

TOP ESTATE LAWYERS

*Here are 17 local attorneys
recommended by their peers*

BY KIM EISLER | PHOTOS BY ERICK GIBSON

There are hundreds of lawyers in Montgomery County who can write your will, help name an executor, draft a medical directive and give power of attorney to someone who could make end-of-life decisions for you.

Hiring a top specialist in wills and trusts will cost from \$3,000 to \$5,000 in most instances. “The client is paying for someone to listen and to express the client’s uniqueness in a will that fulfills their particular needs,” says Michelle Chapin of Paley Rothman in Bethesda. “Wills are not one size fits all.”

Choosing a lawyer to draft or revise an estate plan is an important decision. So we asked dozens of local estate attorneys who they would use to write their wills. Here are the 17 who were recommended most often:

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ANN JAKABCIN

Ann Jakabcin is a 35-year veteran of Stein Sperling Bennett De Jong Driscoll in Rockville. A native of Washington, D.C., she grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania. After graduating from D.C.'s Trinity Washington University, she received a law degree from Temple University in Philadelphia and became a tax planner for family businesses. For many years, Jakabcin, 66, has been known for her fierce loyalty to her clients, including many small-business owners, though she has recently cut back on her practice. Colleagues say "she knows her clients well and writes tax plans that make sense." One colleague says Jakabcin practices law the same way she plays bridge: "Steady, solid and thinks about something before she does it." steinsperling.com

STEVEN WIDDÉS

The head of the estates department at Stein Sperling Bennett De Jong Driscoll in Rockville, Steven Widdes, 66, is one of the most liked and respected estate attorneys in the area. A native of Duluth, Minnesota, he graduated from Drake University's law school in Iowa before coming to Washington, D.C., to work at the Internal Revenue Service. Widdes subsequently worked for a religion-based charitable organization, where his job was to persuade members to include a donation in their wills. Widdes hasn't forgotten that job and often stresses the importance of charitable giving when dealing with clients. "If you give away 4 to 6 percent in total to charities, your children are not going to starve," he frequently tells them. steinsperling.com

CHARLES ABELL

W. Shepherdson "Shep" Abell, co-founder of Furey, Doolan & Abell, Montgomery County's most venerable firm specializing in wills, estates and trusts, has largely stepped aside from practicing full time. Going forward, he has left the Bethesda firm in the able hands of his son, Charles Abell, 48, a University of Virginia law school graduate who has top credentials. He is a former law clerk for U.S. District Judge Thomas Hogan and joined the family firm in 2000 after starting out at D.C.'s Covington & Burling. Says one fellow attorney, "I've had a number of matters with him over the years and I find him to be very knowledgeable [and] approachable, and his clients really seem to respect him and enjoy working with him."

fdalaw.com

LENA BARNETT

The founder of Lena Barnett & Associates in Bethesda, Barnett was once one of the most visible and best-known estate attorneys in the Washington, D.C., area, and was a popular lecturer, speaker and television personality for many years. These days, Barnett, 59, has cut back on her TV work, but the University of Maryland law school graduate is still praised by clients, especially for her communication skills. After three decades in practice, Barnett has a gift for making complicated situations understandable, clients say. "A tax plan has to fit with the goals, values and lifestyle of a client," she says. "You don't let the tax changes wag the dog." Unlike most estate attorneys, Barnett says she usually charges a flat rate for the documents she prepares.

lenabarnett.com

MARY BETH BEATTIE

A solo practitioner in Rockville, Mary Beth Beattie, 61, occasionally mentors young attorneys or law students looking for experience. Beattie, a George Washington University law school graduate, has been in Rockville since 1996 and has 29 years of experience in the field. She is active in estate and county bar organizations and

well known by her peers, two of whom say she drafts clear and professional documents that are error-free.
mbbeattie.com

RACHEL D. BURKE

Rachel Burke, 42, grew up in Chevy Chase and graduated from Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda. An attorney at Furey, Doolan & Abell in Bethesda, she got her law degree from Washington and Lee University in Virginia and later worked in Washington, D.C., for Lloyd Leva Plaine, one of the best-known estate attorneys in the country. Her areas of experience include the "generation-skipping transfer tax," in which the law allows lower tax rates to apply when wealth is passed in certain ways to grandchildren or other substantially younger beneficiaries.
fdalaw.com

PAULA CALIMAFDE

When Paula Calimafde's father, John Calimafde, died in 2015, he was one of the most famous patent litigators in the country. Says Paula, "He basically taught me how to think like a lawyer from the time I was very young." Drawn to estate law while studying at Catholic University, Calimafde, 66, is particularly knowledgeable about transferring pension and retirement benefits. "It has become obvious to me that there are specific things that parents can include in their estate-planning documents, which greatly increases the chances of the children working together amiably and [decreases] the chances of gut-wrenching litigation," says Calimafde, an attorney with Paley Rothman in Bethesda.
paleyrothman.com

ANNE COVENTRY

An attorney at Pasternak & Fidis in Bethesda, Anne Coventry came naturally to her specialization in estate law. Her father was a public defender and her mother was a CPA. "So I managed to combine their careers," she says. A decade ago, the



ERIC CORE

For 36 years, Eric Core, 66, has anchored the will-writing practice at Lerch, Early & Brewer, a multipurpose law firm in Bethesda that has been in business for nearly 70 years. Most of his work these days encompasses the administration of wills he wrote decades ago. "I have been doing this for a long time, and many of my clients have died or created irrevocable trusts and [are] at that point that the plans they have made need to be put in place," he says. Younger lawyers who have worked with Core over the years say he maintains a reputation as one of the smartest and classiest attorneys in the field. He often teaches and holds seminars for financial planners and nonlawyer CPAs. Core, who holds undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Iowa, is the brother of local radio personality Chris Core.
lerchearly.com

FRANK BALDINO

Frank Baldino, 56, has a head-spinning amount of knowledge about wills, prenuptial agreements, trusts and tax shelters, and protecting assets against creditors. An attorney with Bethesda's Lerch, Early & Brewer, Baldino has a law degree from Seton Hall University in New Jersey. Clients occasionally find his enthusiasm dizzying, but ultimately invaluable. The firm has a substantial practice in divorce, and Baldino is often called upon to assist in rewriting documents after a split and to craft postnuptial agreements.
lerchearly.com



PAUL RIEKHOF

A native of Missouri, Paul Riekhof, 51, followed his attorney wife to the Washington, D.C., area and spent five years as a sole practitioner in Silver Spring before being chosen to head the estate planning practice at Rockville's Joseph Greenwald & Laake, a regional powerhouse with offices in Montgomery and Prince George's counties. True to his roots in the Show Me State, Riekhof likes to visit his clients at their homes to get a better sense of who they are and what assets they have. He recommends that clients who decide to change their revocable wills on their own make sure to have an attorney check that the changes will hold up in court. "We have had several occasions of having to probate such wills and have them interpreted by the court," says Riekhof, who graduated from the University of Colorado law school. "It is not extremely common, but it occurs." jgllaw.com

William & Mary law school graduate landed at Pasternak & Fidis, a firm with a strong reputation in estate law. Coventry, 44, has developed an expertise in cases involving "digital assets," in which an executor wants to gain access to a deceased loved one's social media accounts, photos or even electronic currency. "A social media account can be the modern equivalent to a treasured box of letters," Coventry says. pasternakfidis.com

JAY EISENBERG

Jay Eisenberg, 53, heads the estate practice at Potomac's Shulman, Rogers, Gandal, Pordy & Ecker. He is a graduate of George Washington University's law school, where he specialized in tax law. Eisenberg says he prides himself on being responsive to his clients. "I want clients to understand what we are doing," he says. "There's a lot of stuff in this practice that's not that difficult to do—returning phone calls, responding to emails—but there's a lot of lawyers who have lost that." shulmanrogers.com

MARC FEINBERG

Along with Paula Calimafde, Marc Feinberg, 69, of West & Feinberg in Bethesda, is one of the top two local estate lawyers known for their expertise in dealing with

complicated pensions and retirement plans. He studied tax law at George Washington University and got a job after graduation in the estate and gift tax division of the Internal Revenue Service. For the last 30 years, Feinberg has been in private practice. Says a colleague: "Marc has a knowledge of pension and retirement issues that's simply incredible. If you've inherited a pension and can't understand it, he's the man to see." westfeinberg.com

JEFFREY KOLENDER

A University of South Carolina law school graduate, Jeffrey Kolender, 59, heads the substantial estate planning and estate and trust administration practice at Paley Rothman in Bethesda. Colleagues say Kolender has a compassionate demeanor while working with families after a death or divorce. Much of his work involves rewriting the wills of clients in a second marriage after a divorce. Kolender is "a really conscientious attorney and really seems to care about his clients," one family attorney says. "I have worked with him closely over the years on prenuptial agreements and other areas where family law overlaps with estates and trusts." paleyrothman.com

RISING STARS

Here are eight estate attorneys to watch

Micah Bonaviri was studying for an advanced degree in tax law at Georgetown University when he applied for a job at Stein Sperling. Both he and classmate Caroline Ford were offered positions. Eight years, a marriage and a baby boy later, Micah, 37, and Caroline (now **Caroline Bonaviri**), 35, are still at Stein Sterling and working closely with Steven Widdes.

Michelle Chapin, 37, is happy to help families of all means at Paley Rothman, a law firm known for representing upscale clients who own businesses. Chapin, who graduated from American University's Washington College of Law, specializes in writing wills for international clients.

Brian Della Rocca, 44, graduated from the Catholic University law school. He practiced in various areas of business law before settling in estates, and is both accommodating and easy to talk to. Della Rocca is a partner at KDR Law Group in Silver Spring.

Will Hellams, 38, graduated from Charleston School of Law in South Carolina in 2008 and now practices at Lerch, Early & Brewer. Hellams is a graduate of Leadership Montgomery's Emerging Leaders program, which focuses on developing civic-minded professionals into the leaders of tomorrow. He has been mentored at the firm by Frank Baldino and Eric Core.

Christina Scopin, 32, has a law degree from Catholic University and practices at Pasternak & Fidis. A mentor describes Scopin as "attentive to detail, people-oriented and dedicated." She is likely to rise to the next generation of leaders at what's considered one of Bethesda's best law firms.

Micah Snitzer, 34, got his law degree at Hofstra University on Long Island. Snitzer, who practices at Pasternak & Fidis, was a bankruptcy lawyer in Baltimore before switching to estate law.

Megan Wallace, 49, is a former clerk for the Michigan Supreme Court who has a growing practice in Bethesda, fueled in part by referrals from admiring larger firms. She has been able to establish her own firm, Wallace Law, in an area of practice dominated by several top firms. She graduated from the law school at Western Michigan University and received an advanced degree in taxation from Georgetown.

KATHLEEN LI

Kathleen Li, who goes by "Cassie," graduated from the University of Virginia law school and went to work in estate planning at Ropes & Gray, one of Boston's oldest and most prestigious firms. That put Li in the middle of a practice that involved elite clients with high net worths and private foundations. Then, at D.C.'s Covington & Burling, she gained a reputation as one of the best and brightest young lawyers at the firm. Colleagues say Li, 47, "knows the tax stuff cold," so she joined Furey, Doolan & Abell in Bethesda. Says Li: "A will can be as simple or as complicated as you want, but there is no one right answer for everybody. You just have to figure out a plan that works for them."
fdalaw.com

PHIL O'DONOGHUE

Phil O'Donoghue, 68, of Furey, Doolan & Abell in Bethesda is one of the attorneys often mentioned when colleagues are asked to name the best estate lawyer in Montgomery County. Said one peer: "Phil has incredible depth and wisdom." O'Donoghue—his father was an attorney and his grandfather was a federal judge—earned his law degree from Georgetown University. He says he works mostly with clients with high net worths. What does he tell a client who's concerned about Maryland's estate tax? "I tell him to move to Florida or Virginia," two states with no estate tax, he says. "Funny, but I find that most pick Florida."
fdalaw.com

STEPHANIE PERRY

Stephanie Perry, 38, graduated from Emory University's law school in Atlanta. She

was recruited by Pasternak & Fidis in Bethesda after meeting managing partner Nancy Fax at a conference. (Fax, who was also chosen by her peers as one of the top estate attorneys in the county, died in June after a brief illness.) Perry's colleagues say it was one of Fax's best moves. Perry is "really good with people, understands family dynamics and knows how to make people feel comfortable in bad circumstances," Fax said in April. "She is calm, supportive and thoughtful." Perry is one of the youngest lawyers ever admitted into the profession's prestigious American College of Trust and Estate Counsel.
pasternakfidis.com ■

Kim Eisler is the author of four books about lawyers, including his latest, Masters of the Game: Inside the World's Most Powerful Law Firm.

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