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Revocable trust fund

Trust funds are more than deposit accounts that enable you to grant a person or organization money -- they are legal entities. The provisions for trust funds determine how different types operate. One thing all trust funds have in common is the existence of a grantor, a trustee, and a beneficiary. One person can serve in all three roles. Some people have shied away from trust funds because they believe they are exclusive to wealthy people. However, they are an effective way for anyone to establish an inheritance and preserve assets. 1. What is a Grantor? The person who sets up the trust fund and donates property is known as the grantor. This person also decides how the trust fund will be managed, including income and assets. The grantor typically names beneficiaries to a trust fund and has the power to change the beneficiary at his or her discretion. A revocable trust, also known as a living trust, is an instrument used to manage the assets of the grantor during his lifetime and then distribute those assets upon his death. A revocable trust varies from an irrevocable trust because the grantor may alter the revocable trust during his lifetime as long as he is not incapacitated. The key parties in a trust arrangement include the grantor, or creator of the trust, the beneficiaries and the trustee. The beneficiaries are the individuals who stand to benefit from the trust after the grantor's death, and the trustee is the individual or institution charged with managing the trust assets. The grantor may withdraw assets from the trust or alter the trust at any time during his life. If the grantor becomes incapacitated, the trustee will manage all of the grantor's bills and handle all investment decisions related to the property in the trust. One of the advantages of a revocable trust is that the grantor may appoint unrelated, out-of-state trustees to administer the trust. However, the main advantage of a revocable trust is that it allows the assets of the deceased grantor to avoid the state probate process. Avoiding probate can provide major advantages in terms of cost savings and expediency, depending on your jurisdiction. You may not challenge a revocable trust until the grantor is dead or incapacitated. The grounds necessary to challenge a revocable trust in most jurisdictions include lack of capacity of the grantor at the time the trust was created, fraud, duress, mistake or undue influence. To challenge a revocable trust, you must be a beneficiary of the trust. Before you formally challenge the trust, you must gather evidence tending to prove one of the legitimate causes of action. Draft a complaint stating the facts about the trust, why you have standing as a beneficiary and a description of your legal theory about why the trust should not be enforced. Check your local rules of court procedure to make sure your complaint complies. File your complaint with the appropriate probate court in your jurisdiction, and pay the requisite filing fee. After you have filed your complaint, you can begin the discovery process and prepare for trial. Trust funds have provided the basis for countless movies and books over the years, but in reality, they're just living trusts -- they don't necessarily guarantee a privileged beneficiary a lifelong source of easy cash. A trust fund is established when a grantor -- the individual creating it -- transfers ownership of his assets to a separate legal entity, the trust itself. When he dies, ownership of the assets transfers to his named beneficiaries. There are two basic forms of living trusts: revocable and irrevocable. Revocable trusts are more common. One feature that separates a revocable trust from an irrevocable trust is that the grantor typically acts as the trustee. Until the time he dies or becomes incapacitated, he can manage his own trust assets. Revocable trusts also name someone to step in when the grantor can no longer do so -- a successor trustee. The successor trustee might be a friend, a family member or even a professional, such as an attorney or a banking institution. Because the grantor typically acts as trustee of his own revocable trust fund, he maintains control over the assets taken within the trust during his lifetime. He can sell them, change their named beneficiaries, or even liquidate and revoke the entire trust if he wants to. Assuming he doesn't revoke the trust, it holds ownership of and title to his property, including bank and investment accounts. Because he no longer owns these assets, they don't have to pass through the probate process when he dies. The successor trustee can step into the grantor's shoes and take control of the trust, distributing bequests according to the terms of the trust documents. The court doesn't have to get involved. Revocable trust funds aren't perfect and there are several things they can't do. Because the grantor maintains control of his assets, any income generated by them is still reportable on his own tax return. If the income creates a tax liability, the grantor is responsible for paying it. Likewise, revocable trusts don't avoid estate taxation, and they can't shield assets from a grantor's creditors or from claims arising from liability lawsuits. Only irrevocable living trusts can accomplish these things because they involve the grantor turning control of his assets over to the trust forever, even before his death. When the grantor dies and his successor trustee takes over, one of two things can occur. The successor trustee can distribute the trust's assets, transferring them to the grantor's named beneficiaries. When this is accomplished, the successor trustee closes the trust and it ceases to exist -- it's not holding any property for the benefit of others any longer. Trusts can also remain open, however, and this is where the word "fund" comes into play in everyday language. A grantor can direct that his trust remain open after his death instead. If the grantor left a large cash asset, his trust can retain possession of the account and the successor trustee can mete it out to beneficiaries in installments if this is what the grantor directed. Rather than receiving a large lump sum at the death of the grantor, beneficiaries receive periodic payments so the entire balance of the inheritance can't be dissipated through mismanagement, creditor claims, or even spouses in the event of divorce. The beneficiary doesn't actually own the account, but only the individual payments as they're made to him. When you create a revocable living trust, you create a legal document. Generally, people hire trust attorneys to write trusts but you can prepare your own trust document. It may only take a few minutes to write up the actual trust document but if you have a complex trust it could take several weeks to transfer ownership of your assets to your trust. A revocable trust operates under your Social Security number for tax purposes which means that revocable trusts are quicker than irrevocable trusts to create since you do not have to apply to the Internal Revenue Service for a Tax Identification Number for the trust. You can act as the trustee of your own trust which means you do not have to spend time finding someone to manage the trust. You do though have to name beneficiaries and it may take you some time to decide how to split the trust's assets between your heirs. Any assets that you decide to include in the trust do not have to pass through probate when you die so if you want to enable your heirs to completely avoid probate, you must prepare an extensive list of all of your assets. This may not take long if you hold all your assets as cash in one or two bank accounts, but it could take several days to prepare this list if you own various parcels of real estate and a wide variety of stocks, bonds, bank accounts and different commodities. You should provide your trust attorney with a list of all of your assets as well as the names of your beneficiaries and ask your attorney to prepare the trust document. A state-certified notary must witness the final trust document but your attorney should have a notary on staff so this should not cause a delay in the process. Having created the trust, you must provide copies of it to your bank, broker and investment companies and ask all of these firms to re-title your accounts. You must also use quit claim deeds to transfer real estate from your name to the name of your trust. This process could take a number of weeks if you have assets held at various locations around the country. If you hold all of your assets in the form of cash in a bank account then you can create a revocable trust within just a few minutes and without even having to hire an attorney. Under federal banking laws, you can add the names of pay-on-death beneficiaries to your existing bank accounts, and when you do this you automatically turn your accounts into revocable trust accounts. All you have to do is provide a banker with the names of your heirs and then when you die your heirs can claim your money without going through probate. Trusts are organizations created under state laws. Their revocability is therefore determined by the laws of the state under which they are created. Revocable trusts may be treated as distinct entities for some legal purposes, but are disregarded entities for federal tax purposes. Trusts are a popular way to distribute assets after death because the assets in a trust do not pass through probate. There are three roles in a trust. The person who creates the trust is called the grantor or settlor. The grantor transfers money to be held "in trust" for a beneficiary. The document that creates the trust will name one or more beneficiaries and one or more trustees, who exercise the powers granted by the grantor to manage the assets held in trust. A grantor can also be the trustee or a beneficiary, but not both simultaneously. The trustee and successor trustees are usually a trusted family member, professional or institution. A revocable trust is one that the grantor can alter or eliminate entirely at will. This is in contrast to an irrevocable trust, which, by nature, cannot be changed by the unilateral act of the grantor. Living trusts are typically revocable, since the grantor wants to retain control over his assets during his lifetime. Revocable living trusts generally become irrevocable at the death of the grantor. A trust can be revoked by destroying the trust documents and notifying the trustee and any other institutions that may have copies of the trust documents. The IRS treats revocable trusts as disregarded entities for federal income tax. This means that any income generated by the trust that is not distributed to beneficiaries is taxed as income of the grantor. The IRS generally does view trusts as either revocable or irrevocable, but instead looks to the degree of control over the trusts retained by the grantor. The grantor's ability to revoke a trust automatically makes the trust a disregarded entity, but not all irrevocable trusts are taxed separately. Revocable trusts, though they do not go through probate after you die, are counted as part of your gross estate for estate tax purposes. Using a revocable trust to pass assets to your heirs can save them the costs of attorney's fees and court costs associated with probate. Because of the pass-through taxation of revocable trusts, you can also pass the assets along at a higher cost basis and save them the taxes. A trust is also an effective way to ensure that children from other marriages, or other beneficiaries, are not disinherited. When you hear "trust fund," you may immediately think of the phrase "trust fund baby," perhaps imagining someone a whole lot richer than most persons, who will forever be heedlessly plowing his way through inherited millions. While trust funds do provide for wealthy heirs, they have many other functions. They can even provide a trust fund baby with a little structure, precisely so he can't heedlessly run through his inheritance. A trust fund distributes financial benefits provided by a trustor to an individual or an organization, called the grantee. The trustor may be a wealthy parent but can also be another organization. The grantee may be an heir -- that "trust fund baby" -- but can be any individual, group of individuals or organizations. These trusts are often organized as either living or revocable trusts, charitable trusts or marital trusts. Often the largest charitable trusts have a two-part structure: one foundation that manages the assets in the trust and another foundation that distributes those assets. The Bill and Melinda Foundation Trust and the associated Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are examples of this two-part structure. Interestingly, trusts set up for their children's benefit by two of the wealthiest families in the world, Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren and Astrid Buffett, are deliberately limited in scope. The billionaire parents explained their reasons in almost the same words: the idea, they agreed, is to leave their children enough to enable them to do something, but not enough to enable to do nothing. Instead, both the Gates and the Buffetts have already distributed much of their wealth to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Trust, which manages these assets for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the charitable foundation, which, as you might already know, provides about \$4.5 billion dollars annually at a pace designed to spend the assets within a few decades, to maximize their impact, especially in two areas worldwide: poverty and health. Smaller charitable trusts called charitable remainder unitrusts (CRUT) have two purposes: to provide tax benefits during the trustor or donor's lifetime and, after the trustor dies, to serve the charitable purposes described in the charter of the trust. For example, imagine that an individual with a \$500,000 stock portfolio sets up a CRUT. He immediately receives a tax credit for the charitable contribution. The terms of the CRUT include an annual distribution of a certain percentage of the CRUT assets to the trustor. Usually, the percentage distributed would be less than the annual long-term average gain in the stock market, i. e., the assets of the CRUT are not being diminished by the distribution. Upon the trustor's death, the remaining CRUT assets are distributed to the charity or charities named in the charter of the CRUT, which is then dissolved. Another trust form is the living or revocable trust, often used by an individual with substantial assets to avoid probate, the process whereby the executor of the estate becomes responsible for distributing the deceased's assets according to the terms of the will and under the authority of the responsible court. If there is no will and the state appoints an administrator to handle the estate, or, similarly, if it's determined by the heirs that a dispassionate professional should manage and distribute the estate, the probate process can be expensive. In California, for example, the court normally allows a 4 percent executor charge for the first \$100,000 of the estate value, with slightly declining percentages for amounts above \$100,000. If the will is contested, the executor or administrator can appeal to the court for additional payments for services. Another potentially ruinous practice in California and elsewhere is that the executor's fee is calculated on the gross assets before the estate's liabilities are subtracted. Potentially, this could result in all the assets remaining, after payment of the estate's outstanding debts, going solely to the executor! Possibly the worst-case example of what can go wrong in the probate process is what has happened in attempts to settle singer James Brown's estate. Executors were replaced, millions were spent paying executor fees, a higher court reversed various decisions of the lower court, the lower court didn't follow the instructions of the higher court, and as a result, years after Brown's death most of his designated beneficiaries had received nothing. To avoid this, an individual can set up a living trust. Upon the trustor's death, the trustee distributes the assets according to the terms of the trust and, significantly, without court oversight. This almost always results in fewer delays and lower fees than a distribution by an executor of the deceased's estate. Marital trusts are another means of avoiding probate. When one spouse dies, the trust is automatically funded according to the terms of the marital trust. Income is then distributed to the surviving spouse while also providing for the couple's children, who will receive an inheritance of whatever remains in the trust when the surviving spouse dies. Trusts like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are as complex as any other multi-billion dollar corporation and are generally the outcome of extensive planning and document preparation that may cost millions of dollars. But if you want to set up a living trust to expedite the distribution of your assets at a lower cost upon your death, simply search online for "document preparation living trust," to find reputable organizations that will provide you with the forms you'll need, along with helpful explanations, for costs that range between \$60 and \$300. If your estate situation is complicated, you may want to consult a lawyer who can prepare a living trust for you, although at a considerably higher cost.

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