

AWM Financial Planning

The 1 Year Checklist



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In the past couple of months, we've written about things you should be doing 5 and 3 years before you retire. This month we highlight a 1-year retirement checklist you can use before the big day arrives.

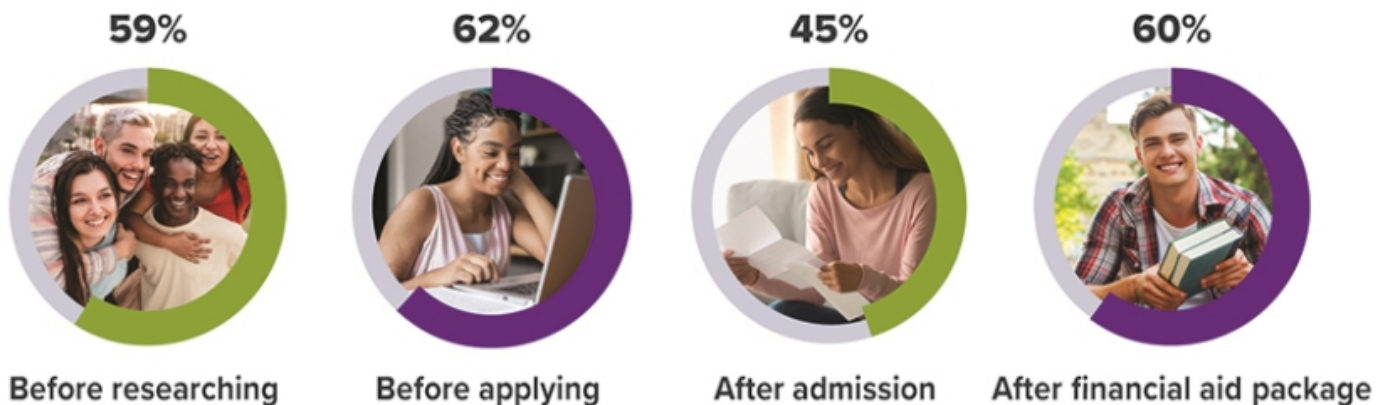
- **Decide when/how you'll notify your employer of your retirement date**, create your transition strategy, and maximize all your employer benefits.
- If you haven't already, **check on your health insurance options and review Medicare decisions**.
- Develop your investment strategy and **create a plan for spending assets in retirement**.
- **Start focusing on your life "outside" of work** in preparation for full-time retirement living — create your retirement bucket list and decide how and with whom you will spend your time!

All the checklists we've shared the past few months are abbreviated but should give you a head start on creating a great retirement. If you feel like you could use some guidance with the process, give us a call and we'll be happy to guide you through it.

Cost Is a Big Factor in College Decisions

For many high school seniors and their families, the period of time from receiving college acceptances to officially committing to a single school can be intense, as they analyze and weigh various factors to arrive at a final decision. In this analysis, cost is a significant factor. But cost often comes into play earlier too, influencing what colleges a student even researches or applies to. At every step of the college process, families crossed schools off their list based on cost.

Percentage of families who eliminated colleges based on cost



Source: *How America Pays for College*, 2021, Sallie Mae

Preparing for a Natural Disaster

Most areas in the United States are susceptible to some form of natural disaster, whether it's a wildfire, tornado, hurricane, earthquake, or flood. A severe storm or other catastrophic event often strikes with little warning, can result in costly damage to your home, and puts your family's safety at risk. Being prepared may help you make it through a natural disaster safely.

Protect Your Home

Wherever you live, there are proactive steps you can take to help protect your home from natural disasters:

- To help fend off storm damage, inspect and repair roof shingles and flashing, clean your gutters and downspouts so that water can flow freely away from your home, trim overhanging tree limbs, and consider investing in storm windows, doors, and shutters.
- If you live in a fire zone, create a defensible perimeter around the outside of your home, keep roof surfaces and gutters free of flammable materials such as pine needles, leaves, and branches, and consider installing fire-resistant roofing and/or siding material.
- If you live in an area that could experience a major earthquake, retrofitting an older home (strengthening the foundation with braces and bolts) might reduce the amount of damage caused by severe shaking.

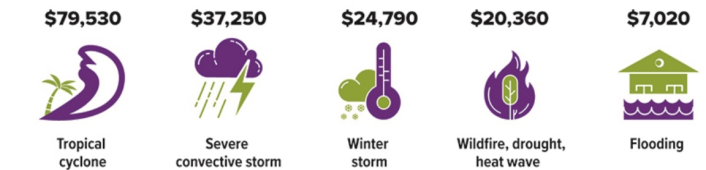
Have an Emergency Plan/Disaster Kit

A natural disaster can sometimes cause power outages that last for days. It can also result in downed power lines, fallen trees and/or flooding that make roads impassable. Know evacuation routes and have an emergency plan that identifies a safe place to meet in the event that family members become separated. Keep important addresses and phone numbers readily accessible and identify a place where you can safely stay for an extended period of time if necessary. In addition, assemble a disaster kit with the following items:

- **Food/supplies.** Stock up on several days' worth of nonperishable food and bottled water. Store other items that are specific to your family's needs, such as infant formula, diapers, pet food, clothing, and blankets.
- **First aid/medicine.** Be prepared for any possible medical needs by having a first-aid kit. Also talk to your doctor about obtaining an extra prescription for important medications you take.
- **Communication/safety items.** Make sure your cell phones are fully charged before the storm arrives. Also gather additional safety items, such as matches, flashlights, batteries, and an AM/FM radio.

- **Important documents/valuables.** Place important documents, such as personal/financial/medical records and any valuables in a secure location that is easily accessible in case of an emergency.

U.S. Natural Catastrophe Losses, 2021 (in millions)



Source: Insurance Information Institute, 2022

Review Your Insurance Coverage

Review all of your insurance policies (e.g., homeowners, renters, and auto) to make sure that you have appropriate coverage for your property and belongings. Your home and its contents should be insured to their full replacement cost, including any new additions, remodels, and furniture. To assist with post-storm insurance claims, be sure to take pictures/videos and make an inventory of your home and valuables in case they are damaged or destroyed.

Keep in mind that certain types of damage (e.g., flood and earthquake) may be excluded from a standard homeowners policy, but separate coverage is often available. Contact your insurance agent to determine if you need to purchase additional insurance tailored to the risk in your area.

Be Ready to File a Claim

If your home suffers severe damage from a natural disaster, you'll need to file a claim with your insurance company. To make the claims process easier, take pictures to document the damage (both inside and outside of your home) as soon as possible. While your claim is being processed, take steps to prevent further damage (e.g., putting a tarp on a damaged roof), since the insurance company may not cover anything beyond the initial damage to your property. Claims are paid up to policy limits.

Otherwise, you may be eligible for immediate disaster relief funds and special programs through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Federal disaster assistance is usually in the form of loans or grants and is available only if the affected area is declared a disaster area by FEMA and not covered by insurance.

Should You Consider Tapping the Equity in Your Home?

With home values skyrocketing recently, your home may be one of your largest assets. Using home equity to help finance other financial objectives is a strategy many people consider, but before doing so be sure you understand the risks as well as the potential benefits.

Home equity is the difference between how much your home is worth, based on current market conditions, minus your mortgage balance. Let's say your home is worth \$450,000 in the current market and your outstanding mortgage is \$250,000. That means you have \$200,000 in equity.

In most cases, lenders will allow you to borrow up to 80% of your home's value minus your mortgage balance. In the example above, the total amount you might borrow would be \$110,000 (assuming you qualify).

It's probably best to be as conservative as possible when using home equity. There's no guarantee that your home will maintain its current market value, so you could end up owing more than it's worth. Moreover, in the unfortunate event of default, you could lose your house.

How to Access Home Equity

Generally, there are three ways to access home equity:

1. Cash-out refinance: In a cash-out refinance, you would refinance your mortgage for more than what you owe and take the difference in cash.

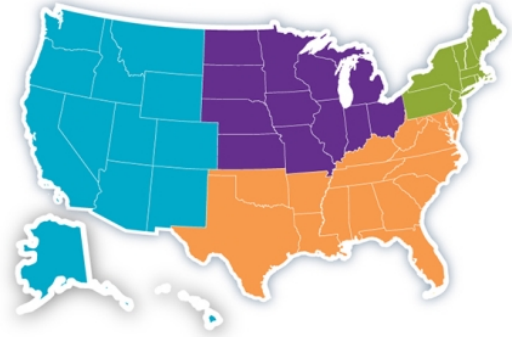
2. Home equity loan: With this type of loan, you would leave your current mortgage untouched and take out a separate loan against the equity in your home, with a fixed interest rate and fixed monthly payments.

3. Home equity line of credit: A HELOC works much like a credit card. You apply for a revolving credit amount up to a certain limit and, upon approval, have access to that money for a specific period, known as the *draw period* (usually 10 years). HELOC funds don't all have to be used right away or at the same time. You can usually access the funds as needed by writing a check or using a linked credit card. Interest rates are variable; required payments will depend on how much you borrow and the prevailing rate. When the draw period ends, all outstanding balances need to be repaid.

Keep in mind that each of these options will have specific fees, including appraisal fees. A refinance could also require closing costs, which can equal thousands of dollars, depending on the amount borrowed.

The best type of loan will depend on your specific situation. If you need a fixed amount of money, a cash-out refinance or home equity loan might be appropriate. If you need an indeterminate amount over time or seek an emergency cash reserve, a HELOC might better serve your needs.

Growth in Home Sales Prices Since 2019



	2019 median sales price	2022 median sales price	Percentage increase
U.S. national	\$250,100	\$357,300	42.9%
West	\$379,200	\$512,600	35.2%
Midwest	\$188,800	\$248,900	31.8%
South	\$219,900	\$318,800	45.0%
Northeast	\$273,000	\$383,700	40.5%

Source: National Association of Realtors, 2020-2022 (median existing-home sales data as of February 2019 and 2022)

When Using Home Equity Might Make Sense

Because you're putting your home at risk, it's important to think critically and strategically when using home equity. Are you using the funds in a way that could reap future financial benefits, such as home repairs and improvements, helping to pay for a child's college education, or consolidating high-interest debt? Then it might make sense. (A loan used for home repairs may also offer tax benefits; talk to a tax professional.) On the other hand, it might not be in your best financial interest if you're thinking of using the money to fund an extravagant purchase, such as an expensive vacation or new luxury car.

Home equity loans and lines of credit that are not used to buy, build, or substantially improve your primary home (or a second home) are considered home equity debt; you cannot deduct the interest on home equity debt. With a cash-out refinance, you can only deduct interest on the new loan if you use the cash to make a capital improvement on your property.

Naming a Trusted Contact

When you open an account or update an existing account at a brokerage or a financial firm, you may be asked if you want to designate a "trusted contact." This individual may be contacted in certain situations such as when financial exploitation is suspected or there are other concerns about your health, welfare, or whereabouts. Naming a trusted contact is optional, but may help protect your account assets.

The person you name as a trusted contact must be at least 18 years old. You'll want to choose someone who can handle the responsibility and who will always act in your best interest — this might be a family member, close friend, attorney, or third-party professional. You may also name more than one trusted contact.

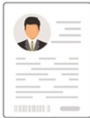
Understandably, you might be concerned that the person you name could make transactions in your account but that's not the case. Your trusted contact will not be able to access your account or make financial decisions on your behalf (unless you previously authorized that person to do so). You are simply giving the financial firm permission to contact the person you have named.

Here are some examples of times when a financial firm might need to reach out to your trusted contact.

- To confirm current contact information when you can't be reached
- If financial exploitation or fraud is suspected
- To validate your health status if the firm suspects you're sick or showing signs of cognitive decline
- To identify any legal guardian, executor, trustee, or holder of a power of attorney on your account

A firm may only share reasonable types of information with your trusted contact. U.S. broker-dealers are required to provide a written disclosure that includes details about when information might be shared. Ask your financial firm or professional if you have any questions about the trusted contact agreement.

You may add, remove, or change your trusted contact at any time, and you'll need to keep your contact's information up-to-date. It's also a good idea to let the person you've chosen know so that he or she is prepared to help if necessary.



To help protect investors against financial fraud or exploitation, The Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA) requires that investment firms make a reasonable effort to obtain trusted contact information.

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