

# A Step-by-Step Guide to Establishing an Advance Care Directive

## **Understand What an Advance Care Directive Can and Cannot Do**

Make sure you understand ACHDs as much as possible. Find state-specific information. Area Agencies on Aging often have helplines you can call, or other resources.

## **Have a Conversation About Advance Care Planning**

Initiate a conversation with your senior parents to discuss their wishes and needs. Involve key people in the discussion, such as a spouse, all siblings, and a trusted person in your community — like a faith leader. If you think a large group will increase stress, stick with one-on-one discussions.

## **Let Your Loved One Make Decisions**

Advance care planning involves many considerations, including treatment preferences, agent selection, and envisioning end-of-life scenarios. While decisions shouldn't be indefinitely delayed, give your parents enough time to reflect on their AHCD. This can increase their satisfaction with their directives and reduce future stress.

Remind them they can consult with others regarding these decisions. Suggest that they talk with their doctors, counselors, friends, or faith leaders to clarify their wishes. If your parent has a chronic condition, talking to their specialist can provide insight into likely future treatments and the prognosis of their illness.

## **Talk to Their Agent and Family**

Talk to the person they've selected as their agent. They should make sure this person is willing to act as their medical proxy and discuss what the AHCD includes and what their wishes are. Next, the family should have another conversation so that your parents can make all their wishes known to everyone at the same time. This can help reduce disagreements in case the directive takes effect.

## **Write Down a Plan**

Document your parent's wishes. Many states have templates that streamline this step; some states have specific forms that you must use. Most people don't require a lawyer present to write an AHCD, but if you're appointing a medical power of attorney, you may wish to seek legal advice.

## **Follow Your State's Rules**

To make the AHCD office, make sure to follow your state's regulations. This might involve having a non-related witness during the signing or getting the document notarized. If a medical POA is needed, additional rules may apply. Once again, Area Agencies on Aging often provide elder law resources to assist with this step.

## **Give the AHCD to the Relevant People**

Ensure copies of your parent's AHCD are distributed to all involved in their care — doctors, hospitals, hospices, nursing homes, palliative care teams, family members, and their attorneys. See if you can provide them with a card for their wallet, which will help alert healthcare workers to their AHCD if they're hospitalized alone.

Additional paperwork like Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) and Do Not Intubate (DNI) orders, typically completed at the hospital, may be necessary to respect your parents' wishes. As such, these should be communicated to the healthcare team afresh upon each admission to the hospital.

Some states use Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) forms for detailed medical care instructions for seriously ill patients. These forms are signed by a healthcare team member, but do not replace your other directives. Instead, it serves as doctor-ordered instructions to ensure that, in case of an emergency, you receive the treatment you prefer. Your doctor will fill out the form based on the contents of your advance directives, the discussions you have with your doctor about the likely course of your illness, and your treatment preferences. For conditions like cancer, your parents may consider a POLST.

## **Update as Needed**

Over time, your loved one's wishes may change due to aging or changes in health status, so the document may need to be updated. Updates are also required if the agent moves away or can no longer act as a medical proxy.

Fortunately, AHCDs can be revised as needed. Review the document regularly to ensure it reflects current wishes. You should also revisit the document following major life or health changes, surgeries, or significant diagnoses.

If your parent does update their AHCD, make sure the new one complies with your state's laws and a new copy is given to anyone who has a copy of their previous directive.