

Friday, April 16, 2010 is National Healthcare Decisions Day

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All adults 18 years and older in Massachusetts are legally able to make decisions about their health care and to appoint someone to represent them upon incapacity. On Friday, April 16, 2010, the country will observe the 3rd annual National Healthcare Decisions Day (NHDD) to encourage people to make their health care wishes known to family, friends and healthcare providers.

NHDD is a grassroots effort to promote advanced health care planning and decision making. I am encouraging all adults to make their wishes known and to have their health choices protected. When you're faced with a difficult health care situation and an accident or illness robs you of your ability to communicate, it is a relief for loved ones and health care providers to know in advance who should speak for you and how much or little health care you would want.

The easiest way to begin to make your advanced health care decisions known is by executing a Health Care Proxy. It's a simple document that you can fill out yourself and all it requires is two witness signatures. You can download a free, legal Massachusetts Health Care Proxy at www.healthcareproxies.com. (Please note that it is a generic form, and doesn't express your preferences regarding significant end-of-life issues.) The site also includes suggestions on what to do with the document after it is executed.

A properly executed Health Care Proxy designates a person of your choice, known as the Health Care Agent, to act on your behalf to make health care decisions for you if you are unable to do so yourself. You can even make a list of limitations part of the Health Care Proxy, if there are specific forms of treatment you do not want under any circumstances. Just signing the document, however, is not enough; you also need to have conversations with the person you appointed about how you feel about life-prolonging treatment. You should also consider going one step further and executing a living will or placing living will language directly in your Health Care Proxy. You can also include in your Health Care Proxy expressions of how your religion would approach critical issues. For example, the following links provide a Catholic adaptation www.macathconf.org/proxy99.pdf, a Christian Scientist adaptation www.chbenevolent.org/wp-content/uploads/Health-Care-Proxy_MA_063009.pdf and a Jewish adaptation www.jlaw.com/Forms/lwdocs/MassachusettsHalachicLivingWill.pdf of the Massachusetts Health Care Proxy.

If you want to dig deeper into the issues and explore various living will sites, try the American Bar Association's "Consumer's Tool Kit for Health Care Advance Planning" <http://www.abanet.org/aging/toolkit/home.html> , Aging with Dignity's "Five Wishes" <http://agingwithdignity.org/family-individual.php> , the Lifecare Advance Directive <http://lifecaredirectives.com/index.html> , the American Hospital Association's "Put It in Writing" http://www.putitinwriting.org/putitinwriting_app/index.jsp and H.E.L.P.'s "Your Way" http://www.help4srs.org/end_of_life/yourway/yourway_pages.htm .

As a result of National Healthcare Decisions Day, many more people in our community may now have thoughtful conversations with loved ones about their health care decisions and complete the necessary legal form to protect their health care wishes. Being one of the Massachusetts sponsors of this day, I am happy to be a part of this grassroots effort to get the word out about the importance of Health Care Proxies so a patient's wishes will be honored by both family and medical staff.

The National Healthcare Decisions Day (NHDD) Initiative is a collaborative effort of national, state and community organizations committed to ensuring that all adults with decision-making capacity in the United States have the information and opportunity to communicate and document their healthcare decisions. National Healthcare Decisions Day is an initiative to encourage patients to express their wishes regarding healthcare and for providers and facilities to respect those wishes, whatever they may be. April 16, 2010 marks the third year of this important day. NHDD has been formally recognized by both houses of Congress. (Senate Congressional Resolution 73 and House Congressional Resolution 323.) For more information about National Healthcare Decisions Day, please visit www.nationalhealthcaredecisionsday.org.