

## **What to do with the home when a loved one passes**

*Dealing with a house after a loved one dies can be emotionally difficult, from clearing out the contents to prepping the premises for sale.*

*Remember to follow important steps when emptying a house and getting it ready to put on the market. While this article deals primarily with the last owner passing away it could very well apply to a widow whose spouse has passed and you're now dealing with a home that is too much for you to take care of alone. (Some points will not apply to you)*

### **Change the Locks and Forward the Mail**

The first step in cleaning a house is to secure the premises. You have no idea how many people may have keys to the house—friends, cleaners, delivery people, house sitters. Rather than try to collect all the spare keys, simply change the locks. You'll sleep better at night.

Nothing screams "empty house"—an open invitation to thieves, vagrants, and vandals—like piled-up mail and periodicals, so have the deceased person's mail forwarded to your home or office by filling out a change of address form with the USPS. The post office will forward Priority, Express, and first-class mail and packages for 12 months and publications for two months, but you can annually update the new address for a few years to keep the forwarding from expiring.<sup>1</sup>

Receiving the mail will help you figure out who creditors are, too, and whether payments were current, as well as seeing if you need to cancel any subscriptions.

### **Search for Financial and Legal Papers**

Look for financial documents and even money in every nook and cranny. Sometimes people stash cash in the strangest places: taped to the bottoms of drawers, inside crawl spaces, and yes, under the proverbial mattress.

You might find significant documents in drawers, file cabinets, and boxes under the bed, or saved as files on a computer. Here's what to do when you find them:

**Homeowner's insurance policy:** Keep the homeowner's policy effective until the day the home closes. Increase coverage if it is too low.

**Will:** Look for updated versions.

**Life insurance policy:** It could be a private policy or purchased through an employer.

**Bank and brokerage account statements:** Carefully read the statements, as many banks report all accounts on one statement.

**Letters from friends:** You may want to write to them.

**Poems, articles, and letters from the deceased:** These writings can later bring you comfort.

**Bill receipts:** Contact creditors. Consider notifying the three major credit reporting agencies, which will flag the individual as deceased and effectively freeze new charges or requests for credit as well.

**Stocks and bonds:** Certificates might be tucked into folders.

***Remember to shred all sensitive documents, especially those containing a Social Security number.***

## **Keep Paying the Bills**

While you'll want to stop some services, others need to be continued. Keep paying the homeowner's insurance premiums, keep the utilities turned on, and notify services such as gardeners or maintenance companies where to send invoices.

If the seller has a reverse mortgage, notify the mortgage company immediately and ask for time to settle the estate before they attempt to foreclose on the house. Under certain circumstances, heirs can keep a home with a reverse mortgage if they repay the balance of the loan or 95% of the home's appraised value, whichever is less.<sup>3</sup>

## **Sort Personal Belongings**

This aspect of cleaning out the house may be the most emotional. It hastens the process if you sort belongings into three piles or tag them with color-coded stickers:

Items to keep

Items to donate or sell

Items to throw away

If family members squabble about distribution, set aside the disputed items until all the sorting is finished and emotions have settled. Then try taking turns by each choosing an item or memento. Consider trading several items for a treasure you truly desire. Sentiment aside, get real valuables—art, antiques, jewelry—appraised to determine their actual value.

## **Prepare the House for Sale**—refer to our full article on this

Clearing out a loved one's house of its personal effects and belongings is the first step toward getting it ready for sale. Next, you have to get it in market-ready condition. Follow this checklist:

**Furniture:** If the furniture is old or worn, get rid of it. Don't leave it in the house because it will detract from the sale.

**Wall hangings:** Remove them.

**Floor covering:** Consider its condition. If there is carpeting over wood floors, strip it and, if necessary, refinish the floors. Replace cracked ceramic tiles. Clean carpet over plywood or buy new carpeting.

Window coverings: If the window coverings are dated, throw them out. Most windows look better without heavy drapes or worn blinds.

Walls: Some people paint once and never again. You may need to patch and repaint the walls.

Ceilings: Replace dated light fixtures, patch cracks in the ceiling and paint.

Remove all pet-related items: Take the outdoor dog house with you and donate it to a shelter. Selling with signs of pets in the home is a turnoff for some buyers.

Clean from top to bottom: Wash windows, dust ceiling fan blades, and wipe down the insides of cabinets.

Also, be aware that if the seller died in the house, you may be required to disclose this fact to a prospective buyer, depending on the nature of their death. We at Lakes Country Realty are prepared to guide you through this emotionally painful time by offering a patient ear and sound advice to make the process as uncomplicated as possible.

*Preparing a home for sale is always time-intensive, and when it is a loved one's home, emotions are involved as well. If done correctly, it will be to your benefit in terms of higher offers for the property.*