K-State aging expert urges Kansans to put advance health directive in place

Document can help assure end-of-life decisions are followed

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – No one, young or old, likes to have “the conversation.”

But Erin Yelland, the interim director of the Center on Aging at Kansas State University, says it’s critical that families talk openly about end-of-life decisions.

“It’s difficult,” Yelland said. “Research shows that end-of-life conversations are fairly rare within families. Often, families are left to assume what a person might have wanted, and during a time of grief, those can be especially challenging decisions.”

An advance health care directive is a legal document that tells a doctor the patient’s wishes for health care in the case the patient is unable to voice their opinions. Yelland notes that approximately 3 in 4 American adults don’t have advance health care directives in place.

“As a cognitively healthy adult, you have the right to be informed of your medical care and decide your treatment,” Yelland said. “But what happens when you are unable to voice your own decisions… if you’re temporarily or permanently incapacitated?”

“That’s where advance health care planning comes in: It allows you to voice your wishes in your future health care needs in the event that you are unable to do so.”

Kansas law allows residents to fill out a simple form that records a name, address and phone number in order to establish a durable power of attorney – or someone who can make health care decisions on your behalf. Kansans must sign the form and have at least one witness to their signature. The form does not need to be notarized.

The form is available online from the K-State Research and Extension bookstore in the publication, Advance Health Care Planning in Kansas; or through local extension offices in Kansas.
Once the form is completed, Yelland suggests making several copies and keeping them in accessible places, as well as copies for the person named as durable power of attorney, a physician, local hospital, family and friends, and “basically anyone who you would think might show up to the hospital if something were to happen to you,” Yelland said.

The forms are recommended for anyone over age 18 in Kansas. “Advance health care planning can start when you’re 18 years old,” Yelland said. “Accidents, tragedies, life events can happen at any point.”

Once the form is complete, Yelland said it’s still important to communicate your wishes to anyone who might have a say in your health care.

“You also need to talk to your health care agent, or the person you’ll appoint in your durable power of attorney to speak for you in the event that something would happen,” she said. “This person needs to be aware of what your wishes are. And perhaps their wishes may not be what your wishes are. But you need to be sure that person will be willing to support you on your behalf and do what you would like.”

Forms should be reviewed and amended – if necessary – every year. If moving to another state (or routinely spend a significant amount of time outside of Kansas), you’ll likely have to fill out a form that is approved by that state.

More information on issues related to aging is available online from K-State’s Center on Aging.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
K-State Center on Aging, https://www.hhs.k-state.edu/aging/about/outreach/


K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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Written by:
Pat Melgares
785-532-1160
melgares@ksu.edu

For more information:
Erin Yelland
785-532-5510
erinyelland@ksu.edu