



Meagan Winthrop explains how advance directives, such as living wills, make end-of-life patients' wishes known. SHAUNA BITTLE/PHOTOS FOR THE TRIBUNE

Help with end-of-life plans

Discussing death adds discomfort but makes life easier on survivors

By Marti Parham
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Many people are reluctant to think about their own death, but Chicago resident Harry L. Sampler isn't, especially not after what he went through last month.

On Dec. 3, the eve of his 62nd birthday, the former public health administrator lost his 8-year-old granddaughter to cancer. A few weeks later, he had his own health scare when chest pains put him in the hospital for six days.

The emotional events prompted Sampler to take charge of his life in a new way — by making end-of-life decisions.

"I just want to take the uncertainty out of things," he said. "I want to be around for a long time, but in the future when that last day does come, there will be no doubt of what I want to happen to me."

Sampler, who lives in Bronzeville, recently attended a workshop on advance directives held at Weiss Memorial Hospital on the city's North Side. Advance directives lay out how an individual wants medical decisions made in the future if that person is not able to make the decision.

Meagan Winthrop, director of business development for Seasons Hospice & Palliative Care, conducted the Weiss workshop. She said people often find the topic difficult to discuss, partly due to a lack of education.

"What we've found is that people just don't know what's out there,"



Benny Davis says that living wills helped him and his 13 siblings cope with the deaths of their parents. "They pre-arranged everything," he said.

WHAT TO KNOW

Health Care Power of Attorney: Allows you to choose someone 18 or older to make health-care decisions for you if you are unable to make them yourself.

Living Will: Only applies to terminal conditions. Explains the types of medical treatments and life-sustaining measures you do and do not want performed, such as mechanical breathing, tube feeding and resuscitation.

The Mental Health Treatment Preference Declaration: Allows you to decide in advance whether you want to receive psychotropic medicine, electroconvulsive treatment or be admitted short-term to a treatment facility if you are incapable of making the decision yourself.

A Do Not Resuscitate order (DNR): A medical treatment order that states if the heart or breathing stops, cardiopulmonary resuscitation will not be attempted.

Illinois Dept. of Public Health

Winthrop said.

In Illinois, there are several types of advance directives, including health care power of attorney and living will.

Kerry Peck, an elder law attorney and partner at Peck Bloom

want to have that power," Peck said.

Peck said most people are uncomfortable talking about issues surrounding death.

"This hesitancy ... can lead to people waiting too long to execute advance directives," said Peck. For example, they may no longer have the mental capacity to do so, he said.

Making these issues a topic of discussion earlier in life, can make the subject less taboo, said Caren Perlmutter, vice president of the Weiss Geriatric Service Line. "We need for people to start thinking about this throughout their adult years because death is inevitable."

Sandy Garfield, an educational seminar coordinator from the Edgewater neighborhood, attended the workshop because she wanted to learn more about updating her Living Will.

"I lost my mother about 20 years ago. She was on a ventilator and I was watching her die. I was never really quite sure what she would have wanted," said Garfield.

"Right after that I decided to carry a Living Will in my purse because I never wanted to be put on life support if there was no hope for me. I have (the Living Will) witnessed and notarized."

For more information on the Weiss workshops, which are held bimonthly, call 800-503-1234. For free downloads of the forms, go to the Illinois Department of Public Health at www.idph.state.il.us.

Illinois also offers the Five Wishes program, www.wishingwithdignity.org, as another legal alternative. Five Wishes not only makes medical wishes clear, it also addresses emotional, personal and spiritual needs.

LLC, said not making such decisions can have unintended consequences.

"The failure to plan allows for confusion and (for) the decision regarding your health care to be made by someone else you may not