

Why You Need an Advance Directive

One of the greatest gifts you can give your loved ones is to let them know what your health care wishes are in the event you are unable to speak for yourself. Although it may be frightening and uncomfortable to think about this, if you have the right tools, advance care planning can be much easier.

An event or emergency might happen at any time that may require someone else to speak for you and provide direction about your health care. Unfortunately, an advance directive is often thought of as a document designed exclusively for older people.

“We all hope to communicate until the very end of our lives, but it doesn’t always happen that way,” said Michelle Ross, a social worker with Frederick Health. “An advance directive helps ensure that your wishes for your medical care are followed, even if you cannot speak for yourself. Creating these documents relieves your loved ones from having to guess what medical treatment you would have wanted, leaving less room for disagreements and the type of turmoil that can have a devastating effect on a family for a very long time.

“An advance directive is a two-part document. The first part identifies a health care agent whom you designate to help speak on your behalf. This agent could be a spouse, adult child or other family member, or a trusted friend or a professional who helps with health care matters.

The second part, known as a living will, contains specific directions for your agent and health care team care in certain situations. You can provide information in your living will that will explain what treatments you want to receive or refuse and under what conditions.

In the state of Maryland, many different types of advance directive documents are available and can easily be found on-line. For it to be considered complete and a legal document, the advance directive must be signed by two witnesses; both must be over the age of 18. If you name a health care agent, that person may not be a witness to your signature on the document. Also, one of the witnesses must be a person who would not financially benefit from your death or handle your estate. The advance directive is not a form that requires a notary.

“If you are unable to speak for yourself, and you have not created an advance directive, according to the law, your medical providers must identify a surrogate to direct your care,” said Ross. “And this may or may not be the person you would have chosen for yourself.

“Too often, when loved ones are left guessing what should be done, the result can be guilt, uncertainty and even arguments. By making your wishes known, you can help your loved ones feel more comfortable with your choice of care.

Summary of what was presented at the September 2021 WMCA meeting by Michelle Ross