
Insurance company / annuity issuer				
Retirement-plan custodian				
Mortgage lender / property manager				

First 30–90 Days

☐ Follow the attorney's direction on filing the will and opening probate or estate administration, if required.

☐ If an estate is opened, obtain the appropriate legal authority before acting for the estate. In New Jersey, uncontested probate matters are generally handled through the county Surrogate; in Pennsylvania, the Register of Wills handles probate and grants authority to an executor or administrator.

☐ Obtain a complete inventory of assets, liabilities, income sources, insurance coverage, and property.

☐ Request date-of-death values for investment accounts, retirement accounts, real estate, business interests, and other assets when appropriate.

☐ Determine which assets pass through the estate, trust, joint ownership, beneficiary designation, or transfer-on-death/payable-on-death arrangement.

☐ Protect and maintain property; verify insurance coverage, monitor taxes, mortgages, utilities, maintenance, and necessary repairs.

☐ Address valid bills and creditor claims only in coordination with the executor, attorney, or other authorized professional.

☐ Open an estate bank account if directed and keep estate funds separate from personal funds.

☐ Ask tax professionals about the final individual income-tax return, estate income-tax returns, and applicable state inheritance or estate-tax matters.

☐ Keep a detailed record of every payment, deposit, valuation, communication, and distribution.

Asset and liability inventory

Category	Located?	Institution, address, or description	Owner / beneficiary information	Notes / next step
Bank and cash accounts	☐ Yes ☐ No			
Brokerage and investment accounts	☐ Yes ☐ No			
IRAs, 401(k)s, pensions, and benefits	☐ Yes ☐ No			
Life insurance and annuities	☐ Yes ☐ No			
Real estate	☐ Yes ☐ No			
Vehicles and titled property	☐ Yes ☐ No			
Business interests or private investments	☐ Yes ☐ No			
Debts, loans, and recurring bills	☐ Yes ☐ No			
Digital assets and online accounts	☐ Yes ☐ No			

Following Months

☐ Continue to follow the estate attorney's instructions regarding notices, claims, probate filings, and deadlines.

☐ Maintain and insure estate property until it is transferred or sold with appropriate authority.

☐ Keep beneficiaries reasonably informed, while following legal advice and the terms of the will or trust.

☐ Do not make distributions until debts, claims, expenses, taxes, and any required reserves have been considered.

☐ Review whether investments or assets require professional management while the estate is being administered.

☐ File required final individual and estate tax returns. The IRS states that a surviving spouse, executor, administrator, or other legal representative may have responsibilities for final tax returns and the estate.

☐ Obtain required releases, receipts, or approvals before final distributions, as advised by counsel.

☐ Complete final accounting, distribute assets according to the governing documents and applicable law, and close estate accounts when administration is complete.

Before Distributing Assets

Question to confirm	Status	Notes / professional guidance received
Do we have the legal authority to distribute this asset?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unknown	
Does the asset pass under the will, trust, joint ownership, or a beneficiary designation?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unknown	
Have valid debts, expenses, taxes, and potential claims been considered?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unknown	
Has the asset been valued, protected, and insured if needed?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unknown	
Have necessary professional advisers reviewed tax, legal, and investment implications?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unknown	
Have we retained documentation of the decision and distribution?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unknown	

Estate Records to Keep

☐ Death certificates and funeral-related expenses

☐ Will, trust, court filings, and letters of authority

☐ Account statements, date-of-death valuations, and asset inventories
☐ Insurance claims, benefit forms, and correspondence
☐ Bills, creditor notices, debts, and payment records
☐ Tax returns, tax notices, and accountant correspondence
☐ Property expenses, insurance records, repairs, and maintenance documents
☐ Beneficiary communications, receipts, releases, and distribution records
☐ Notes from meetings with attorneys, accountants, financial professionals, and institutions

Questions to Bring to Professionals

Question	Notes or answer
What probate or estate-administration steps are required in the state where the person lived?	
Which assets are controlled by a will or trust, and which pass outside the estate?	
What notices, creditor procedures, tax returns, or deadlines may apply?	
Should an estate bank account, tax ID number, appraisal, or date-of-death valuation be obtained?	
Which bills should be paid now, and which should wait for further review?	
What records must the executor, trustee, or beneficiary keep?	
What financial or investment decisions should be delayed until the estate process is clearer?	

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