

LIVING WILLS AND HEALTH CARE ADVANCE DIRECTIVES: FAQs

The Florida Legislature has recognized that every competent adult has the fundamental right of self-determination regarding decisions pertaining to his or her own health, including the right to choose or refuse medical treatment or procedures which would only prolong life when a terminal condition exists. This right, however, is subject to certain interests of society, such as the protection of human life and the preservation of ethical standards in the medical profession.

To ensure that this right is not lost or diminished by virtue of later physical or mental incapacity, the Legislature has established a procedure within Florida Statutes Chapter 765 allowing a person to plan for incapacity, and if desired, to designate another person to act on his or her behalf and make necessary medical decisions upon such incapacity.

What is a Living Will?

Every competent adult has the right to make a written declaration commonly known as a "Living Will." The purpose of this document is to direct the provision, the withholding or withdrawal of life prolonging procedures in the event one should have a terminal condition. The suggested form of this instrument has been provided by the Legislature within Florida Statutes Section 765.303. In Florida, the definition of "life prolonging procedures" has been expanded by the Legislature to include the provision of food and water to terminally ill patients.

What is the difference between a Living Will and a legal will?

A Living Will should not be confused with a person's legal will, which disposes of personal property on or after his or her death, and appoints a personal representative or revokes or revises another will.

Do I have to sign a Living Will?

Under Florida law, a Living Will must be signed by its maker in the presence of two witnesses, at least one of whom is neither the spouse nor a blood relative of the maker. If the maker is physically unable to sign the Living Will, one of the witnesses can sign in the presence and at the direction of the maker. Florida will recognize a Living Will, which has been signed in another state, if that Living Will was signed in compliance with the laws of that state, or in compliance with the laws of Florida.

After I sign a Living Will, what is next?

Once a Living Will has been signed, it is the maker's responsibility to provide notification to the physician of its existence. It is a good idea to provide a copy of the Living Will to the maker's physician and hospital, to be placed within the medical records.

What is a Health Care Surrogate?

Any competent adult may also designate authority to a Health Care Surrogate to make all health care decisions during any period of incapacity. During the maker's incapacity, the Health Care Surrogate has the duty to consult expeditiously, with appropriate health care providers. The Surrogate also provides informed consent and makes only health care decisions for the maker, which he or she believes the maker would have made under the circumstances if the maker were capable of making such decisions. If there is no indication of what the maker would have chosen, the Surrogate may consider the maker's best interest in deciding on a course of treatment. The suggested form of this instrument has been provided by the Legislature within Florida Statutes Section 765.203.

How do I designate a Health Care Surrogate?

Under Florida law, designation of a Health Care Surrogate should be made through a written document, and should be signed in the presence of two witnesses, at least one of whom is neither the spouse nor a blood relative of the maker. The person designated as Surrogate cannot act as a witness to the signing of the document.

Can I have more than one Health Care Surrogate?

The maker can also explicitly designate an Alternate Surrogate. The Alternate Surrogate may assume the duties as Surrogate if the original Surrogate is unwilling or unable to perform his or her duties. If the maker is physically unable to sign the designation, he or she may, in the presence of witnesses, direct that another person sign the document. An exact copy of the designation must be provided to the Health Care Surrogate. Unless the designation states a time of termination, the designation will remain in effect until revoked by its maker.

Can the Living Will and the Health Care Surrogate designation be revoked?

Both the Living Will and the Designation of Health Care Surrogate may be revoked by the maker at any time by a signed and dated letter of revocation; by physically canceling or destroying the original document; by an oral expression of one's intent to revoke; or by means of a later executed document which is materially different from the former document. It is very important to tell the attending physician that the Living Will and Designation of Health Care Surrogate has been revoked.

Where can I go to obtain legal advice on this issue?

If you believe you need legal advice, call your attorney. If you do not have an attorney, call The Florida Bar Lawyer Referral Service at 1-800-342-8011, or the local lawyer referral service or legal aid office listed in the yellow pages of your telephone book.

This information has been prepared by the Consumer Protection Law Committee of The Florida Bar and the Bar's Public Information Office.

