

4/8/20 REUTERS LEGAL 15:22:44

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April 8, 2020

Coronavirus crisis raises demand, and complications, for wills

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(Reuters) - Robert Adler, a New York-based trusts and estates lawyer, says calls to his office have doubled or tripled in recent weeks, with people he's never worked for before asking him: "What happens if I die?"

"A lot of those callers are doctors, nurses, EMTs, transit workers, police ... people still on the job," said Adler, of Adler & Adler. That's not his usual client base of affluent people making long-term plans for larger estates. Most of the new callers just want quick answers on how to plan what would happen to their children and belongings if they died and "whenever I get these calls, I do whatever I can" to give them guidance, he said.

He's not the only one. Attorneys from New York to California told Reuters that since the coronavirus pandemic hit the U.S. there's been a surge of people of all ages calling with questions about how to draft and execute wills. More people are also asking about advanced healthcare directives, in case the virus leaves them incapacitated, said Bernard A. Krooks, the founding partner of New York law firm Littman Krooks.

Charles Rampenthal, the general counsel of LegalZoom.com Inc, which provides online legal services, said he's heard of more people using the company's services to create wills, but doesn't have definitive data yet.

The coronavirus has spread rapidly across the U.S., killing more than 12,800 people and infecting at least 398,199 as of early Wednesday.

Most U.S. states have ordered residents to stay at home and practice social distancing in an effort to slow its spread, which has complicated will execution.

In many states, a will is only valid if it is also signed by disinterested witnesses who were present, in person, when the person executing the will signed it.

Rampenthal said he has suggested that people who live in apartments ask neighbors to serve as witnesses from across the hallway. Adler's clients have signed wills on their front lawn, with witnesses standing across the street, or watching from windows. Then the document is dropped half-way between them for witnesses to come and sign, with each party bringing their own pens, and wearing gloves, he said.

The demand for estate planning due to the pandemic likely has not yet peaked, given the added hurdles to executing wills and that many people are more focused on immediate needs such as securing food and healthcare, said Jules Haas, a New York trust and estates attorney. He said previous crises, like the 9/11 attacks, led to an aftershock of people seeking estate planning advice, once their urgent needs were taken care of.

"People are now more focused on their own mortality," Krooks said. "The only thing they can control ... is whether or not they're prepared."

--- Index References ---

Company: LEGALZOOM COM INC

News Subject: (Health & Family (1HE30))

Industry: (Coronavirus (1CV19); Healthcare (1HE06); Infectious Diseases (1IN99); Real Estate (1RE57); Viral (1VI15))

Region: (Americas (1AM92); New York (1NE72); North America (1NO39); U.S. Mid-Atlantic Region (1MI18); USA (1US73))

Language: EN

Other Indexing: (Littman Krooks) (Charles Rampenthal; Bernard A. Krooks; Robert Adler; Adler & Adler; Jules Haas)

Keywords: antitrust; arbitration; bankruptcy; banking; busimm; capmarket; corpgov; commercial; dataprivacy; ebec; employment; energy; fedlit; health; immigration; insurance; ip; ma; products; realestate; securities; tax (OCC:OLRTXT); (N2:US)Keywords:

Word Count: 475

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