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Protecting Deceased Clients from Identity Theft

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News at eleven.

Though it seems like the sort of fantastical headline that the 11 o'clock news would use in a commercial to spook viewers into tuning in, as a [recent blog post](#) reminds us, identity theft is a very real problem that can continue to haunt (I know...) your clients even after they're gone. And, because it takes up to sixmonths for the institutions that govern our financial lives (Social Security Administration, credit-reporting bureaus, etc.) to receive and process death records, such scams can be even harder to identify than usual. Even though potential identity theft is likely the last thing on a family's mind when trying to process the death of a loved one, there are, nonetheless, some simple steps advisors, in concert with a client'srelatives, can take to discourage any unscrupulous individuals.

Don't over-share in the obituary. [According to AARP](#), many identity thieves start by gleaning personal information from funeral homes and obituaries. Make sure your client's family pays special attention not to reveal too much information in publicly available materials. General age of the deceased, for instance, is fine, but spelling out his birthday isn't. Innocuousseeming items, like the deceased's mother's maiden name, can also do a great deal of damage (just think of how many password recovery "secret questions" you have set up currently that ask for your mother's maiden name).

Contact financial organizations yourself. Financial organizations are cumbersome beasts that can take a great deal of time to process any changes, so it's imperative to inform them of your client's death immediately, to reduce the window for any potential shenanigans. There are three main creditreporting bureaus—[Equifax](#), [Experian](#) and [TransUnion](#). When a client dies, copies of his death certificate should be mailed to each of them along with a request that they place a "deceased alert" on the client's report. Certificates should also be mailed (make sure the family gets a bunch, they're going to need them) to every company that holds any financial information about the client, including banks, insurers, credit card companies, etc. You should also report the death directly to [Social Security](#) by calling 1-800-772-1213. It's important to follow up with each of these organizations to make sure that the requests are actually being processed and that your client's status gets updated in their systems. Don't just drop the certificates in the mail and call it a day.

Cancel driver's licenses and passports. These documents need to be canceled in order to prevent potential fraudsters from requesting duplicates/replacements. Closing out a deceased's driver's license is as simple as contacting the local DMV (if that can be considered simple) and informing them of the death. They will fill you in on the protocol, which varies by jurisdiction. Terminating a passport is a bit more complicated and requires that the passport and a death certificate be mailed to the [Consular Lost and Stolen Passports Unit](#).

Stay vigilant. Keep an eye on the deceased's financial records and every few months for the first year after death, request a credit report for the deceased (each of the three bureaus offers one free report annually, so space them out) just to ensure that everything is still in its place.

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