As we age, we develop larger amounts of personal information we need to manage, organize and remember – social security numbers, medication, medical histories, long-term care insurance and banking information. Can you imagine trying to find, manage and make educated decisions on behalf of someone else without having access to this information in advance? Unfortunately, many people are put in the position of searching for a loved one's personal information after there has been an emergency. Take the following example:

Pete is a 71-year-old man in good health who regularly swims at his gym and plays bridge at the local senior center. Without warning, he had a stroke requiring hospitalization, limiting his ability to talk and requiring an extended stay at a rehabilitation facility. Pete's children live two hours away from him and they never talked with their father about aging and what his wishes are. They don't know his medical history, what type of insurance he has (or if he even has insurance) or if he has the assets to pay for rehabilitation. Before they can do anything else, they need to drive to their father's house and find as much as they can about his personal information.

This is a realistic and challenging scenario. In the moment, it can feel easier to put off discussing and gathering personal information until there is a need, but by then it might be difficult to gather all the necessary information.

When it comes to gathering this information, there is much to manage. Fortunately, there are many resources that can help you compile materials. Many bookstores and online retailers offer "senior organizers" or "senior information organizers" (some can be found at little or no cost). These organizers can provide step-by-step guidance on the process of collecting and storing important information for older adults.

Reminder, discussing personal information with older family members and friends can be a sensitive issue. During the course of the conversation, you might become
aware of personal information (for example, finances, unknown medical conditions and treatments, social security numbers) your loved one does not want to share. If this is the case, don’t take it personally and instead see if they will collect and organize their personal information themselves or perhaps there is someone else they want to have collect this (for example, an attorney). It’s important they let someone know where and how to access this information in case of an emergency.