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THE REGISTER CITIZEN

Attorneys offer drive-up legal service for seniors during coronavirus outbreak

By Lisa Backus
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Photo: Contributed Photo

Attorneys Lyn Elovson, left, and Christine Tenore are offering drive-up legal services for the elderly during the coronavirus pandemic

A dapper 88-year-old man wearing a mask, gloves and a hat pulled into the parking lot of the Fairfield law firm of Elovson and Tenore to sign the paperwork to revise his will.

“You do know it can get in your hair,” he told attorney Lyn Elovson while seated in his car. He used his own pen to sign the documents after being handed a sterilized clipboard from a safe distance away.

As attorneys who specialize in Elder Law, including estate planning, trusts and guardianships, Elovson and attorney Christine Tenore are dealing with the most vulnerable portion of the population when it comes to COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

They've adjusted their business so seniors can update wills and deal with other estate planning and legal issues as the state deals with the public health emergency, which has killed 189 people as of Sunday.

They've done eight parking lot signings since launching a virtual office the week of March 23. As long as courts and municipal buildings are accepting documents, they will be filed on deadline, the attorneys said.

"Our clients are concerned about their mortality and they have concerns about deadlines that need to be met," Eliovson said. "They need legal representation in case of illness and making sure that they are choosing someone who will see to their needs."

The attorneys who have been in business for more than two decades decided to move to a virtual model, providing cyber-secure video conferencing meetings as a way of meeting their clients' needs while keeping people safe from contracting COVID-19, whether they are home, in a nursing home or in an assisted-living or senior facility.

Many of the documents required can be filed electronically. But in situations where a signature is needed, Eliovson and Tenore will come to an assisted-living or senior living facility to meet clients in the portico of the building so they don't have to venture out. They have to be more creative when it comes to a client in a skilled nursing facility since they have been locked down from visitors for weeks.

The attorneys are also conducting drive-up service in their parking lot so clients don't have to get out of their cars. Any witnesses required to watch a document signing stand six feet away, allowing safety for all, the attorneys said.

Appointments are conducted by video whenever possible — and the scenarios can be adjusted to fit the needs of the clients and their families, Tenore said.

"The video conferencing not only allows us to converse but by using various platforms, we're able to show documents," Tenore said.

In one case, a family of three siblings needed to review the contract for their mother who is being moved to the skilled nursing portion from the assisted-living area of the facility. Two of the siblings were comfortable with the video conference — but the third wants to do it by cell phone, Eliovson said.

They practiced in advance to make sure the meeting would off without a hitch.

“What we found is that the clients have a level of comfort when they see us,” Tenore said.

Gov. Ned Lamont included in one of many executive orders he’s issued that witnesses to some documentation can be waived and that certain documents can be notarized by teleconference, the attorneys said.

“This will give us more flexibility,” Tenore said. “There are safeguards in place, but if there is an emergency at a nursing home, which are locked down from visitors, there is something we can do.”

People have been scrambling to update their wills and estate plans since those above 70 comprise the highest percentage of deaths from COVID-19, the attorney said. But the challenge is to make sure that despite the video conferencing and the drive-up signatures, the documents will be valid years from now, Eliovson said.

“Our goal is to give our clients peace of mind with documents that stand the test of time and to be responsive in a time of crisis,” Eliovson said.