



## **Power of attorney and health care directives: Simple steps for peace of mind**

Planning for the unexpected is something we all know we should do, but it's often delayed until it's too late. When I meet with clients, estate planning usually takes center stage. But what about planning for the "what ifs" while you're still alive? In many ways, that's even more important.

I've seen firsthand how crucial it is to have a power of attorney (POA) and a health care directive in place. These essential documents not only protect you but also make things easier for your loved ones during difficult times.

### *Why these documents matter*

Without a POA, your family may need to apply to the courts for permission to handle your finances. Without a health care directive, medical professionals may turn to family members who are uncertain about your wishes. In both cases, it can lead to delays, stress, and unnecessary conflict during an already difficult time.

A POA allows you to appoint someone you trust to manage your finances if you become unable to do so yourself. Because these documents are set at the provincial level, the rules can differ depending on where you live in Canada.

For example, in Alberta, this is usually set up as an enduring power of attorney (EPA), which means it continues to be valid even if you lose mental capacity. Some EPAs take effect immediately, while others are contingent—only “triggered” when certain conditions are met, such as a doctor confirming that you can no longer make financial decisions. Choosing the right approach depends on your circumstances and comfort level, which is why seeking advice when creating these documents is so important.

A health care directive—sometimes called a personal directive in Alberta—lets you outline your wishes for medical care and name someone to make health decisions for you if you can't. With both documents in place, your loved ones have clear guidance, decisions are made faster, and you can be confident your wishes are respected.

#### *What the numbers say*

Despite their importance, surveys show only about one in three Canadians have these protections in place—leaving many families vulnerable to financial and medical uncertainty.

#### *Lessons from real life*

This year alone, I've seen several circumstances where POAs were triggered due to sudden illness or injury. In many cases, out-of-date documents created unnecessary stress at an already difficult time. Keeping your documents current spares loved one's confusion and ensures your affairs are handled the way you want.

#### *Don't forget: Spousal access to accounts and bills*

Even with a POA, your spouse or partner needs to know how to access bank accounts and manage household bills. Without account numbers or login details, things can quickly become overwhelming. A simple, securely stored list can make all the difference.

This summer, I made sure my spouse was set up with online banking so he could access our accounts if needed. Taking that small step reminded me how important it is for every family to have a simple plan in place.

#### *Making it simple*

Getting started doesn't have to be overwhelming. Here are a few steps that can make all the difference:

- Start the conversation with your spouse, partner, or family.
- Choose someone you trust to act as your POA and health care agent.
- Meet with a lawyer to draft or update your documents.
- Keep them in a safe, accessible place and let your loved ones know where they are.
- If something unexpected happened tomorrow, would your loved ones know how to manage your finances or your medical care?

#### Final thoughts

You don't need to know every legal detail to take these important steps. The peace of mind that comes from knowing your affairs are in order is invaluable. Whether you're updating old documents or preparing them for the first time, setting up a Power of Attorney and a Health Care Directive is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself and your family.

Taking time to prepare these documents is an important part of protecting both yourself and your loved ones. Review your POA and health care directive regularly to make sure they still reflect your wishes. If you'd like to understand how this planning fits within your overall financial picture, our team is here to provide guidance.