SOCIUS WEALTH MANAGEMENT

When You're Suddenly in Charge

A woman's guide to navigating insurance, finances and life after losing a spouse

You do not have to figure everything out today.

You only need a place to begin.

A complimentary educational guide | November 2026

A note before you begin

When someone you love dies, paperwork can arrive before you have had time to grieve. If your spouse handled the insurance, bills, retirement accounts or investments, you may not know where everything is. This guide breaks the process into smaller, manageable steps.

Written with women in mind, this guide can help any surviving spouse or partner. Benefits and legal rights depend on your circumstances, account ownership and state law.

Start here: Keep one notebook or folder for names, dates, reference numbers, documents and next steps. Ask someone you trust to sit with you if that helps.

Why preparation matters

- A 2024 Thrivent survey found that 41% of widowed women surveyed had no financial conversations or plans in place before their spouse died.
- Fewer than half of respondents felt financially prepared after their loss.
- LIMRA estimated approximately 11.7 million widows living in the United States in 2026.

Never send passwords or complete account numbers through unverified messages or forms.

01 | Your first 48 hours

Only address what is urgent. Everything does not need to happen today.

- Ask the funeral home or appropriate authority about death certificates and which organizations require certified copies.
- Locate identification, marriage certificate, will or trust, and any estate attorney contact details.
- Secure the home, pets, vehicles, valuables and important mail.
- List essential bills due within 30 days: housing, utilities, insurance, food and prescriptions.
- Identify funds legally accessible for immediate needs. Do not assume you can use an account owned solely by the deceased.
- Contact current or former employers about life insurance, final pay, pensions and other benefits.

Give yourself permission to wait: Avoid major, irreversible investment, housing or gifting decisions unless truly necessary. Do not distribute estate assets before understanding legal obligations.

Your document checklist

Death certificates • ID • marriage certificate • will/trust • beneficiary information • insurance policies • bank and retirement statements • mortgage and loans • tax returns • advisors and attorney contacts.

02 | Life insurance

A simple process for finding policies, filing claims and tracking the response.

- Find the policy. Review files, premium payments, employer benefits and correspondence. Ask an agent or benefits administrator.
- Cannot locate a policy? Try the free NAIC Life Insurance Policy Locator at content.naic.org. A match is not guaranteed.
- Call the insurer directly. Request the beneficiary claim packet and ask which documents and death certificate copies are required.
- Submit and track the claim. Record the claim number, date, representative and missing documents.
- Review payout options. Ask about lump sums, installments, protections, fees and tax treatment before choosing.

Important: A named beneficiary may receive proceeds outside probate, but disputes, trusts, estates and exclusions can complicate the process. Seek qualified advice for your circumstances.

MY INSURANCE CLAIM TRACKER

Insurance company / contact

Policy number (last four digits only)

Claim or reference number

Next follow-up date / missing documents

03 | Survivor benefits

Ask questions early, even if you have not yet found every document.

Contact the Social Security Administration (SSA) promptly about monthly survivor benefits and the one-time death payment. Eligibility depends on age, disability, caregiving responsibilities, work history and other factors. Some divorced spouses and children may qualify.

- Call SSA at 1-800-772-1213 or contact a local office. Survivor applications cannot currently be completed online.
- Ask about the potential $255 lump-sum death payment, monthly survivor benefits and how these interact with your own retirement benefits.
- Gather proof of death, marriage and birth information, Social Security details and direct-deposit information as requested. Do not wait to make contact.
- Ask employers about pension survivor options, retirement plans, unpaid compensation and continued health coverage.
- For veterans or federal employees, ask separately about VA, federal retirement, TSP and related survivor benefits.

Timing matters: Claiming decisions can change benefit amounts. Request a personalized explanation before choosing a start date.

04 | Accounts and investments

- List joint, individual, trust-owned and beneficiary-designated accounts.
- Ask institutions for bereavement departments and their transfer requirements.
- Before withdrawing or rolling over inherited retirement assets, ask about deadlines and tax consequences.
- Review 3 to 6 months of cash needs before changing investments.

05 | Bills, debts and home

A collector contacting you does not automatically mean you personally owe a debt. Responsibility depends on joint obligations, guarantees and state law, including community-property rules. Request written verification and seek legal guidance before paying disputed debts with personal funds.

- Continue essential bills you are legally responsible for and confirm the payment source.
- Inventory loans, credit cards, subscriptions and automatic payments.
- Contact mortgage servicers and insurers about account updates and continuing coverage.
- Ask a CPA about final tax returns, estate tax filings and your changing tax situation.
- Avoid rushing to sell your home unless cash flow, safety or legal needs require it.

Your 30 / 60 / 90-day plan

DAYS 1–30

Gather documents, contact SSA, insurers and employers, confirm cash flow, identify trusted helpers.

DAYS 31–60

Track claims, review debts, inventory retirement accounts, consult an attorney or CPA if needed.

DAYS 61–90

Build a new budget, review survivor income, update beneficiaries and decide what can wait.

These are organizing windows, not legal deadlines. Benefits, claims, probate and taxes may have different deadlines. Confirm them directly.

06 | Questions worth asking

Bring this page to a conversation with a financial professional.

- How much money is available to cover essential expenses now?
- Which insurance and survivor benefits have we found, and what may remain unclaimed?
- What happens to my income, taxes and retirement plan after this loss?
- Which investment decisions are urgent, and which can wait?
- What fees would I pay, what services are included, and are you acting as a fiduciary when giving advice?
- May I bring a trusted family member or friend to the meeting?

A SPACE FOR YOUR NEXT STEP

My most urgent question

Person or institution I need to call

What I learned

My next step and date

You do not have to navigate this alone. Socius Wealth Management welcomes conversations about retirement income, investments and financial planning. There is no obligation to become a client to use this guide.

sociuswealthmgt.com | 928-491-6013

Trusted places to turn

Thrivent | Widowed women survey

newsroom.thrivent.com | June 2024

LIMRA | Financial preparedness for widowed women

limra.com | June 2026

NAIC | Life Insurance Policy Locator

content.naic.org/consumer/life-insurance-policy-locator

NAIC | Life insurance beneficiaries

content.naic.org

Social Security | Survivor benefits

ssa.gov/survivor

Social Security | Application documents

ssa.gov/forms/ssa-10.html

CFPB | Resources for surviving spouses

consumerfinance.gov | Surviving spouses

CFPB | Responsibility for a spouse's debts

consumerfinance.gov/ask-cfpb

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