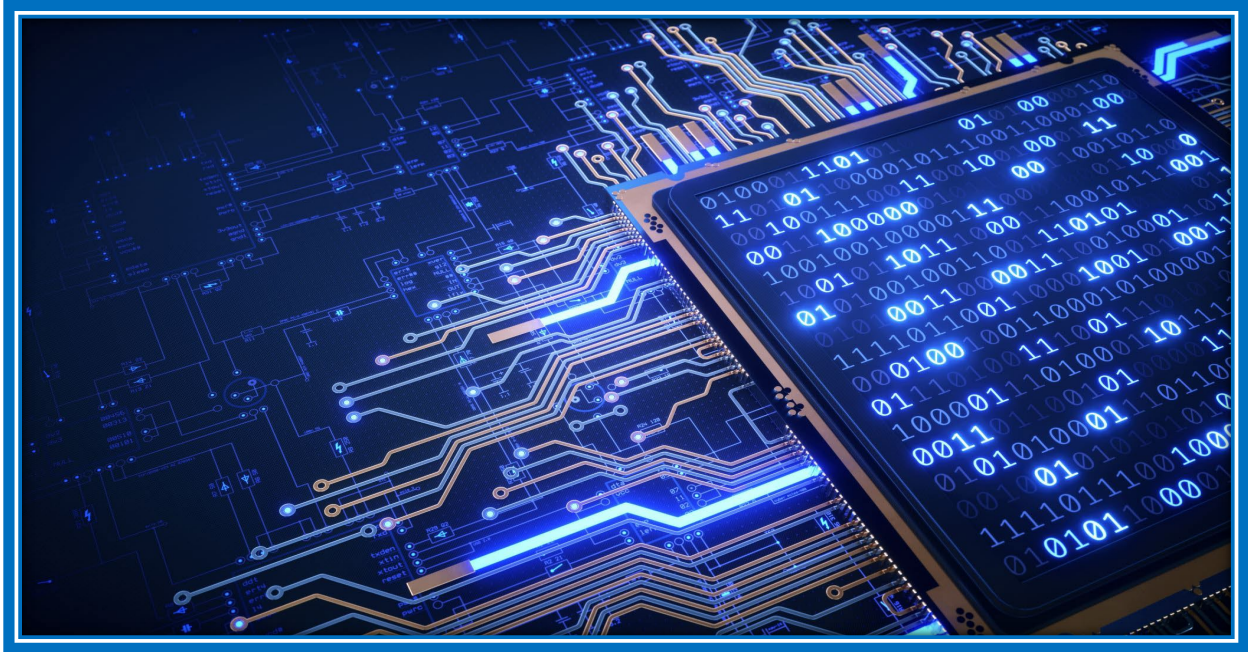


When Grief Meets a Locked Screen



Why Your Family Needs Access to your Digital Financial File

Nobody wants to think about their own death. And nobody — not really — wants to picture the people they love most sitting at a kitchen table surrounded by papers, a laptop, and a phone, trying to piece together the financial life of someone who is no longer there to explain it.

Nearly 4 in 10 respondents stored their passwords entirely in their heads — which means one health event, one accident, one sudden death, and that information is gone forever.

But that scene plays out in American households every single day. Not because people didn't care. Not because they weren't smart. But because they never got around to having that one conversation: Where is everything? How do I get to it? What did you have that I didn't know about?

We plan for death in some ways. We buy life insurance. We buy a long-term care insurance plan. We write wills – hopefully also a Power of Attorney for Health and Financial decisions. We name beneficiaries. But in an era when so much of our financial lives exists behind a username and a password — bank portals, investment accounts, retirement dashboards, utility auto-pays, insurance portals — the traditional planning checklist has a gaping hole in it. And the families left behind are the ones who fall through it.

The Numbers Tell a Sobering Story

A 2024 survey of 1,000 U.S. adults conducted by All About Cookies put hard numbers to something financial advisors and estate attorneys have been quietly observing for years: the digital financial lives of most Americans are invisible to their partners and families.

Only 3 in 10 people in relationships said their partner could easily access their online accounts if they passed away.

Read that again. Seven out of ten surviving spouses or partners would face an immediate barrier — locked out of the very accounts they need to manage bills, access savings, and begin settling an estate — at the exact moment they are least equipped to handle that kind of stress.

Exactly half of respondents said they had online financial accounts their partner or spouse didn't know existed at all.

These weren't hidden out of deception. They were simply accounts that had accumulated over the years — an old 401(k) from a previous employer, a brokerage account opened during the early days of online investing, a high-yield savings account set up when rates were climbing. Individually manageable. Collectively, invisible.

The survey found that respondents held a median of \$8,000 in online assets that would either get lost or significantly delayed reaching their heirs. And in many cases, those funds may never reach their intended recipients at all. Money held in unclaimed accounts can, depending on the state, eventually be turned over to the government if no heir steps forward to claim it.

Grief Is Hard Enough Without a Locked Door

There is a particular cruelty to the kind of stress that comes from financial chaos during bereavement. Grief is already one of the most physically and emotionally exhausting experiences a human being can go through. The brain doesn't function normally. Sleep is disrupted. Simple decisions feel enormous. The idea of navigating a complex web of unknown financial accounts, forgotten passwords, and unresponsive customer service lines during those weeks and months is almost impossible to overstate.

Yet this is the reality for millions of families every year. A spouse who handled the bills passes away unexpectedly, and their partner doesn't know the login for the electric company's auto-pay account. A parent dies after a long illness and the adult children discover three separate investment portals they've never heard of. A sudden cardiac event leaves a surviving spouse unable to access the primary checking account because the login requires a two-factor authentication code sent to a phone they can't unlock.

These are not edge cases. These are predictable, preventable crises — and they compound the pain of loss in ways that leave lasting marks on families.

The Will Isn't Enough Anymore

Many people feel they've done their due diligence because they have a will. And a will is important — but it was designed for a world that no longer exists. A will can direct who inherits your assets. It cannot tell your spouse the password to your Charles Schwab account. It cannot explain which email address you used to set up your IRA portal. It cannot list or explain the seven subscriptions still charging your debit card every month.

There's another important wrinkle: passwords, account numbers, and login credentials should never go in a will, because wills become public documents when they go through probate. Any sensitive financial information included in a will is potentially accessible to anyone. The right place for that information is a separate, secure document — a digital legacy plan — that lives outside the will but is just as deliberately maintained.

The All About Cookies survey found that of the 65 percent of respondents who had a will, only 24 percent included any online account information. And even the households that intended to share passwords often relied on informal, fragile methods.

This Is a Long-Term Care Issue Too

It would be easy to frame this as purely an estate planning problem. But it's just as much a long-term care planning problem, and that distinction matters.

A significant number of care events are not sudden deaths.

They are gradual declines: a diagnosis of Parkinson's, the slow progression of dementia, recovery from a major stroke. In these cases, the window to share information doesn't close all at once — but it does close. And families who wait until mom or dad's cognitive abilities have declined to begin these conversations often find themselves locked out not just of accounts, but of the ability to have a meaningful conversation about any of it.

Planning for long-term care means planning for the full arc of what might happen — including the reality that the person who has always managed the money may eventually be unable to do so. A surviving spouse who has never logged into an investment account, never set up the auto-pay for homeowner's insurance, never known where the brokerage statements were sent, is not in a position to make good financial decisions during a care transition or after a loss. That gap doesn't just cause stress. It can cause real financial harm and possibly unintended tax or other legal consequences.

The Conversation That Changes Everything

The good news is that the solution isn't complicated. It doesn't require an attorney, although that might help. It requires a conversation — and then some follow-through.

Sit down together. Make a list of every account, portal, and subscription that touches your financial life. Bank accounts. Investment and retirement accounts. Insurance portals. Mortgage or rent payment systems. Utility auto-pays. Tax filing services. Social Security

accounts. Note the username, the associated email address, and where the password is stored. If you use a password manager, make sure your partner knows how to access it.

Then go further. Talk through which accounts your partner didn't know existed. Talk about how investment decisions are made, where statements go, what the auto-pay schedule looks like throughout the month. Financial literacy within a household isn't just good emergency planning — it's a form of care for the person you love most.

Tools like password managers make this easier than ever. Apple's iCloud Keychain allows users to designate an heir directly from their phone. Google Password Manager allows passwords to be downloaded as a secure spreadsheet. Popular third-party top password management software like Nordpass, Keeper, ProtonPass offer peace of mind. Many dedicated password managers feature a "legacy contact" or "digital will" specifically designed for this purpose. The technology exists. It's the conversation that most couples have been putting off.

Prepared Is the Greatest Gift You Can Give

Here is the truth about long-term care planning, and about end-of-life planning more broadly: we cannot control when loss enters our lives. We cannot predict whether it comes suddenly or slowly at 60 or at 85, after a full life or in the middle of one. What we can control is whether the people we love are left standing in the dark, or whether we've handed them a map.

Being prepared doesn't mean obsessing over death. It means loving your family enough to have an uncomfortable conversation now so they don't face an impossible one later. It means treating your digital financial life with the same seriousness you give your physical estate. It means recognizing that grief, when it comes, will be brutal enough on its own — and that adding confusion, financial stress, and locked accounts to that grief is something entirely within your power to prevent.

For more information contact Peggy Fields, Licensed Consultant

Long-Term Care Solutions To Protect Your Family & Finances



Peggy Fields

Multi-State Licensed Agent

peggyfields.acsiapartners.com

Cell: 704-839-1158

Peggy.Fields@acsiapartners.com

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