

Advance Care Planning

Care Provider Bulletin

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What is advance care planning?

- Advance care planning is in the process of considering health care decisions for an individual if a serious health concern arises.
- To make these decisions, individuals need to think about what is important to them, including personal goals, values, beliefs, and preferences about different types of medical treatment. It may help to talk with family, friends, health care providers, and guardian (if applicable).
- Individuals can choose a “proxy,” someone to advocate for them with health care providers to make sure that any actions taken are what the individual wants. This person can also be called a health care agent, health care representative, or durable power of attorney for health care. Some individuals may already have guardians in place who serve in this role.
- Advance care planning should include completing an advance directive (a legal document), to help make sure their wishes are honored.
- Advance care planning is important and it is never too soon to have conversations with family and loved ones.

Choosing a health care agent

- A good health care agent is someone who knows the individual well, cares about them, and is willing to advocate on their behalf. Some people choose relatives and others choose friends.
- A health care agent must be at least 18 years old, and cannot be the patient’s health care provider, an employee of their health care provider, or affiliated with any care facility (unless they are a spouse, parent, adult child, sibling, or relative).
- The health care agent will be responsible for communicating the individual’s wishes and making decisions during difficult or emotional times.
- If other people are involved with care, (such as a legal guardian, friends or close relatives), it is important they are aware of decisions and can work to fulfill the individual’s wishes.
- It is helpful to identify at least one additional person as a back-up health care agent in case the person chosen cannot serve in the role when needed.



What is an advance directive?

- An advance directive is a legal document that includes two parts:
 1. A health care directive for treatment wishes, and
 2. Names a health care agent.
- Individuals can complete advance directive documents that include both parts or separate documents for each.
- The advance directive can be changed or revoked at any time, as long as the individual can communicate their preferences.
- To make the documents legal, two witnesses or a notary public are needed.
- The document should be kept in a safe place that is easily accessible. Copies should be given to the health care agent, health care providers, and loved ones that may be involved in the individual’s future health care. It is a good idea to give a copy of the document to the hospital that might treat the individual in an emergency. Keep a list of all places where the advance directive was provided so that out-of-date documents can be replaced.
- Advance directives are for anyone age 18 and older.

What is a Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment?

- Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) is intended for individuals with serious illness or chronic medical issues. It translates health care wishes into medical orders and includes preferences for resuscitation, medical intervention, use of antibiotics, and artificially administered fluids and nutrition. The POLST guides actions of emergency medical service providers and should state the current health care preferences the individual wants. It must be signed by the provider and the individual (or health care agent).
- A POLST provides guidance during medical emergencies in all settings – in an individual's home, etc. It does not restrict an individual from receiving the level of care they wish to have.
- For individuals receiving residential supports from Developmental Disabilities Administration, see DDA Policy 6.09 for instructions on the POLST process that ensures it is properly noted by care providers.
- For individuals residing in the Residential Habilitation Centers, see DDA Policy 17.01 for proper recognition.

Frequently Asked Questions

What happens if a health care agent is not chosen?

- Washington state law defines an order of decision-makers for those without a health care agent or court-appointed guardian. The spouse is the first decision-maker. If no spouse or state-registered domestic partner exist, then adult children decide; then parents; and then siblings. If more than one person at the decision-making level exists, all must agree on the health care decisions. In many cases these family members do not know the choices their loved one wanted. If no one at any of these levels exists, the health care providers sometimes require legal action to name a decision maker. This can delay decisions and prolong or intensify the health care treatments.

How often should an advance directive be updated?

- Advance directives should be reviewed at least every 10 years. Changes might need to be made if: the individual marries or divorces, experiences the death of a loved one, has health changes, or receives a new health diagnosis. A hospitalization is a common time to review these decisions. The health care agent should be notified of any changes.

What is the difference between a POLST and an advance directive?

- An advanced directive is advisory to your health care agent, but is not a clear order such as the POLST.

Will the health care agent be responsible for medical bills?

- No, the health care agent will not be responsible for medical bills. They will only advocate on someone's behalf.

What happens if there is no POLST or advance directive?

- Without a POLST in place, emergency treatment may not be the form of care the individual wants. Medical professionals would then look at family and/or loved ones for treatment decisions after emergency care has been started. If unable to find someone that will be a health care proxy, the court will appoint a legal guardian to make decisions. This process can take days to weeks.



Additional Resources

Advance directive forms and information on how to get started:

- **Providence Institute for Human Caring**, www.providence.org/institute-for-human-caring
- **Ageing with Dignity (Five Wishes)**, www.ageingwithdignity.org
- **Honoring Choices Pacific Northwest**, www.honoringchoicespnw.org
- **End-of-Life Washington**, www.endoflifewa.org
- **Conversation Project**, www.theconversationproject.org

For legal help and information, visit:

- www.WashingtonLawHelp.org

End-of-life planning services and documents are provided to qualified patients at no cost. Schedule an appointment with a health care provider to look at options and discuss this process.