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By Martha Underwood.

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The Inheritance Conversation

When wealth moves, most institutions lose the relationship. This paper makes the case that the inheritance conversation belongs years before the inheritance, and shows advisors, banks, and credit unions how to hold it well, especially with Black families.

BY MARTHA UNDERWOOD / 8 MIN READ / OCTOBER 2026

Executive summary

Cerulli Associates projects that \$124 trillion in wealth will transfer through 2048, with \$105 trillion expected to flow to heirs. Nearly \$40 trillion is expected to pass first to surviving spouses, most of them widowed women, before moving to the next generation.

For financial institutions and advisors, this is not only a wealth event. It is a relationship event. When an account holder dies, the money moves to people the institution often has never met. Those heirs frequently take the money elsewhere, not out of dissatisfaction, but because there was no relationship to keep.

Prisimm, the publisher of LEGACY, studies this pattern at the institutional level. Its 2026 Deposit Mortality Index research estimates roughly \$1.5 trillion in deposits at U.S. banks and credit unions tied to account-holder mortality over a ten-year horizon, and found that institutions with established succession capabilities scored markedly lower on transfer risk than those without.

This paper argues that **the inheritance conversation is a core service, not an estate-settlement afterthought**. Institutions that connect with beneficiaries while the account holder is alive serve families better and keep more of the wealth they have helped build. For Black families, whose wealth is often first-generation and whose trust in financial institutions has been tested by history, the conversation must be held with particular care.

It offers:

- A diagnosis of **why the conversation doesn't happen**
- A **five-stage beneficiary relationship model**
- **Practice standards** for serving Black families
- **Metrics** institutions can track
- A **90-day pilot plan**

Disclosure: LEGACY is published by Prisimm, which builds inheritance infrastructure for banks and credit unions. The model in this paper is intended to be vendor-neutral and can be implemented with or without any particular technology.

Part 1: The relationship problem

Wealth moves; relationships don't

Most institutions serve individuals. Wealth, however, belongs to households, and it moves along family lines. When the individual dies, the institution's relationship often ends with them.

Heirs typically arrive at the institution during one of the worst weeks of their lives. They may be unfamiliar with the institution, unsure what documents it needs, and navigating a process built for compliance rather than care. Many finish the transaction and leave.

The scale

The generational transfer is already underway. Cerulli estimates heirs are currently receiving trillions of dollars each year, with annual transfers projected to rise over the coming decade. Baby Boomers and older generations are expected to account for the large majority of all transfers through 2048.

At the institutional level, the effect shows up as slow, steady deposit runoff concentrated among the oldest account holders, often the institution's most loyal and highest-balance members. Because remaining older members often keep growing their balances, the loss can be masked in aggregate figures until it becomes a trend.

The equity dimension

For Black families, the stakes are sharper. The Federal Reserve's 2022 Survey of Consumer Finances placed median Black family wealth at about \$44,900, compared with about \$285,000 for white families, even as Black wealth grew faster than any other group's from 2019. Much of that wealth is first-generation, concentrated in homes, and held by families with less inherited experience in transferring it.

Minority depository institutions and Black-owned banks and credit unions face a particular version of this challenge: their mission is to build and keep wealth in the community, and every transfer that leaves the institution is a transfer that may leave the community too.

Part 2: Why the conversation doesn't happen

Institutions rarely decide not to talk with families about inheritance. The conversation simply falls between the cracks.

It feels uncomfortable. Staff are trained to open accounts and solve problems, not to talk about death. Customers often feel the same.

It feels like a compliance risk. Front-line staff may worry that discussing beneficiaries or estate plans crosses into legal advice. It doesn't have to, but without training and clear scripts, many avoid it entirely.

It has no trigger. Account opening is an event. Death is an event. The years in between are not, so nothing prompts the conversation.

It lives in silos. Deposit accounts, wealth management, insurance, and mortgage are often separate lines of business. No single team owns the household.

The data isn't there. Many accounts have no beneficiary designation at all, or designations recorded in formats that can't be searched, updated, or connected to a relationship.

Part 3: The five-stage beneficiary relationship model

The following model treats beneficiaries as future members or clients from the first day, not as strangers at the last.

Stage 1: Capture

When: at account opening, and at every account review.

What: invite the account holder to name payable-on-death or transfer-on-death beneficiaries where appropriate, and record them in structured, searchable form.

Why: designations reduce probate friction for the family and create the first link between the institution and the next generation.

Practice notes: explain in plain language what a designation does; make updates easy; prompt reviews after life events; and never pressure a customer to name anyone.

Stage 2: Connect

When: during the account holder's life, with their permission.

What: with consent, introduce the institution to named beneficiaries in a light, respectful way: a welcome letter, an invitation to an educational event, an offer to meet.

Why: heirs who know the institution before a loss are far more likely to stay after one.

Practice notes: consent is essential. The account holder decides what, if anything, is shared. Connection should never disclose balances or private details without explicit permission.

Stage 3: Prepare

When: as account holders age or experience life changes.

What: offer household planning conversations, multigenerational meetings, document checklists, and referrals to estate attorneys and other professionals.

Why: families that plan together transfer wealth more smoothly, and the institution becomes part of the plan.

Practice notes: stay within your role. Educate, organize, and refer. Leave legal advice to attorneys.

Stage 4: Support

When: at the moment of loss.

What: a clear, compassionate settlement process with a single point of contact, a plain-language list of what's needed, realistic timelines, and help with the accounts that pass outside probate.

Why: the family's experience in this week determines whether they stay. A process designed for dignity rather than paperwork is the single most important retention investment an institution can make.

Practice notes: train staff for grief-aware service. Reduce repeat document requests. Communicate proactively. Offer to help beneficiaries understand their options before they move funds.

Stage 5: Continue

When: after the transfer.

What: help the new account holder make decisions about the money they received, including savings, debt payoff, homeownership, education, and their own estate planning.

Why: an inheritance is often a turning point. The institution that helps an heir make good decisions becomes that heir's institution.

Practice notes: begin the cycle again. The heir is now an account holder with beneficiaries of their own.

Part 4: Practice standards for serving Black families

Acknowledge history without making it the whole story. The Freedman's Savings and Trust Company collapsed in 1874, costing tens of thousands of Black depositors their savings. Lending discrimination shaped homeownership for generations. Many families carry that memory. Institutions earn trust by being consistent, transparent, and present, not by asking for it.

Show up in trusted spaces. Churches, HBCUs, fraternities and sororities, civic organizations, and community events reach families who would not come to a branch to discuss estate planning. Educational programming in those settings, free of sales pressure, builds the relationship that later makes the conversation possible.

Plan for the family as it actually is. Extended families, blended families, caregiving relatives, and family land are common. Ask about them. Design meetings that can include several generations.

Address heirs' property. Institutions serving Southern communities in particular should understand heirs' property, know the local legal aid organizations and heirs' property centers, and recognize that clouded title can block access to mortgage credit and disaster assistance.

Use plain language. Explain what documents do. Avoid acronyms. Put things in writing.

Represent the community. Staff and advisors who reflect and understand the families they serve make the conversation easier to begin.

Part 5: What to measure

Institutions that treat the inheritance conversation as a service can measure it like one.

METRIC	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
Designation coverage rate	Share of eligible accounts with a current beneficiary designation on file
Designation freshness	Share of designations reviewed or confirmed in the last three years
Beneficiary connection rate	Share of named beneficiaries with a consented relationship to the institution
Household planning conversations	Number of multigenerational or estate-readiness meetings held
Time to settle	Days from notification of death to completion of account transfers
Transferred balance retention	Share of balances that remain with the institution 12 months after transfer
Heir satisfaction	Survey feedback from families after settlement

Part 6: A 90-day pilot

Days 1 to 30: Baseline. Measure designation coverage on a defined segment, such as account holders over 65. Review the settlement process from the family's point of view. Identify one community partner.

Days 31 to 60: Capture and prepare. Train a small team on beneficiary conversations with clear, compliant scripts. Run a designation review campaign for the segment. Host one educational event with the community partner.

Days 61 to 90: Support and measure. Assign a single point of contact for all estate notifications. Simplify the document checklist. Measure changes in coverage, time to settle, and early retention signals. Decide whether to expand.

A closing word

Every institution says it serves families. The inheritance conversation is where that promise is tested. It asks institutions to see the people behind the account holder, the spouse, the children,

the grandchildren, and to begin building relationships with them long before the moment of loss.

For Black families building first-generation wealth, that conversation can be the difference between wealth that transfers and wealth that disperses. For institutions, it can be the difference between a relationship that ends and one that continues for another generation.

Be the reason families stay.

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About the author. Martha Underwood is the founder and CEO of Prismm, which builds inheritance infrastructure for banks and credit unions, and the author of *The Death of Deposits* (2026). She spent more than 25 years building technology inside regulated banking institutions.

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