VWG WEALTH MANAGEMENT
A Hightower Company

Surviving Spouse / Executor / Trustee Checklist

- [ ] Locate legal documents including the deceased's Will and Trusts. Determine who is named Executor or Trustee and review any funeral or burial instructions.
- [ ] Find all financial documents including bank, brokerage, retirement, insurance, real estate, and vehicle ownership records. Review the most recent tax return and Forms 1099 to identify assets and income sources.
- [ ] Check whether important documents are stored in a safe-deposit box and contact the financial institution if necessary.
- [ ] Gather household bills, loan statements, and credit card records. Secure personal documents including driver's license, Social Security card, passport, birth certificate, marriage license, divorce decrees, military records, citizenship documents, and retirement paperwork.
- [ ] Secure digital assets and online accounts, including email, financial accounts, social media, subscriptions, cloud storage, and photographs where login credentials are available.
- [ ] Order an appropriate number of certified death certificates. Many institutions and insurance companies require original certified copies.
- [ ] Notify the estate attorney, CPA, and financial advisor and begin coordinating estate settlement activities.
- [ ] Track all expenses related to funeral, burial, probate, administration, travel, and professional services. Certain expenses may be reimbursable or tax deductible.
- [ ] If probate is required, contact the appropriate probate court with the original Will and certified death certificate.
- [ ] Contact life insurance companies, retirement plan administrators, banks, and brokerage firms to begin beneficiary claim and distribution processes.
- [ ] Investigate potential pension benefits through former employers, the U.S. Department of Labor, or the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC).
- [ ] Search for missing life insurance policies, annuities, and unclaimed property through the NAIC Life Insurance Policy Locator Service and applicable state programs.
- [ ] Notify Social Security Administration (1-800-772-1213) and, if applicable, the Department of Veterans Affairs. Confirm benefit payments stop appropriately. The statutory lump-sum Social Security death benefit remains $255 in 2026.

- [ ] If you are a surviving spouse, review Social Security survivor benefit strategies with your advisor. Eligible survivors may generally claim survivor benefits as early as age 60 (or age 50 if disabled), subject to SSA rules.
- [ ] Notify health, long-term care, disability, umbrella, homeowners, renters, automobile, travel, and other insurance providers.
- [ ] Close or update credit card accounts and monitor credit reports for fraudulent activity.
- [ ] Notify banks and brokerage firms and remove or update ownership registrations on joint accounts as appropriate.
- [ ] Retitle utilities and household service accounts into the surviving spouse's or responsible party's name.
- [ ] Begin evaluating whether a federal estate tax return (Form 706) will be required. For 2026, the federal estate, gift, and GST tax exemption is $15 million per individual, with portability potentially allowing up to $30 million for a married couple when properly elected.
- [ ] Work with valuation professionals, attorneys, and CPAs to document date-of-death values for all assets.
- [ ] Meet with a financial advisor to develop an investment plan for inherited assets, insurance proceeds, and ongoing cash-flow needs.
- [ ] Review and update beneficiary designations on retirement accounts, insurance policies, transfer-on-death registrations, and payable-on-death accounts.
- [ ] Review and update your own Will, Trust, powers of attorney, and healthcare directives.
- [ ] Create an updated personal financial plan reflecting current assets, income sources, expenses, insurance needs, and long-term objectives.