Why Your Estate Plan Might Need a Tune-up

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An estate plan is a set of papers that usually includes a will, durable power of attorney, and advance medical directive. These essential documents can help you manage financial and health-related matters if you ever become incapacitated, and they should provide for the efficient transfer of your assets upon your death.

In other words, an estate plan is a hedge against uncertainty, a defense against the curveballs life may toss your way. An up-to-date plan can help you minimize death taxes, protect your assets from creditors, provide for your loved ones, establish trusts for your children, and appoint guardians to care for them.

Although estate-planning documents don't "expire," they can become out of date and ineffective if your life circumstances have changed. This is when a "tune-up" may be in order. A phone call with an Estates & Trusts attorney is advisable if any of the following apply to you —

- You have had children or gotten married or divorced.
- Someone named in your documents has died.
- You have bought or sold real estate (in Maryland or elsewhere).
- Your assets have changed significantly.

Even if your circumstances are largely unchanged, it is still recommended that you review your plan every three to five years. Tax laws change, new planning techniques become available, and updated documents can offer important new benefits.

It's also possible that your wishes have changed since your documents were drafted. For example, do you want to update the list of people who will inherit from you? Is it time to change the individuals who will settle your estate, act as your trustees, or serve as guardians to your children? Do your financial power of attorney and advance medical directive still name the right people to manage your affairs if you no longer can?

An attorney who specializes in this area can help you think through your planning goals and suggest your best options for achieving them. Even if no changes to your documents are necessary, receiving the assurance that you are ready for the unexpected is reason enough to speak with a planning professional today.

Of course, if you don't already have a current estate plan, there is no better time than the start of a new year to put your affairs in order. Making decisions today about your will, power of attorney, and advance medical directive can bring you peace of mind and a new confidence about what lies ahead.

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