
Preface to First Edition

My experience with elder law began about 30 years ago, when my in-laws (who lived several states away) visited a law firm for the first time in their lives and were persuaded to sign estate planning documents that they did not understand and that were not appropriate to their situation. The attorney, who did not have a paralegal and charged an outrageous fee, did not listen to their concerns and showed them no respect. When I graduated from law school the following year and began practicing estate planning and probate, I promised myself I would do a better job. A big part of doing a better job involves use of paralegals to keep costs down and communication up. I was fortunate that my paralegals had excellent communication skills as well as substantive knowledge.

Later, as the coordinator of a paralegal program, I had a request for a course in Elder Law. I knew it was more than estate planning and I began exploring the topic. I was again fortunate: There were program graduates working in the field even though we had not offered the class. My preparation to teach the class involved learning a lot of substantive law and spending time in law firms to pick up the “culture” of dealing with these clients. A book on this subject could be huge, if it covered that substantive law in detail as well as the “soft skills” required for ethical practice and good client communication. I think I’ve found the right balance: giving students the terminology and legal framework they need to be effective without overwhelming them with detail and, at the same time, keeping the content client-focused, as this area of practice must be.

I would like to thank the busy professionals who were so generous in providing information for the profiles: Noel Anschutz, Rev. Amity Carrubba, LaShonda Dillard, Greg Duncan, Heather Finn, Pete Flowers, Dr. Ron Hirsch, Eric Matusewich, Tina McHorney, Kathy Motley, Kimberly Murphy, Jennifer Poulin, Lisa Wagman, and, particularly, the people at Law Elder Law, LLP, Aurora, IL.

Laurel A. Vietzen
February 2011

Preface to Second Edition

I have enjoyed being around older adults for my entire life. As a child, I grew up in an area that was once considered “the country” and a place where older adults moved to when they retired or needed care. My family home was surrounded by orchards, a hospital, and many places where older adults lived, which were then called care homes, convalescent hospitals, and nursing homes. The older adults in these communities became my friends, and I visited them nearly every day. I was in 4-H and brought rabbits, chickens, ducks, dogs, and cats to visit older adult residents and brighten their day. I got to know the residents, talked to them, and helped them in different ways. However, I got so much more from these older adult residents. I listened to their stories, learned new things, and appreciated their sharing their lives with me.

Once I became a trial lawyer, I saw how others abused older adults and took advantage of them. This was especially true if someone had memory issues or dementia. I saw children abusing their parents, physically, mentally, and/or financially. I saw how care facility employees, the people who were supposed to care for older adults, ended up abusing them. I wanted to learn more about older adults, so I went back to school and became a gerontologist. As a lawyer and gerontologist, I have gained a better understanding of how society’s beliefs affect the treatment of older adults. While being a lawyer helped me make a positive difference in the lives of older adults, my skills as a gerontologist have made me a more effective advocate for older adults.

By working on the second edition of this book, I have included more detailed information about working with older adults, elder abuse, dignity with dying, housing options, LGBTQ+ elder issues, and other elder law-related matters. Many changes have taken place since the first edition of this book was published, and I wanted to share this information with an emphasis on understanding the larger view, while including enough detailed information to enable paralegal students to better understand how important they are.

Althea T. Kippes
June 2026