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1. a **Living trust** – helps to avoid the cost and delay of probate. Trusts are designed to make sure your wishes are carried out properly.
2. **Life Insurance policies**. Most insurance would not go through probate and may go directly to a beneficiary. Keep your insurance information up-to-date.
3. **Health and Disability Insurance policies**. A serious injury or illness can really impact a family's financial situation. Be sure to have personal insurance policies and details of any employer-provided policies on hand.
4. **Retirement plan statements**. You need the current investment statements and you also need the plan details. Contact your employer for a current copy of your retirement plan – you need to know the terms and specific benefits of each plan.
5. **Deeds, Stock Certificates, Brokerage Account Statements, Bank Statements** etc. – documentation for every piece of real estate you own, everything that shows ownership of any asset. Remember, if ownership cannot be proven – the State will end up owning what you have.
6. **Bank Account Statements** – check and savings. If your bank allows it, you might want to consider setting up a “Totten trust” where the bank account will go directly to an heir when you die. You can do this with investment accounts as well by establishing what is called a “transfer on death” beneficiary. Keep these up-to-date – changing your will won't affect them.
7. **Power of Attorney**. You need 3 kinds:
 - a. *Power of Attorney* – this is someone you trust to make decisions for you while you are away somewhere (like traveling) or for other day-to-day reasons. If you become incapacitated, this type of POA usually ends.
 - b. *Durable Power of Attorney* – this one keeps on going even if you become incapacitated (i.e. in a coma or undergoing surgery etc.) be careful with the person you select for any Power of Attorney. They legally become you!
 - c. *Health Care Power of Attorney*. A really important one. This person will be able to make medical decisions on your behalf. These could be life and death decisions.
8. **Living Will**. This document instructs your medical providers and your family as to how you want to be treated in life and death situations. Don't leave your family wondering about your wishes.
9. **Inventory** – make a master list of all these important documents. List what they are, when they were drawn up (and updated) and where they are located (safe deposit box, file cabinet, Aunt Peggy's – wherever).
10. The last thing you need to have is what I call your **final instruction letter**. In this letter lay out exactly what you want in the way of funeral arrangements, memorial services – the details that the family usually has a lot of stress deciding. And then include in this document your wishes for your family. Talk frankly about what you expect of them to do after your death. How you expect them to handle the disposition of your belongings and assets. This document will go a long way toward keeping your family together during the sad time of separation.