

Advance Directives

Blessing Hospital | Illini Community Hospital

Are Advance Directives for me?

If you are unable to make decisions for yourself because of an accident or illness, would those persons caring for you know how to treat you? Would your family and your doctors know how you would want decisions made about your care? A document which names a person you wish to make healthcare decisions for you anytime you are not able to is called a **durable power of attorney for healthcare**. A **living will** is a different written document in which you can outline the kind of treatment you want for yourself at the end of your life. You do not need both documents. If you decide to only do one, it is best to have the power of attorney for healthcare because the authority you give the person who will be acting on your behalf is greater, and you do not have to be terminally ill/dying for it to be active.

If you have questions regarding any information in this handout, please call Care Coordination at (217) 223-8400, ext. 7900.

What is a Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare (DPOAHC)?

- You can write out your wishes about medical care.
- You name someone who knows you well who can speak for you and make healthcare decisions for you when you are unable to (this person will be called a proxy or agent). You can also allow someone to make decisions for you now and continue when you can no longer make your own decisions.
- The agent will act on your behalf when you decide. Your condition does not have to be terminal or irreversible.
- The agent is allowed to make your healthcare decisions such as life-support, surgery, dialysis, etc.
- You may give the agent specific instructions regarding the treatment you would want or not want and you can limit their authority.
- The DPOAHC is the preferred document for recording and communicating your care wishes.

What is a Living Will?

- It is a form to write down which medical treatments you do or do not want at the end of your life.
- It takes effect only when you can no longer express your wishes.
- It will only be active if your doctor/s believe you have a terminal or incurable, irreversible condition and that death is near.
- Applies to care considered “life-support, “life-prolonging” or “death delaying” like using a breathing machine.

Practitioner Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment (P.O.L.S.T.)

Illinois allows a P.O.L.S.T. form as a way to:

- Help healthcare professionals know and honor your life-sustaining treatment wishes.
- Create medical orders that spells out your choices for life-sustaining care.
- Inform emergency medical staff of your life sustaining treatment choices.
- Be used by multiple providers, such as ambulance staff, emergency responders, long term care facilities and hospitals.

The P.O.L.S.T. does not take the place of the DPOAHC. It should be used in combination with other Advance Directives. The P.O.L.S.T. is a practitioner’s order used to communicate your wishes when you are unable to do so.

Declaration for Mental Health Treatment

Should you ever have a mental crisis which might make you unable to express your wishes about mental health treatment, you can spell out in advance your preferred treatment in a Declaration for Mental Health Treatment. The Declaration form allows you to name the specific symptoms for which you would want or not want mental health treatment. These include psychotropic medication, electroconvulsive treatment (ECT) and admission to and retention in a mental health treatment facility. You can also appoint a person to make decisions about your mental health treatment if you are unable to. Blessing Health System has these forms available upon request. For information on the Declaration for Mental Health Treatment, call Care Coordination at (217) 223-8400, ext. 7900.

The Illinois Health Care Surrogate Act

If there is no Living Will or Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare, this law allows a family member (or others) to make healthcare decisions for a patient when they are not able to make decisions for themselves. The law gives the order of who to go to first to be the surrogate decision-makers.

How do I know what I want?

While we know illness and death are a part of life, talking about what is important can be hard for many families. By thinking about these things ahead of time we can make those times less stressful. Ask yourself what is most important to you in life. What physical and/or mental limitations could you accept and still find life meaningful and enjoyable? What injuries, illnesses or conditions might significantly change your life? We all have values, beliefs and life goals that guide our thinking about life and death. What do you believe about prolonging life when recovery is not possible? You may want to talk with family, close friends or clergy to help you make future health care decisions.

Why do I need an Advance Directive?

Advance Directives allow you to make decisions about your medical treatment now in case you may not be able to in the future. Most people will die in a hospital or long-term care facility where medical technology can keep people alive longer than in the past; not always at the quality of life that a person wants. Often families must make difficult decisions about the care of their loved one. This can be emotionally painful and create family conflicts if the person's wishes are not known. An Advance Directive is a great tool to provide your loved ones with guidance in making the decisions you would want for any ongoing treatment.

What is an "Agent"?

This is the person you would pick to make your healthcare decisions for you when you are unable to do so. You would appoint an agent with a Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare. You should pick someone who knows you very well and will follow through in your best interest.

- Your agent should see that your wishes for medical treatment are followed as closely as possible. If your wishes are not known, your agent should use their knowledge of you, your wishes, beliefs and values, to make decisions they think you would make.
- Your agent has the authority to make all healthcare-related decisions including disposition of your body after death. The chosen agent can overrule other family wishes.
- You can give your agent specific directions. You can also place specific limitations upon their authority.
- Your healthcare agent has no control over or access to your financial resources and cannot be held responsible for your expenses.

State laws are different. Most states will honor an advance directive from another state but you should check to make sure. Missouri and Iowa residents must have their DPOAHC notarized but Illinois residents do not.

Who should I choose?

Being a healthcare agent is an important responsibility. Take time to think about who is the best person to be your agent. An agent should be:

- At least 18 years of age;
- A family member OR close friend OR another person you want to speak on your behalf;
- Someone who knows you and your values well and to whom you feel comfortable discussing your wishes regarding healthcare;
- Someone you trust to do what is best for you and who is willing to carry out your wishes, even if they do not agree with your choices;
- Someone who would be comfortable talking with and asking questions of doctors and others caring for you;
- Someone who can be available when decisions need to be made;
- Someone who is NOT your doctor or other personal healthcare provider.

You can name a second person as an alternate or successor agent. If your agent is unavailable or unable to make decisions for you, your alternate agent will be able to act on your behalf. You may list more than one alternate but they would only act in the order listed by you. You should not choose two people to serve as your agent at the same time to share the duties of agent.

What will happen if I don't choose an agent for healthcare?

If you are unable to make medical decisions because you are too sick and you don't have an Advance Directive, Illinois law (Health Care Surrogate Act) spells out who the care team should turn to for help with decision-making. This may not be ideal for you if 1) the person named by law may not be the person you would pick; 2) the person identified by the law may not know or be able to carry out your wishes; and 3) the person identified may not be able to make all the decisions you might have made because of limitations placed upon them by law (especially with regard to withholding or withdrawing treatments). It is best to name your agent to avoid any future issues.

What do I do now?

- Complete the proper form(s) or use another form if you wish. If you add additional pages, make sure you sign and date them.
- Sign and date the form in front of a witness and have them sign it too. A list of who can (and cannot) serve as witness is included on the form.
- Get copies of the completed form and give them to your agent (and alternates, if any), your doctor(s), your family and any close friends who might be involved in your care. Make sure a copy goes with you any time you might be hospitalized.

What if I change my mind?

You can change your mind about your agent or your wishes at any time. Just let someone know (like your agent or care provider) and/or destroy your old documents. If you want to complete another form, remember to give copies to everyone you gave the former form to. Simple changes like updating phone numbers or addresses, can be done to a pre-existing form; just sign and date the updates.

Anything else?

- Even if you have completed an Advance Directive, talk with your family so they understand your wishes.
- Talk with your doctor(s). The more they understand your wishes, the better they will be to treat you as you want.
- Provide the hospital with a copy of your Advance Directive.
- If you have questions regarding any information in this handout, please call Care Coordination at (217) 223-8400, ext. 7900.
- If you need information regarding an Advance Directive that is on file within the Blessing Health System, please contact Health Information Management for assistance.
- When this form is completed and properly witnessed or notarized, it is considered a legal document.