

Health Care Proxy

Frequently Asked Questions



What is a Health Care Proxy? A Health Care Agent?

A Health Care Proxy is a document by which you can appoint someone else to make medical decisions on your behalf if for some reason you are unable to make them or communicate them for yourself. The person you choose to appoint is known as your Health Care Agent.

Why should I complete a Health Care Proxy?

If you become unable to decide or express what medical treatments you want, it is important to have someone available who can speak on your behalf. Such a time might arise after an accident leaving you temporarily unconscious, a heart attack, a mental illness, or any of a number of conditions.

How is this different from a Living Will?

Both the Health Care Proxy and the Living Will were designed to ensure that you get the medical treatment you want in the event that you are unable to communicate your wishes. However, a Living Will is a document that only allows you to state what life-sustaining treatments you do not want. Further, it only becomes active if you are terminally ill or are in a permanent, unconscious state. The Health Care Proxy, on the other hand, allows your Agent to make Health Care decisions for you in a variety of situations when you are unable to yourself. It also allows you to give specific instructions (prior to your incapacitation) to your Agent and limit what you wish them to do. Finally, the Health Care Proxy becomes effective any time you lose the capacity to make decisions yourself; a Living Will only applies after a doctor determines that you are terminally ill, in a permanent unconscious state, or have permanent brain damage that prevents you from making decisions. In Massachusetts, the legality of the Living Will is still being defined. For this reason, the Health Care Proxy is preferred.

When does a Health Care Proxy take effect?

The Health Care Proxy becomes active only after your doctor determines that you are unable to make decisions or express them for yourself. Your doctor must document in writing the reasons for your incapacity and its expected length. This determination is then given to you and to your Agent. Only then can your Agent make decisions on your behalf.

It is important for you and your Agent to understand that Good Samaritan Medical Center (GSMC), as a Catholic institution, adheres to the “Ethical & Religious Directives” (ERD), for Catholic health care services. As such, GSMC will not honor an advanced directive that is contrary to Catholic teaching. If the advanced directive conflicts with Catholic teaching, an explanation will be provided as to why the directive cannot be honored.

To learn more about the ERDs, please visit www.usccb.org/bishops/directives.shtml.

Good Samaritan Medical Center

A STEWARD FAMILY HOSPITAL



What if I regain my decision-making ability?

If your doctor decides you have regained the capacity to make or communicate your own decisions, your Health Care Agent will no longer be able to make them for you. Your consent will then be required for all medical treatments.

Who should my Health Care Agent be?

Your Health Care Agent should be someone you trust and someone who knows you well. Remember, this will be the person deciding what medical care you receive. Therefore, it should be someone familiar with your values, religious beliefs and preferences for treatment. It should also be someone willing to accept this responsibility. Many people choose a spouse, child, brother or sister, or a close friend, though you can choose anyone over 18 to be your Agent.

Who will make medical decisions on my behalf if no Health Care Proxy exists?

If you become unable to make or communicate treatment decisions to Health Care providers, providers will look for an alternate decision maker. If a Proxy exists, that person will be your Agent. If a Proxy does not exist, decisions will often be made by a group of people, including family and care providers and, in some cases, a guardian. When no Proxy exists, the medical decision making process is usually slower than with a Proxy. More importantly, treatment decisions made by a committee of family and Health Care professionals may not reflect your values and beliefs. The Health Care Proxy assists in having your treatment preferences carried out in the most efficient manner possible.

How do I tell my Agent what I want him/her to do?

Asking someone to make decisions on your behalf is a difficult thing to do, both for you and your Agent. A good way to begin is by deciding for yourself what kinds of medical treatment you do and do not want. Once you have thought about what your wishes are, sit down with your Agent and discuss them. Be sure your Agent understands your preferences, since these may be different from their own. Often times, it can be hard to talk about sensitive life-pertaining issues like these. There are many services available to help facilitate these discussions between you and your Health Care Agent. Besides your primary physician many professionals are willing to help including your clergy and social service organizations.

Where can I find a Health Care Proxy form?

You can obtain a Health Care Proxy form at Good Samaritan Medical Center in the registration and patient waiting areas, from your physician or nurse, or by calling our patient advocate at 508-427-3214. Your doctor's office will also be able to provide you with the information.

How do I fill out the Health Care Proxy form?

Completing the form is an easy process. No lawyer is needed. It only requires yourself and two witnesses.

Revoking a Health Care Proxy

A Health Care Proxy is automatically revoked if you fill out another Health Care Proxy at a later date, or if you legally separate from or divorce your spouse, and your spouse was named in the Health Care Proxy as your Agent. You may also revoke your Health Care Proxy by notifying your Agent, your doctor, or other Health Care provider, in writing, that you want to revoke the Health Care Proxy, or by any other act which indicates a clear intention to revoke.