



ADVANTAGES OF DELAWARE TRUSTS

2026 EDITION



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The State of Delaware has established itself as a favorable jurisdiction for personal trusts due to its contemporary laws, attractive income tax advantages and investment flexibility, among other reasons. In this paper we highlight the most significant legal and tax benefits of a Delaware trust — for both residents and nonresidents alike — along with strategies for protecting and preserving wealth for generations to come.

The Northern Trust Institute brings the breadth and depth of the firm to address the increasingly complex and sophisticated wealth management needs of our clients and their advisors. Informed by the latest insights and continually vetted through feedback, our advice is grounded in real-world outcomes and backed by proven credibility.

We believe you will find this content helpful and look forward to collaborating with you to create meaningful legacies for our clients

NEW TOPICS IN THIS EDITION

This edition discusses Delaware's Trust Act 2025, which made changes to the Delaware statutes, including the following:

- Two amendments contain provisions confirming that a beneficiary's interest in a trust is not subject to other claims. Section 1513 of Title 13 of the Delaware Code (13 *Del. C.* § 1513) was amended to provide that a transfer of property in trust to a spouse is not marital property unless the trust agreement expressly provides that it is. This is discussed on page 28. Also, 12 *Del. C.* § 3315 was amended to further clarify that a beneficiary's discretionary interest in a trust is not a property right, and therefore not subject to the claims of that beneficiary's creditors. This is discussed on page 28.
- The non-charitable purpose trust statute, 12 *Del. C.* § 3556, had several modifications continuing the trend of Delaware having a modern and widely used purpose trust statute. These changes included adding a definition of "enforcer." The update also provides that the possibility of a person receiving distributions from a purpose trust, in furtherance of the declared purpose of the trust, does not make that person a beneficiary of the purpose trust. This statute, and the use of purpose trusts, are discussed on page 19.
- The process for determining when and how an officeholder in a trust agreement can resign was given more definition by the modification of 12 *Del. C.* § 3326. This is discussed on page 26.

This edition also provides an update on select cases that were decided in Delaware in 2025. The *CES 2007 Trust* case discusses Delaware's Qualified Dispositions in Trust Act, and is covered on page 30. The *Burd* case discusses Delaware's pre-mortem validation statute, and is covered on page 19.



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TRUSTS IN DELAWARE — AT A GLANCE

Topics Covered in this Year's Edition

Can you direct a trustee on investments in Delaware?

Delaware was the first state to have a “directed trust” statute thereby formally recognizing that trustees could be directed on investments, distributions and other matters. The statute also recognizes the role of a trust protector. Directed trusts are discussed beginning on page 8.

Can you allocate duties among trustees to create an excluded trustee role?

Delaware statute does permit the creation of an “excluded trustee” where the duties of the trustee are divided among more than one party. For example, one trustee can have the responsibility for investments with the excluded trustee having no duties, responsibilities or authorities over investments. This is discussed on page 11.

Does Delaware allow long-term or “dynasty” trusts?

Delaware allows personal property to be held in trust for an indefinite period. Real estate can be held for 110 years, but if the real estate is held in an entity such as an LLC, it can be held for an indefinite period. Thus, a dynasty trust can be created in Delaware. These trusts can be useful in long-term wealth transfer planning. The ability to have a long-term trust in Delaware is discussed beginning on page 10.

Are Delaware trusts subject to income tax?

Although Delaware does have an income tax on trusts, there is an offset for *non-Delaware* beneficiaries. Thus, if a Delaware trust does not have any beneficiaries in Delaware, there is no Delaware income tax on the trust. The trusts are still subject to federal income tax if they are not grantor trusts for income tax purposes. Also, even if a trust is not subject to Delaware income tax, it may be subject to income tax by another state depending on the trust's contacts with other states. Income taxation of Delaware trusts is discussed beginning on page 12.

Are “quiet trusts” permissible in Delaware?

Trusts where the beneficiaries do not receive information about the trust for a period of time are sometimes referred to as “quiet trusts,” “silent trusts” or “confidential trusts.” These types of trusts are permitted in Delaware. The ability to have a “designated representative” receive statements and have knowledge of the trust on behalf of beneficiaries is permitted. The designated representative can represent and bind beneficiaries in judicial and nonjudicial matters. Confidential trusts are discussed beginning on page 16.

If needed, is it possible to modify a Delaware trust?

Delaware has various methods for modifying irrevocable trusts. These methods include decanting, merger and nonjudicial modification agreements. There are various factors that go into deciding whether it is necessary to modify a trust. Trust modifications of Delaware trusts are discussed beginning on page 20.

Does Delaware permit electronic execution of trusts?

Delaware permits electronic execution of trusts, as well as remote notarization. This is discussed beginning on page 27.

Are there other flexible provisions of Delaware law?

Delaware provides a progressive and flexible environment in which to establish a trust. This paper covers the above topics plus several other key provisions of Delaware law.

INNOVATIVE LEGISLATIVE AND JUDICIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Delaware has long been home to substantial personal wealth, including long-term trusts funded by local residents over a century ago. Delaware began to attract wider attention as a trust jurisdiction in 1986, when its General Assembly completed a massive overhaul of its trust laws. Although Delaware had earlier granted a deduction for trust income of trusts held for nonresident beneficiaries, the 1986 revision began the formal recognition of so-called administrative trusts or directed trusts, allowing for the bifurcation of trustee duties among third parties and the trustee.

The repeal of the rule against perpetuities in 1995, the adoption of a self-settled spendthrift trust statute in 1997, and the enactment of the nation's first total return unitrust statute in 2000 firmly established Delaware's reputation as an innovative jurisdiction for safeguarding personal wealth. Significant changes continue to be enacted under Delaware's Trust Act each year.

While the advances in trust law have been significant, an equally important benefit is the exclusive jurisdiction of the Delaware Court of Chancery over matters of equity, which generally covers all fiduciary proceedings and disputes (other than the rare case involving a non-fiduciary claim for monetary damages against a trust or a trustee). With an established body of fiduciary law and a bench of highly experienced jurists, the Court of Chancery offers lawyers and their clients the assurance that, should a trust dispute ever arise, Delaware has the judicial infrastructure to resolve it efficiently and fairly.

INVESTMENT FLEXIBILITY

Delaware's Prudent Investor Rule

When the General Assembly crafted its revisions to Delaware's trust laws in 1986, the most remarkable change was the adoption of a modern portfolio approach to trust investing. Although the prudent investor rule has now been adopted in nearly every state, Delaware's enactment seemed almost revolutionary at the time. The new principle, codified at 12 *Del. C.* § 3302(b), allowed trustees to depart from the traditional rule of ensuring that each and every investment was both safe and productive. Rather, § 3302(b) permits trustees to acquire assets of virtually any nature because their investment performance is judged on the basis of the entire portfolio. Thus, trustees can invest in a manner that has the potential to generate higher returns through investments in growth stocks, emerging markets and alternative investments as long as the portfolio as a whole was invested in a manner that a prudent investor would adopt.

Trust Instrument Can Specify Standard of Liability

Furthermore, 12 *Del. C.* § 3303(a) allows a grantor to limit a trustee's liability to willful misconduct for not diversifying trust assets if the language of the trust agreement directs the trustee not to diversify or specifies the circumstances in which the assets are to remain undiversified. The statute specifically provides that "the rule that statutes in derogation of the common law are to be strictly construed shall have no application to this section. It is the policy of this section to give maximum effect to the principle of freedom of disposition and to the enforceability of governing instruments."

Absent specific language in the trust agreement, under both common law and Delaware law, trustees have a general duty to exercise prudence in managing a concentrated position, a duty that often requires a trustee to reduce the position despite a family's desire to retain it. A 2009 decision of the Delaware Court of Chancery, *Merrill Lynch Trust Co., FSB. v. Campbell*,¹ reaffirmed the critical role of a trust agreement in determining the limits on a trustee's liability for a trust's poor investment performance. In that decision the court held that the trust instrument provided for a large payout and long duration, making the trustee's investment choices reasonable under the circumstances.

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Investing

Delaware has also recognized the growing interest in ESG investing, including by beneficiaries of trusts. The Delaware statute recognizes this desire by some beneficiaries to invest for financial return and to promote ESG goals with the following language:

*“... when considering the needs of the beneficiaries, the fiduciary may take into account the financial needs of the beneficiaries as well as the beneficiaries’ personal values, including the beneficiaries’ desire to engage in sustainable investing strategies that align with the beneficiaries’ social, environmental, governance or other values or beliefs of the beneficiaries.”*² The statute also provides that the trust instrument may expand the laws of general application to fiduciaries including laws pertaining to, *“the manner in which a fiduciary should invest assets, including whether to engage in one or more sustainable or socially responsible investment strategies, in addition to, or in place of, other investment strategies with or without regard to investment performance.”*³

DIRECTED TRUSTS

Much of the wealth that funds trusts comes from grantors who are still in the wealth creation stage. Typically, they have generated their wealth by having significant control over their assets or business. The desire for retaining some level of control has ushered in significant growth in the use of directed trusts. As of the date of this edition, more than 40 states have some form of statute that allows a trustee to be directed on matters such as investments, distributions, tax compliance or perhaps a combination of some or all of these functions.

Uniform Directed Trust Act

The trend continues with the promulgation of the Uniform Directed Trust Act (the “Act”) by the Uniform Law Commission in 2017.⁴ So far, 20 states and the District of Columbia have enacted the Act, and it has been introduced into legislation in Kentucky. The widespread enactment of directed trust legislation is evidence of the increased use of directed trusts for administrative flexibility.

The Delaware Directed Trust Statute

In 1986, Delaware was the first state to formally recognize directed trusts by statute with the enactment of 12 *Del. C.* § 3313, which is often referred to as Delaware’s directed trust statute. Before the enactment of this statute, directed trusts existed in Delaware dating back to the early 1900s based on trust instruments directing the trustee to hold a concentrated position of stock. This was due to the large number of trusts created by members of the DuPont family that held concentrated positions of DuPont stock.

A trustee can be directed on any matter, including investments, distributions and tax matters. The unique nature of Delaware’s law on directed trusts has led to a substantial influx of trusts in which some party other than the trustee has exclusive responsibility for the investment of some or all of the trust assets. A common use of the statute is to permit the grantor to fund a trust with an asset such as a closely held company, or any other asset that a corporate trustee might not hold given the requirements of the prudent investor rule unless directed. Specifically, 12 *Del. C.* § 3313(b) authorizes the trustee to take direction from an advisor named in a trust instrument, without liability for the advisor’s investment results, except in the event of the trustee’s willful misconduct.⁵ With the bifurcation of the trustee’s traditional duties of administration and investment management, the advisor is treated as a fiduciary for the investment component, absent language in the trust agreement stating that the advisor is not a fiduciary. The most common practice is for the advisor to serve in a fiduciary role.

It is this protection from liability for the trustee, except in cases of willful misconduct by the trustee, that enables trustees to hold trust assets that the grantor wants the trust to hold, which the trustee might not be able to retain otherwise. The statute ultimately provides flexibility in trust management, which can be a benefit for trust beneficiaries.

To bolster a directed trustee's protection from liability for the conduct of an advisor, 12 Del. C § 3313(e) explicitly absolves a directed trustee of a duty to monitor the conduct of the advisor, provide advice to the advisor, consult with the advisor, or communicate with or warn or apprise any beneficiary or third party concerning instances in which the trustee would have exercised their own discretion in a manner different from the manner directed by the advisor. Actions of the trustee that are seemingly within the scope of the advisor's duties (such as confirming that the advisor's directions have been implemented) are presumed to be administrative in nature and not an undertaking of the trustee to become a co-advisor.

The extent of a directed trustee's protection from liability under 12 Del. C. § 3313(b) was the subject of the dispute in *Duemler v. Wilmington Trust Co.*, in which the co-trustee and investment advisor brought an action against an administrative trustee for losses the trust incurred after the investment advisor elected not to tender a bond in an exchange offer and the bond issuer subsequently defaulted on its obligation.⁶ The investment advisor claimed that the trustee wrongly failed to deliver to him a copy of the prospectus for the exchange offer. In concluding that § 3313(b) insulated the directed trustee from liability, the vice chancellor observed:

In connection with Plaintiff's decision not to tender the securities in the Exchange Offer, [the trustee] acted in accordance with Plaintiff's instructions, did not engage in willful misconduct by not forwarding the Exchange Offer materials to Plaintiff and had no duty to provide information or ascertain whether Plaintiff was fully informed of all relevant information concerning the Exchange Offer.⁷

Note that 12 Del. C. § 3313 makes it clear that the statutory protection is also available when a trustee is directed *not* to take specified actions unless directed. The statute also specifies that the definition of "investment decision" includes powers commonly understood to be part of investment decisions but which were not specifically covered in the statute previously. This includes matters such as the power to lend and borrow for investment purposes, the power to vote, and various powers and activities that are generally part of investment decisions.

At times, the question arises during the administration of a trust as to whether a loan to a beneficiary falls within the discretion of the trustee or is under the purview of the investment advisor directing the trustee. Subsection (d) of the statute clarifies that "investment decisions," which would fall under the purview of an advisor directing a trustee on investments, do not include loans that are made in lieu of a distribution to a beneficiary that could have been made to or for the benefit of a beneficiary under the terms of the trust.

As illustrated below, the directed trust statute provides a useful solution to a number of common trust situations.

CLIENT SITUATION:	POTENTIAL SOLUTION:
<p>Concentrated position</p> <p>A trustee of a trust with a concentrated position in a particular asset may want to sell a substantial portion of the asset to achieve greater diversification and reduce the concentration risk. The beneficiaries may oppose a sale because of their emotional attachment to the asset or simply the belief that the asset will perform well over the long term.</p>	<p>Family committee manages concentration</p> <p>To resolve this familiar conflict, the parties can seek to modify the trust into an administrative trust in which a family committee (composed of family members who are experienced professionals) has exclusive investment responsibility for the concentrated asset, while the trustee retains management authority over the more diversified assets.</p>
<p>Funding with closely held assets</p> <p>An individual wants to contribute to a family trust certain interests in a closely held operating business or investment entity, but the client is uncomfortable with the notion that the trustee would have management responsibility for the closely held asset.</p>	<p>Client retains control</p> <p>If the individual designates themselves as the investment advisor for the closely held asset, the trustee will not have any authority to participate in decisions regarding the individual's business or investment entity.</p>

As noted earlier, § 3313 also applies to “distribution decisions or other decisions of the fiduciary” and is not limited to investment decisions. For example, the appointment of a distribution advisor in a trust agreement may be especially useful if the grantor wants to impose “lifestyle” standards or other subjective criteria for the beneficiaries’ eligibility (or ineligibility) for distributions of income and principal of the trust. These sorts of standards may be difficult for corporate trustees to apply if they lack intimate knowledge of the beneficiaries’ lifestyles and it is impracticable to gather the information on which to base a distribution decision. If a grantor feels strongly about incorporating subjective standards into their trust agreement, it may make sense to appoint a family member, a family confidant, or even a professional individual fiduciary to make potentially controversial judgments about the beneficiary’s lifestyle, moral character or productivity.

Trust Protectors Covered Under the Directed Trust Statute

Furthermore, § 3313(f) allows a directed trustee to follow the direction of a trust protector without concern for liability stemming from the protector’s actions. The trust protector can take a wide variety of actions, including the exercise of trustee removal and appointment powers, the modification or amendment of a trust instrument to achieve a favorable tax result to improve the trust’s administration, or to allow for modification of a beneficiary’s power of appointment under the trust.

Excluded Trustees

Delaware’s Excluded Trustee statute, 12 *Del. C.* § 3313A, goes beyond the concept of a directed trust and creates a complete division of responsibility among parties. In a directed trust, the advisor will direct the trustee, and the trustee executes on the advisor’s directions with limited liability. However, in an excluded trustee relationship under § 3313A, a trust will have a trustee and an “excluded trustee.”

Under this alternative, the excluded trustee does not take direction from the advisor. Rather, each trustee has their own sphere of responsibility and acts independently.

Section 3313A provides that the excluded trustee is not liable (individually or as a fiduciary) for any loss resulting directly or indirectly from the action taken by the other trustee, as long as the trust agreement gives that other trustee exclusive authority over the matter in question. Specifically, the statute provides that “the co-trustee holding the power to take certain actions with respect to the trust shall be liable to the beneficiaries with respect to the exercise of the power as if the excluded trustee were not in office and shall have the exclusive obligation to account to the beneficiaries and defend any action brought by the beneficiaries with respect to the exercise of the power.”⁸ This statute also provides that the trust instrument may enable the trustee with the responsibility over the matter to direct the excluded trustee if needed. This is useful when the excluded trustee has custody of the assets, which is common when a corporate trustee is the excluded trustee, and the excluded trustee needs to be directed to deliver the assets as part of the other trustee’s purchase or sale of assets, or other similar administrative actions.

Subsection (a) (2) of § 3313A provides that although the excluded trustee is not a fiduciary for any power that falls to the co-trustee, the excluded trustee remains a fiduciary with respect to any powers or other matters over which the other trustee does not have exclusive authority under the terms of the trust.

DYNASTY TRUSTS

The Rule Against Perpetuities

Prior to the latter part of the 20th century, every state had adopted, in one form or another, the rule against perpetuities (the Rule), which has the effect of limiting the duration of a trust. Under the traditional common law Rule, if an interest must vest at all, it must vest within 21 years after the death of all identified individuals living at the creation of the trust. The Rule reflects a policy judgment that property owners should not be permitted to restrict the transfer of their property beyond the lives of persons who were likely known to the owner plus the minority period of the next generation. The practical effect of the rule against perpetuities was that trusts could last only a few generations, after which the remainder interests would have to be distributed outright to the remainder beneficiaries.

The Generation-Skipping Transfer Tax Reintroduced in the 1986 Tax Act

The complexity of applying the Rule caused a number of states to develop alternatives to the common law Rule, such as the 90-year period under the Uniform Statutory Rule Against Perpetuities. However, it was not until the Tax Reform Act of 1986 (the 1986 Act) that states began to seriously consider abolishing the Rule outright. The 1986 Act reintroduced the transfer tax on generation-skipping transfers (the GST tax). Congress intended the GST tax to apply to transfers that skipped the next immediate generation and would otherwise avoid an estate tax at that intermediate generation.⁹ The 1986 Act provided each transferor with a lifetime exemption from the GST tax. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act¹⁰ permanently extended the basic exclusion/generation-skipping amount that was enacted under the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 (TCJA),¹¹ to be adjusted for inflation. The basic exclusion/generation-skipping transfer amount for 2026 is \$15 million.

Importantly, the Internal Revenue Code (the IRC) does not place any limit on the duration of trusts that are “exempt” from the GST tax due to a grantor’s allocation of exemption. Under the traditional Rule, the limit on the length of a GST-exempt trust would be two generations. Consequently, a state’s extension or outright abolition of the Rule would vastly increase the number of generations who could enjoy the fruits of the transferor’s GST-exempt trust, without diminution of the trust assets on account of any federal transfer tax.

Delaware’s Repeal of its Rule Against Perpetuities

In 1995, Delaware became the first state after the passage of the 1986 Act to repeal its rule against perpetuities, thus permitting trusts of personal property to last potentially forever.¹² Although direct interests in real property remain subject to a perpetuities period of 110 years, a Delaware trust may be able to hold real property without limitation if the property is held through a corporation, limited partnership, limited liability company or other entity.¹³

In the ensuing years, many states adopted legislation that either allows a trust agreement to opt out of the Rule, extends the Rule to a finite period (often more than 100 years), or repeals the Rule altogether.

Quantifying the Benefit

The economic benefit of a long-term GST-exempt trust cannot be denied. As Figure 1 demonstrates, an individual’s ability to contribute assets to a trust that will continue for generation after generation without the imposition of any transfer tax is an extraordinary opportunity when compared to the alternative of passing assets outright, from generation to generation, subject to a federal transfer tax at each generation. Assuming a \$15 million contribution to a trust, a five percent after-tax rate of return on the investment assets, a new generation every 25 years, and a federal estate tax of 40 percent applied at each generational transfer, the GST-exempt trust would have a value of \$582,490,289 after only 75 years. The same sum of \$15 million held outside of a trust (and subject to a gift tax or estate tax upon transmittal to each successive generation) would have a value of \$125,817,902. (See Figure 1.)

With the passage of each generation, the difference in value between the GST-exempt trust and the “no-trust” alternative becomes exponentially larger. With such a compelling financial outcome, it is not surprising that Delaware fiduciaries have witnessed an influx of long-term or “dynasty” trusts.¹⁴

Common Funding Examples of a Delaware Dynasty Trust

A grantor contributes cash, marketable securities or interests in a closely held entity (in the latter case, often at discounted values) to an irrevocable trust, using the grantor’s lifetime applicable gift tax exclusion (\$15 million in 2026). The grantor then allocates a portion of their lifetime GST exemption (also \$15 million in 2026). This allows multiple generations to benefit from the trust and to allow for appreciation of assets indefinitely.

A grantor sells assets to a trust with the hope that the assets will appreciate. The trust that purchases the assets is an irrevocable trust that is “defective” for income tax purposes, meaning it includes powers that will cause it to be treated as a grantor trust for income tax purposes. The grantor contributes seed money to the trust in order to collateralize the trust’s purchase of the assets, and the grantor may use their lifetime gift tax exclusion in order to avoid making a taxable gift to the trust. The trust then purchases the appreciating assets from the grantor in exchange for a promissory note that is collateralized by the seed money. The promissory note will bear interest at the appropriate applicable federal rate, which is a minimum rate of interest set by the IRS (the AFR). If the rate of return on the purchased assets exceeds the interest rate on the promissory note (i.e., the hurdle rate), then the grantor will have successfully transferred the appreciated value of the asset out of their estate and to the trust, which can benefit family members and allow for future appreciation of the assets.

FIGURE 1*

	DELAWARE DYNASTY TRUST Transfers in Trust to Next Generation Every 25 Years	TAXABLE OUTRIGHT Transfers to Next Generation Every 25 Years
Year 1	\$15,000,000	\$15,000,000
Year 25 Value	\$50,795,324	\$50,795,324
Transfer Tax	—	(\$20,318,130)
Ending Value	\$50,795,324	\$30,477,194
Year 50 Value	\$172,010,997	\$103,206,598
Transfer Tax	—	(\$41,282,639)
Ending Value	\$172,010,997	\$61,923,959
Year 75 Value	\$582,490,289	\$209,696,504
Transfer Tax	—	(\$83,878,602)
Ending Value	\$582,490,289	\$125,817,902
Delaware Benefit	\$456,672,386	

Assumptions:

1. Federal estate tax rate: 40%
2. Return on investment assets: 5% annually
3. No state income taxes
4. No distributions from trust or consumption of principal or income
5. No basic exclusion amount used to offset taxable amount in future years

* Examples used are for illustrative purposes only. Actual results may vary.

SAVINGS ON FIDUCIARY INCOME TAXES

State income taxes can be a significant drag on the growth of an irrevocable trust. In many states, a trust’s realized capital gains and accumulated ordinary income are taxed at rates between 5 and 10 percent, with rates in California as high as 14.4 percent. Thus, in addition to the 20 percent rate on capital gains at the federal level, plus the potential net investment income tax of 3.8 percent, state income taxes can greatly reduce trust earnings.

Delaware Income Tax Treatment of Trusts

Delaware offers an appealing alternative venue for irrevocable trusts because it does not impose any state income tax on income that is accumulated for distribution to nonresident beneficiaries in future years.¹⁵ As a practical matter, an irrevocable trust for nonresident beneficiaries should not be subject to any Delaware income tax because its income either will be distributed to its beneficiaries with a corresponding deduction for the distribution,¹⁶ or will be accumulated with a deduction.

An Example of the Potential Tax Savings

If two trusts (one in California and one in Delaware) were to sell a zero-basis asset for net proceeds of \$10 million, the after-tax proceeds of the sale in the Delaware trust would potentially be worth \$1.33 million more because the proceeds in the California trust would be subject to California income tax at a rate of 13.3 percent. (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 2*

	Sale in Delaware Trust	Sale in California Trust
Sale Proceeds	\$10,000,000	\$10,000,000
Tax Cost	\$0	\$0
Gain on Sale	\$10,000,000	\$10,000,000
State Income Tax	\$0	\$1,330,000
Federal Income Tax	\$2,380,000	\$2,380,000
Proceeds Net of Tax	\$7,620,000	\$6,290,000
Delaware Benefit	\$1,330,000	

Assumptions:

1. Federal capital gains rate: 23.8%
2. California state income tax rate: 13.3% (maximum rate of 12.3% plus a mental health services tax of 1%)
3. No federal tax deduction for state taxes paid

* Examples used are for illustrative purposes only. Actual results may vary.

Potential Taxation by Other States

For a trust to take full advantage of Delaware’s deduction for trust income accumulated for nonresident beneficiaries, it is essential that the trust avoid a tax nexus with another jurisdiction. A number of factors can cause a Delaware trust to become subject to state income tax in another state.

For example:

Fiduciary Activities in Another State. Many jurisdictions will treat a trust as a resident trust, and subject to state income tax, if the trust has a fiduciary residing in that state, or if the trust administration occurs in that state. For instance, if a Delaware trust has a noncontingent beneficiary, a co-trustee, or investment or distribution advisor located in California, that state could consider the trust to be subject to its tax regime.¹⁷ Similarly, if a Delaware corporate trustee delegates a major portion of their trust administration duties to an affiliate in another state (i.e., the affiliate has full discretion to manage the trust’s investment portfolio without any supervision of the Delaware trustee), there is a risk that the affiliate’s state would consider the trust to be resident and fully taxable in that state.

Source Income in Another State. If a Delaware trust has source income from an operating business or real estate located in another state, that state likely will claim that it is entitled to tax at least a proportionate share, if not all, of the trust’s federal taxable income.¹⁸ Portfolio managers of Delaware trusts must be aware of investments that could generate source income from a high-tax state. Investments like hedge funds and private equity funds often have layers of entities, and managers should be mindful that a fund could allocate state-sourced income to a trust on a Form K-1.

“Residence-by-Birth” States. Perhaps most significantly, a considerable number of states will attribute resident status to an irrevocable trust established in another state if the grantor of the trust was a resident of the state when the trust became irrevocable. Examples of states that have adopted this treatment of non-domiciliary trusts — known as the “residence-by-birth” approach — include, but are not limited to, Connecticut, Illinois, the District of Columbia, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin. There may be due process grounds for challenging the

constitutionality of residence-by-birth tax schemes under the Supreme Court's decision in *Quill Corp. v. North Dakota*.¹⁹ Following the *Quill* decision, state courts were notably unfriendly to states' attempts to assert taxing jurisdiction, and until recently the Supreme Court had declined to address the issue. Thus, fiduciaries are often left with little guidance regarding their obligations to pay fiduciary income tax to another state.²⁰

Recent Court Cases Regarding a State's Ability to Tax a Nonresident Trust

There have been a number of cases where the state court ruled that the mere fact that the trust was created by a grantor who was a resident of that state was not sufficient to create a taxable nexus where there were no other connections with the state. These cases include the *McNeil* case in Pennsylvania, the *Linn* case in Illinois and the *Fielding* case in Minnesota.²¹ They are notable in part because they were decided in residence-by-birth states. But, because these cases relied on their specific facts, care should be used in relying on these cases. Residents of Pennsylvania, Illinois, Minnesota and other residence-by-birth states should not assume their trusts will be exempt from state income taxes merely because the trust is located in Delaware or another trust-friendly jurisdiction.

The trend of determining taxation to be unconstitutional continued in the *Kaestner* decision, which came from the North Carolina courts and was ultimately decided in the U.S. Supreme Court.²² In this case the U.S. Supreme Court addressed the constitutionality of state taxation of a trust's undistributed income, based solely on a beneficiary living in the state imposing the taxation. North Carolina imposed an income tax on a trust over a four-year period even though the beneficiaries received no income in those tax years, had no right to demand income in those years, and could not count on ever receiving income from the trust. The Court held that this imposition of tax violated the Due Process Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

FREEDOM OF DISPOSITION

Beneficiary Well-Being Trusts

In recent years, there has been a movement where “advisors and families alike are encouraged to consider how the design of trusts can support — rather than inhibit — beneficiary engagement, education and, ultimately, their thriving.”²³ This movement has come about as individuals who create trusts have realized that although there are many advantages to passing wealth down through successive generations in a family (many of these benefits are discussed in this publication), the reality is that trusts may become so large over time that beneficiaries may receive significant wealth sometimes before they have had an opportunity to understand the value of money and responsibilities that go along with wealth. Delaware has enacted the beneficiary well-being trust statute,²⁴ which is the first of its kind in the country. The objective of the beneficiary well-being trust is to provide wealth management training and services for the beneficiaries' well-being and to educate beneficiaries about their family history, family values and dynamics, family governance, and philanthropy. To do this, the statute specifically enables the trustee to expend trust assets for these types of programs.

For a trust to be a beneficiary well-being trust under the Delaware statute, the trust instrument must specifically refer to the statute, Section 3345 of Title 12. The statute provides that, “If a trust is a Delaware beneficiary well-being trust, the trustee shall provide the beneficiaries, individually or as a group, with beneficiary well-being programs at such times and in such manner as set forth in the provisions of the governing instrument, or in the absence of such provisions, then at such times and in such manner as the trustee may determine is appropriate.”²⁵ The statute defines “beneficiary well-being programs” to include seminars, courses, programs, workshops, counselors, personal coaches, short-term university programs, group or one-on-one meetings, counseling, family meetings, family retreats, family reunions and custom programs. These programs must have one or more of the following purposes: (1) Preparing each generation of beneficiaries for inheriting wealth through multigenerational estate and asset planning; assistance with navigating intergenerational asset transfers, developing wealth management and money skills, financial literacy and acumen,

business fundamentals, entrepreneurship, knowledge of family businesses, and philanthropy; or (2) Educating beneficiaries about the beneficiaries' family history, the family's values, family governance, family dynamics, family mental health and well-being, and connection among family members.²⁶ The trust expenditures for these programs are a trust administration expense to the extent permitted by law, rather than trust distributions to the beneficiaries, meaning that these should not cause the beneficiaries to experience income taxation by participating in these programs.²⁷

The Delaware statutes were also modified by adding a new paragraph to Delaware's trustee powers statute, which provides that trustees of all Delaware trusts have the power to provide the same types of beneficiary well-being programs.²⁸

If a trust is a beneficiary well-being trust, the trustee shall provide these well-being programs either as mandated by the trust instrument or in the trustee's discretion if not mandated in the trust instrument. Even if the trust is not designated as a beneficiary well-being trust, the trust instrument can still specify that the trustee may provide these well-being programs in the trustee's discretion.

Letters of Wishes

Background on letters of wishes. A letter of wishes is a writing created by the trustor of a trust (separate from the trust instrument) that is designed to express the trustor's intent in creating the trust and specific provisions of the trust. These can be helpful if a fiduciary is trying to discern the trustor's intent when exercising its fiduciary powers such as making discretionary distributions to beneficiaries.

While letters of wishes are not a new concept, they have become more prevalent in recent years with the increase of long-term or "Dynasty" trusts. These long-term trusts are often drafted with more flexibility to account for the difficulty in predicting how beneficiaries' needs might change over many years. A letter of wishes provides guidance to the fiduciary by providing the grantor's intent as an overlay to the trust provisions. It is important to note that a letter of wishes is precatory. It is a statement of the trustor's intent, but it is not a binding directive on the fiduciary.

Alternatively, the trust instrument may refer to the fact that the trustor might create a letter of wishes.

Given the increased usage of letters of wishes, Delaware enacted a statute in 2024 to codify the concept of letters of wishes as well as the parameters for their use. The statute addresses letters of wishes because historically there has not always been clarity regarding when a fiduciary may rely on, or disregard, a letter of wishes. The statute provides certainty on matters including the requirements for a valid letter of wishes and the parameters for when a fiduciary can choose to, or not to, rely on a letter of wishes. These rules are contained in the definitions section of Title 12 of the Delaware Code and the section of Title 12 that addresses the standard of review of a fiduciary's exercise of discretion. The letters of wishes statute does not address "statements of intent" included in the terms of a trust instrument, because Delaware statute already provides that, "It is the policy of this section to give maximum effect to the principle of freedom of disposition and to the enforceability of governing instruments."²⁹

Delaware's statutory definition of a letter of wishes

The statute defines a letter of wishes as, "any separate writing created by a trustor that makes specific reference to a governing instrument of a trustor and contains statements regarding the trustor's intent regarding the governing instrument but is not itself a governing instrument."³⁰

Standard of review of a fiduciary's exercise of discretion

The standard of review of a fiduciary's exercise of discretion is codified in Section 3315 of Title 12 of the Delaware Code. Subsection (a) provides generally that when a governing instrument does not limit the exercise of a trustee's discretion, a court will not evaluate the reasonableness of the trustee's exercise of discretion as long as the trustee has not acted dishonestly or from an improper motive. New subsection (c) provides that the fiduciary's decision whether or not to consider a letter of wishes is subject to this same standard of review.

Letters of wishes are gaining traction as an instrument to convey the trustor's intent for how the trust assets should be managed.

Subsection (c) (1) provides that a trustee may consider a letter of wishes, whenever created, and whether or not the governing instrument is ambiguous if the letter of wishes meets all of the following:

- (a) the letter of wishes has been delivered to the fiduciary by the trustor or on behalf of the trustor;
- (b) the letter of wishes reflects the trustor's intent contemporaneous with the date of execution of the governing instrument, which intent may be reflected in facts and circumstances known to the trustor, or not known to or anticipated by the trustor as of the date of execution of the governing instrument; and
- (c) the letter of wishes is not inconsistent with any provision of the governing instrument.

Note that although a trustor may deliver a letter of wishes to the fiduciary after the creation of the trust, the trustor cannot change their original intent with subsequent letters of wishes. Letters of wishes must reflect the trustor's intent at the time of the creation of the trust, although it may take into account facts that were not known to the trustor when they created the trust.

In addition, the statute provides the following: A fiduciary's decision not to consider a letter of wishes with respect to an unambiguous provision of a governing instrument is not an abuse of discretion.³¹ A fiduciary's decision not to consider a letter of wishes not meeting the requirements for a valid letter of wishes is not an abuse of discretion.³² A fiduciary's decision to consider a letter of wishes meeting the requirements for a valid letter of wishes, with respect to an ambiguous provision of a governing instrument, is not an abuse of discretion.³³ Despite these provisions, the statute also provides that a letter of wishes is not binding on a fiduciary. A fiduciary does not have a duty to follow the letter of wishes, and the fact that a fiduciary does or does not exercise a discretionary power in accordance with the letter of wishes does not create an inference that the fiduciary improperly exercised the power or abused the fiduciary's discretion.³⁴ Finally, the statute provides that except as provided under the terms of the governing instrument or by court order, the fiduciary does not have a duty to provide to any beneficiary a copy of a letter of wishes.³⁵

Confidential Trusts

A grantor may not want to disclose the existence of a trust to their beneficiaries because they fear that the knowledge of substantial wealth will reduce the beneficiary's incentive to lead a productive life, or for other reasons. Irrespective of the grantor's motivation to keep a trust confidential, this desire runs counter to a trustee's common law duty to disclose to a beneficiary their interest in a discretionary trust.³⁶ But, 12 *Del. C.* § 3303(c) permits a grantor to direct the trustee not to fulfill their duty to inform the beneficiary of the beneficiary's interest in the trust "for a period of time." A grantor might choose, for example, to prohibit the trustee from disclosing the existence of the trust until the grantor's youngest child reaches 25 years of age. Or, the trust could remain confidential for a term of years, until a specific date, or until a specific event that is certain to occur. Regardless of the nature of the restriction a grantor imposes on the flow of information to beneficiaries, the grantor may direct nondisclosure to the beneficiaries as long as the expression of that intent is clear from the terms of the trust instrument, and the restriction on disclosure ends within a defined period of time.

There is not a specific definition of "period of time" in § 3303. However, in 2015, the statute was modified to add the following safe harbors regarding what constitutes a "period of time." The statute reads: "the terms of a governing instrument may expand, restrict, eliminate, or otherwise vary the right of a beneficiary to be informed of the beneficiary's interest in a trust for a period of time, including but not limited to: (1) A period of time related to the age of a beneficiary; (2) A period of time related to the lifetime of each trustor and/or spouse of a trustor; (3) A period of time related to a term of years or specific date; and/or (4) A period of time related to a specific event that is certain to occur."³⁷ Note that if the trust is to be a confidential trust, most corporate trustees will prefer that the trust agreement directs the trustee not to provide notice for a period of time, rather than leaving it in the trustee's discretion. Also, it is common for corporate trustees to have policies that limit the duration of a quiet trust, for example to the age of 25 for a beneficiary.

Designated Representative Statute

Delaware statute 12 *Del. C.* § 3339 allows the appointment of a “designated representative” who is authorized to receive trust information on behalf of, and represent and bind, any beneficiary where the governing instrument limits or restricts the beneficiary’s right to receive information about the trust. The designated representative statute was enacted in 2015 to be used with confidential trusts created under § 3303. It was expanded significantly in 2021 to provide for representation of beneficiaries in various scenarios even if a designated representative is not named in the trust instrument.

The statute offers various methods for appointing a designated representative.

Methods of appointing a designated representative when provided for in the trust instrument. The first method is found under subsection (a) (1) of § 3339, which provides that “designated representative” means a person who is expressly appointed under the terms of a governing instrument.

Under § 3339(a) (2), a governing instrument may authorize, appoint or direct a person to represent or bind one or more beneficiaries in connection with a judicial proceeding or nonjudicial matter. “Judicial proceedings” and “nonjudicial matters” are both defined in 12 *Del. C.* § 3303(e), and the examples provide for nonjudicial matters including items such as nonjudicial release agreements.

Subsection (a) (3) allows a trust agreement to name a person who has the power to appoint a designated representative to fill either of the roles in subsections (a) (1) or (a) (2). This means that even if there is not a person named in the trust agreement to serve as the designated representative, the trust agreement can have express provisions to allow the appointment of a designated representative at any time.

To the extent that a designated representative is not appointed in accordance with subsections (a) (1) through (a) (3), § 3339(a) (4) authorizes the grantor to appoint a designated representative, subject to the limitations discussed below.

Subsection (a) (5) provides that to the extent a designated representative is not appointed in accordance with subsections (a) (1) through (a) (3), a beneficiary may appoint a designated representative to represent and bind the beneficiary. Thus, even if the trust is not a confidential trust, the beneficiary may decide that they would rather have information be provided to a designated representative or, for convenience, to represent the beneficiary in any nonjudicial matter.

The designated representative statute has been expanded to provide representation of beneficiaries where Delaware’s virtual representation statute might not be available — even if the trust is not a confidential trust. Section 3339(b) specifies that in addition to appointing a designated representative for a confidential trust, a designated representative may be appointed to represent “any minor, person who is incapacitated, or unborn person, or a person whose identity or location is unknown and not reasonably ascertainable” in any nonjudicial matter. This means that a designated representative can be appointed to provide representation of minor and unborn beneficiaries in nonjudicial matters, even if the trust is not a confidential trust. An example of where this could be useful is if a trustee or advisor wants to circulate a nonjudicial release agreement, and no party is available to serve as a virtual representative for minor and unborn beneficiaries under the virtual representation statute, 12 *Del. C.* § 3547.

As described beginning on page 25, Delaware’s virtual representation statute has certain limitations as to who can serve in the role under various scenarios. However, it should be noted that the use of the designated representative statute as an alternative to virtual representation is limited to “nonjudicial matters.” It does not apply to judicial proceedings. Furthermore, if the grantor is appointing a designated representative under subsection (a) (4) of § 3339 for representation in a judicial proceeding or nonjudicial matter, the grantor’s ability to appoint a designated representative is limited by three factors. First, the appointed designated representative must serve in a fiduciary capacity. Second, the grantor cannot appoint himself, or a related or subordinate party to the grantor within the meaning of IRC § 672(c). And third, the grantor must provide written notice within 30 days of the appointment to the parent or guardian of a beneficiary being represented. The

statute adds these additional requirements when the grantor is using the designated representative statute to represent and bind a beneficiary that would ordinarily be represented through virtual representation because without these limitations the grantor could unilaterally use the statute to avoid the restrictions of Delaware's virtual representation statute in nonjudicial matters.

Finally, subsection (b) provides that a beneficiary can appoint a designated representative to represent the beneficiary in any nonjudicial matter. Again, this means that a beneficiary can appoint someone to represent them, even if the trust is not a confidential trust. Note that this is limited to nonjudicial matters and does not apply to judicial proceedings.

The statute provides that a designated representative acting in a fiduciary capacity can reduce or extend any period of time that the trust is a confidential trust. The statute also provides that a designated representative can accept their role in writing or through actual service or similar action. Thus, although the statute originally required the designated representative to accept their role in writing, that is no longer required if it is clear that the designated representative has accepted their role through their actions. Also, the statute provides that by accepting the role, the designated representative submits to personal jurisdiction in Delaware regarding any matter related to the trust.

In addition, the Nonjudicial Settlement Agreement statute, 12 *Del. C.* § 3338, and the statute permitting a modification of trust by consent while the grantor is living, 12 *Del. C.* § 3342, impose additional requirements where the grantor is naming a designated representative as part of the modification process. This is discussed in detail beginning on page 21.

Avoiding Post-mortem Challenges to Trusts

Delaware law limits a person's ability to contest the validity of a trust if certain requirements are met. The Delaware statute provides that a trustee is permitted to give any person notice of the existence of a trust. This notice initiates a 120-day period in which the person may contest the validity of the trust. The written notice must specify the trustee's name and address, whether the person is a beneficiary of the trust, and the period of time the statute allows for bringing an action to contest the validity of the trust.³⁸ The statute effectively compels a dissenting person to mount a challenge to the validity of the trust while the grantor of the trust is still living and able to provide testimony to defeat allegations of incapacity or undue influence. The statute also forces the dissenting person to make the claim knowing that the grantor will be aware of the claim. This statute may be attractive to an individual who wants to create a trust for the benefit of certain family members or charities, and who also wants the comfort of knowing that the family members will be precluded from challenging the trust after the grantor passes away.



The statute provides that either mailing or delivering the notice to a person's last known address constitutes receipt, absent evidence to the contrary. Notice is deemed to be given when sent to the person to whom the notice was given and, "absent evidence to the contrary, it shall be presumed that notice was received by the person seven days after it was sent to such person" in accordance with Delaware's notice statute.

This statute was upheld by the Delaware Supreme Court in the *Ravet* case in 2015.³⁹ In 2025 the application of the statute was reviewed in the *Burd* case.⁴⁰ In *Burd*, a husband and wife executed a will and trust, and their overall estate plan disinherited one of the husband's adult children from a prior marriage. The husband and wife used the Delaware pre-mortem validation statute for both the will and the trust.⁴¹ The child objected within the specified 120-day period. A case was filed in the Delaware Court of Chancery and the child alleged undue influence and elder abuse as causes of action to have the will and trust declared invalid. The court held that the child failed to meet their burden of proof and the child was therefore unsuccessful in the court proceeding. This is the first matter involving the Delaware pre-mortem validation statute resulting in litigation that involved testimony from the supposedly incompetent testator/settlor.

The statute creates the same type of pre-mortem validation for wills and certain exercises of powers of appointment.⁴² If a pre-mortem notice seems a bit extreme for a particular individual, grantors still have the option to use a no-contest or "in terrorem" clause in a will or a trust.⁴³ An in terrorem clause is a provision that, if given effect, would reduce or eliminate the interest of any beneficiary of the will or trust who sues to contest the validity of the will or trust or to vary its terms. In terrorem clauses generally are enforceable under Delaware law, unless the court determines that a beneficiary who has brought an action has "prevailed substantially" in that action.

Purpose Trusts

At common law, a trust without definite beneficiaries, or at least readily identifiable beneficiaries, failed for lack of a proper object unless it qualified as a charitable trust.⁴⁴ The problem with such trusts was that without a certain class of beneficiaries, there was no one to enforce the trustee's duties under the trust agreement. In the case of a charitable trust, the power of enforcement resides in the State's Attorney General, who has plenary authority to enforce a charitable trust within their jurisdiction.

A pair of Delaware statutes, 12 *Del. C.* §§ 3555 and 3556, eliminate the common law rule prohibiting non-charitable purpose trusts. Section 3555 permits an individual to establish a pet trust — a trust for the benefit of "specific animals" living at the time of the trustor's death. Section 3556 authorizes an individual to create a trust for a declared non-charitable purpose that is "not impossible of attainment." This paper focuses its discussion on the noncharitable purpose trust statute, 12 *Del. C.* § 3556, since there is an increasing use of these trusts.

Section 3556(c) authorizes a person appointed under the trust agreement, or if there is no such person, the Court of Chancery, to enforce the trust's purpose. This role is generally viewed as the party who steps in if the trustee or other parties named in the trust agreement veer off course from the stated purpose of the trust. This role is frequently referred to as an "enforcer" when discussing purpose trusts. The Delaware noncharitable purpose trust statute was amended in 2025 to create the role of an enforcer.⁴⁵ The enforcer acts in a fiduciary capacity, unless the trust agreement provides otherwise. The role of the enforcer is subject to, and benefits from, the various provisions for a "fiduciary" throughout the Delaware statutes. Also, this amendment brings the Delaware purpose trust statute in alignment with other states that have well-known purpose trust statutes which incorporate the role of an enforcer, such as Oregon.⁴⁶ Under the revised Delaware purpose trust statute, the enforcer has various powers similar to other fiduciaries under the Delaware statutes. One such power is that the enforcer can be an interested party needed to modify a trust under the modification statutes (Modification of Trust by Consent While the Grantor Is Living, or Nonjudicial Modification Agreement) described below in this paper beginning on page 22. Interestingly, Delaware's purpose trust statute is the only purpose trust statute that permits *cy pres*, thus providing another way to modify the provisions of the purpose trust if needed.⁴⁷



The statute also gives standing to a person who has an interest (other than a general public interest) in the declared purpose of the trust to petition the Court of Chancery to appoint an enforcer or remove an existing enforcer. However, under the 2025 amendment this may be limited by the trust agreement. The 2025 amendment allows the trust agreement to provide that the enforcer or some other person has exclusive standing to enforce the terms of such trust, to the exclusion of any other person who has an interest in the trust.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the 2025 amendment states that the possibility of a person receiving distributions from a purpose trust, in furtherance of the declared purpose of the trust, does not make that person a beneficiary of the purpose trust.⁴⁹

The Delaware statute has no stated limit on the duration of a purpose trust. Since Delaware has repealed its rule against perpetuities, a Delaware purpose trust can exist indefinitely. Upon the termination of a purpose trust, whether by its terms, the fulfillment of its purpose, or the depletion of its assets, any remaining assets are to be distributed under the terms of the trust agreement or, in the absence of any such direction, to the grantor's intestate heirs under Delaware law.

Increased Interest in Purpose Trusts

Business owners who desire to retire but want to see their ventures continue to operate with the attention and values that extend beyond mere profit-making may benefit from selling the business to a purpose trust. A purpose trust allows families to focus a trust on a specific goal rather than on a specific beneficiary. With a purpose trust, the benefits of the business could succeed to its employees or a charity in place of (or in addition to) family members, for the purpose of keeping the business intact, subject to the control of an advisory committee and trustee. By embracing the idea of the purpose trust, business owners can ensure the continuity of their ventures while upholding the values and commitments that have made them successful. The transfer of the company by the owner to the purpose trust can be structured in various ways including by gift, sale or a combination of the two. The transaction can be structured so that the business owner makes a partial or complete gift of the company to the purpose trust. If the transaction is done by a sale, again this can be the owner's entire ownership or a portion. Also if done by a sale, the transaction can be structured so the owner receives a stream of payments over time.⁵⁰

METHODS FOR MODIFYING A TRUST IN DELAWARE

Decanting

Beginning with New York State in 1992, 41 states and the District of Columbia have adopted legislation to allow trustees with discretion to distribute trust principal, to appoint some or all of such principal in favor of another trust.⁵¹ This process is known as "decanting" a trust, and it offers trustees the ability to modify terms of an irrevocable trust. The trend continues with the promulgation of the Uniform Trust Decanting Act by the Uniform Law Commission in 2015.⁵² So far 19 states and the District of Columbia have enacted or introduced this uniform act, and it has been introduced into legislation in Kentucky and Massachusetts.

Decanting is one option for modifying the terms of a trust, but certain conditions must be satisfied.

Delaware's decanting statute was enacted in 2003, many years before the Uniform Decanting Act was promulgated.⁵³

Under the statute, a trustee who has authority to make distributions of principal may instead exercise such authority by appointing all or part of the principal in favor of a trustee of a second trust. The second trust can be a new trust, or the second trust can be a modified version of the original trust. However, in order to decant a trust under the statute, the trustee must also satisfy the following conditions:

1. The trustee must exercise the decanting authority in favor of a receptacle trust having only beneficiaries who are "proper objects" of the exercise of the power (i.e., the second trust may narrow or limit the permissible beneficiaries of the first trust, but it may not add beneficiaries who were not already "proper objects" of the first trust);
2. If the first trust qualifies for treatment as a minor's trust under IRC § 2503(c), the beneficiary's remainder interest in the second trust must vest and become distributable no later than the date upon which such interest would have matured under the first trust;
3. The trustee's exercise of decanting authority cannot reduce any income interest of any income beneficiary of a trust for which a marital deduction is taken under IRC § 2056 or § 2523 or comparable state law;
4. The trustee's exercise of decanting authority cannot apply to assets subject to a beneficiary's presently exercisable power of withdrawal if that beneficiary is the only person to whom, or for the benefit of whom, the trustee has authority to make distributions; and
5. The trustee's exercise of such authority shall comply with any standard that limits the trustee's authority to make distributions from the first trust.

The process of decanting may be useful any time an irrevocable trust agreement does not permit modifications under the authority of the trustee or a trust protector. Those modifications might include:

1. Changing the law governing the administration of the trust to the law of a more favorable state;
2. Dividing an existing trust to achieve tax benefits, such as maximizing GST-exempt assets;
3. Transferring the situs of a non-grantor trust from a high-income tax state to one without an income tax on fiduciary income;
4. Converting a non-grantor trust into a grantor trust or a grantor trust to a non-grantor trust for fiduciary income tax purposes; and
5. Modernizing a trust's governance procedure by appointing trust advisors and protectors.

The Delaware decanting statute provides significant latitude to decant a trust. Unlike the decanting statutes of some states, the Delaware statute permits a decanting even if the trust has an ascertainable standard for distributions. However, the second trust must have some or all of the same ascertainable standards. For example, if the first trust has an ascertainable standard of health, education, maintenance or support, the second trust must be for the same standards, or for any one or more of those standards such as health and/or education. Also, some decanting statutes provide that a trustee can only decant income if the trustee has first accumulated the income and added it to principal. This is not required under the Delaware decanting statute. The Delaware statute provides that the party exercising the power to decant the assets to a new trust can declare the new trust. Thus, it is possible to decant the assets of a trust into a trust that is created specifically for the purpose of the decanting. Finally, unlike some states, the Delaware decanting statute does not require notice to, or consent from, the beneficiaries before the decanting becomes effective. However, in practice most trustees will generally require that beneficiaries sign a release as part of the decanting process. Thus, a trustee with sufficient discretion to invade principal or pay income can enhance the benefits of an existing trust through judicious reliance on Delaware's decanting statute.

A 2024 case in the Delaware Court of Chancery involved a trust that was moved to Delaware from another jurisdiction, and then decanted using the Delaware decanting statute. However, it turned out that the trust instrument did not allow for distributions of principal, and the decanting was for the entire amount of the trust principal. The Court found that the decanting was void *ab initio*.⁵⁴

Nonjudicial Settlement Agreement (NJSa) Statute

Delaware's NJSa statute provides a method for the "interested persons" of a trust to resolve matters regarding the administration of a trust without judicial involvement.⁵⁵ This statute is substantially similar to the NJSa statute found in the Uniform Trust Code.⁵⁶ However, unlike the Uniform Trust Code version, the Delaware statute provides that any interested person may bring a proceeding in the Court of Chancery to interpret, apply, enforce or determine the validity of a nonjudicial settlement agreement. The statute defines interested persons as those whose consent would be necessary to achieve a binding settlement if the settlement were approved by the Court of Chancery. The rules of the Court of Chancery provide that such persons include, but are not limited to the following: (i) trustees and other fiduciaries; (ii) trust beneficiaries (including remaindermen) with a present interest in the trust or whose interest would vest if the trust terminated currently. If the agreement changes any beneficial interests, all beneficiaries are necessary parties, not just beneficiaries, who would take currently if the trust were to terminate. Thus, conceivably there could be remaindermen whose interest would not vest if the trust terminated currently, but rather would only vest upon a certain condition or specific event. The following would be necessary persons to the NJSa if beneficial interests are being changed: (iii) the grantor, if living; and (iv) all other persons having an interest in the trust pursuant to the express terms of the trust instrument, such as holders of powers and persons with other rights held in a non-fiduciary capacity. The statute provides that interested persons may enter into a binding nonjudicial agreement with respect to any matter involving a trust, provided it does not violate a material purpose of the trust.

The Delaware statute provides a non-exclusive list of six matters that may be resolved by a nonjudicial settlement agreement. These include: (i) interpreting or construing the terms of a trust; (ii) approving the report or accounting of a trustee; (iii) directing a trustee to refrain from exercising a power or granting a power to a trustee; (iv) resignation, appointment or determination of compensation of a trustee; (v) transferring the principal place of administration of a trust; and (vi) determining the liability of a trustee for an action relating to the trust.

As noted, this statute was based on the Uniform Trust Code, and comments to the Uniform Trust Code indicate that this list is a "non-exclusive list." This is of note since the list does not include an enumeration that the NJSa may be used to modify a trust. There have been differing opinions among Delaware practitioners as to whether an NJSa could be used to modify a trust, or whether modifying a trust "violates a material purpose" of the trust.⁵⁷ When the grantor is alive and an interested person to the NJSa, the material purpose limitation does not apply.⁵⁸

Note that when a grantor is a party to an NJSa, then unless the transfer in trust is an incomplete gift for federal gift tax purposes, the grantor may not represent and bind any beneficiary (as a Designated Representative or through virtual representation) other than the grantor. In order to represent and bind other parties, the grantor, or a representative for the grantor, is required to confirm that the transfer to the trust was an incomplete gift for federal gift tax purposes. This provision is intended to address the concern that a grantor representing and binding beneficiaries could have adverse transfer tax consequences for the grantor, due to the grantor having a retained power over the trust.

The Delaware NJSa statute provides that an NJSa may be used with charitable trusts and non-charitable purpose trusts. The limitation is that the NJSa statute may not be used to change the trust's purpose unless the trust has become unlawful under the Delaware Constitution or no longer serves any religious, charitable, scientific, literary, educational or non-charitable purpose. However, these restrictions do not apply if the grantor is a party to the agreement.

Modification of Trust by Consent While the Grantor Is Living

Delaware statute 12 *Del. C.* § 3342 also provides for modification of a trust by consent while the grantor is living and requires that the grantor be a party to the modification. The statute provides that it can be used to modify existing provisions and add new provisions, so long as such provisions could have been included in the governing instrument if the trust were created upon the date of the modification.

The statute provides that a grantor's power to participate in a trust's modification may be exercised by an agent under a power of attorney, to the extent that that power expressly authorizes the agent to do so, or to the extent that the agent is expressly authorized by the terms of the trust's governing agreement. Alternatively, the guardian (or similar court-appointed representative) of the grantor's property can authorize the trust's modification with the approval of the supervising court. The statute also provides that a modification under the statute requires the participation of all grantors, if there is more than one grantor.

Similar to the NJSA statute, unless the transfer in trust is an incomplete gift for federal gift tax purposes, the grantor may not represent and bind any beneficiary (as a Designated Representative or through virtual representation) other than the grantor. In order to represent and bind other parties, the grantor, or a representative for the grantor, is required to confirm that the transfer to the trust was an incomplete gift for federal gift tax purposes. This provision is intended to address the concern that a grantor representing and binding beneficiaries when beneficial interests are being changed could have adverse transfer tax consequences due to the grantor having a retained power over the trust.

The Modification of Trust by Consent While the Grantor Is Living statute may be used unless the trust's governing instrument expressly provides that the governing instrument may not be modified pursuant to this statute, a nonjudicial settlement agreement, or under a modification agreement.

Delaware's Merger Statute

Another method of potentially modifying a trust is the use of Delaware's merger statute.⁵⁹ Similar to Delaware's decanting statute, the Delaware merger statute provides that the party exercising the power to merge the assets into a new trust can declare the new trust. Thus it is possible to merge the assets of a trust into a trust that is created specifically for the purpose of the decanting. Although this provision has long been one of several powers listed in the specific powers granted to trustees under the Delaware statute, this provision has gained additional utility in recent years, especially when decanting is not an option because the trustee lacks specific discretionary authority to distribute principal. The merger statute is often used in a manner similar to a decanting, in which a new trust is created and the original trust is merged into the new trust. Delaware's merger statute gives a trustee the power to merge any two or more trusts, whether or not created by the same grantor, as long as the merger does not result in a material change in the beneficial interests of the trust beneficiaries. The statute does not require that the trusts that are being merged be created under the same instrument, or even by the same grantor. The statute does not define what constitutes a material change in the beneficial interests of trust beneficiaries. However, most practitioners in Delaware feel that as long as the resulting change is only administrative, such as adding an investment advisor, there is not a material change in the beneficial interests. Thus, in recent years, for administrative changes such as adding an investment advisor or updating investment language, the merger statute has become an alternative to decanting, or the use of an NJSA.

The merger statute also provides that the power to merge trusts is available when one of the trusts was created in order to participate in the trust merger, and that a trustee has the power to declare a trust for the purpose of merging existing trusts with that new trust. Furthermore, the power to declare trusts and merge trusts exists even if one or both of the trusts is not funded prior to the merger. This is important because it clarifies that the trust merger statute can be used to modify a trust, even if it is necessary to create a new trust that is not funded prior to the merger.

In addition to the requirement that the merger must not result in a material change in the beneficial interests of the trust beneficiaries, there are other important considerations for a merger. If a trust is being moved from another state and is being modified as part of that move, advisors should examine the application (if any) of the other state's merger statute. Additionally, any merger provision contained within the trust instrument should be considered.

Authority to Allocate Trustee Duties Among Multiple Trustees

Delaware statute 12 *Del. C.* § 3343 provides another tool that can be used to modify irrevocable trusts where the desired modification solely addresses powers of the trustee. The statute provides that any fiduciary who has the power to appoint a successor trustee has the power to appoint multiple successor trustees and additional trustees. Notably, this appointment power includes the power to allocate various trustee powers “exclusively to one or some of the trustees serving from time to time.” Pursuant to § 3343(c) and in accordance with § 3313A, a trustee to whom powers are exclusively allocated under this section is a fiduciary only with respect to the powers that are allocated to that trustee. The statute makes it clear that the other trustee(s) who were not allocated such power have no liability for, and no duty to monitor, the actions of the trustee to whom those powers, duties and responsibilities were allocated. The statute clearly states that if the powers are bifurcated with any trustee not having certain powers, the trustee that does not have those powers is an “excluded trustee” and will not be subject to liability with regard to those powers. Therefore, advisors and fiduciaries might now consider using section § 3343 to specifically allocate powers and duties among different trustees, limit liability, and avoid the need for a full decanting, but still obtain all the benefits of a decanting.

Consent Petition Process in the Delaware Court of Chancery

Historically, the Delaware Court of Chancery allowed “consent petitions” for the purpose of reforming irrevocable trusts. If all of the interested parties to the trust agreed, the trust could be reformed for a proper purpose.

Between 2010 and 2012, the Court of Chancery entered two standing orders that increased the requirements for a consent petition, indicating its desire to look more closely at the overall procedure.

In December 2012, the Court of Chancery continued its increased scrutiny of the consent petition process in its opinions in the *Peierls* matter.⁶⁰ In these decisions, the court questioned whether a family of related trusts could be transferred to Delaware and modified through the consent petition process. The rulings were appealed to the Delaware Supreme Court, which ruled on the Chancery Court's holdings on October 4, 2013.⁶¹ The Delaware Supreme Court's opinions in *Peierls* provide a road map for the successful use of the consent petition procedure and set out the following guidelines:

1. Unless a choice of law provision in the trust specifically and expressly provides that another jurisdiction's laws shall always govern administration, Delaware law will govern the administration of any trust moved to Delaware that allows the appointment of a successor trustee without geographic limitations, once the Delaware trustee is appointed and the trust is administered in Delaware;
2. While it is possible for the Delaware Court to have jurisdiction along with another state, if that other state has exercised primary supervision, such as court accountings for the trust, Delaware will not exercise jurisdiction over the trust until the other court has expressly relinquished primary supervision;
3. While historically Delaware trustees accepted their appointment contingent upon the modification of the trust, Delaware trustees must now accept their appointment before the Delaware Court will accept jurisdiction.
4. Whereas the consent petition process referred to the “reformation” of a trust, the actual effect is now a modification of a trust, since a reformation is used only where there is a mistake by all parties during the creation of the trust, and not merely where the parties are requesting a subsequent change to the trust; and

The process to modify a trust by “consent petition” has faced more intense scrutiny over the last decade, leading the court to adopt stricter guidelines.

5. The Court of Chancery will not issue advisory opinions; it will not enter an order regarding any matter that could be accomplished without court approval, such as the appointment of a successor trustee where such a provision is contained in the trust.

On balance, although the Court of Chancery Peierls opinion initially cast doubt on the viability of the consent petition process, the Delaware Supreme Court decision in Peierls validated the process and provided a road map for utilizing the process successfully.

Delaware statute 12 Del. C. § 3332 codifies and expands on the Peierls decision. The statute provides that when a trust is transferred to Delaware from another jurisdiction, Delaware law will govern the administration of the trust while the trust is administered in Delaware, with certain exceptions. The exceptions are where the trust instrument expressly provides either: (i) that the laws of another jurisdiction govern the administration of the trust (more than just a general choice of law provision in the trust); or (ii) that the laws governing the administration of the trust will not change due to a change in the place of administration of the trust.

In June 2015, the Court of Chancery issued an order in the *Flint* case, which established an additional test for the judicial modification of trusts.⁶² The new test requires the court to consider the grantor's intent as part of the modification process. In the *Flint* matter, the petitioner was seeking an order to modify the trust to clarify the governing law of the trust and to add an investment advisor. The court declined to determine the governing law because it felt the language of the proposed modification was too vague to be implemented. More importantly, the court did not grant the order to add an investment advisor, stating that modifying a trust requires the court to consider the grantor's intent, and the grantor was no longer alive. Practitioners have concluded that this adds a new "grantor intent" test to the consent petition process.

PROCEDURAL MATTERS

Virtual Representation of Minor, Unborn and Other Beneficiaries Who Cannot Represent Their Own Interests

Background of the statute. Enacted in 2000, Delaware's virtual representation statute 12 Del. C. § 3547 provides that a minor, an incapacitated person, unborn person, or a person whose identity is unknown or not reasonably ascertainable, may be represented and bound in judicial and nonjudicial matters by another person who has a substantially identical interest with respect to the matter at hand. However, this is limited in that the person can represent and bind another only to the extent there is no material conflict of interest with respect to the particular question or dispute between the representative and the person being represented. Another limitation is that if a person is acquiring or increasing a fiduciary or non-fiduciary role as part of the particular question or dispute for which representation is being sought, that person cannot represent and bind others as this is deemed to be a material conflict. For example, if as part of a proceeding a person is becoming an investment advisor who will direct the trustee, that person cannot represent and bind others for that proceeding.

Parent acting as virtual representative. The parent or parents of a minor or incapacitated beneficiary may represent and bind the child, as long as neither parent has a material conflict of interest with the child with respect to the question or dispute that is the subject of the representation. The statute also provides the ability of the parent or parents to represent and bind unborn or unascertainable persons with interests that are substantially identical to their child's interest.

Parents can also represent and bind another minor, incapacitated or unborn person who has an interest that is substantially identical to the parents' own minor, incapacitated or unborn child, provided there is no material conflict of interest between their child and the other minor, incapacitated or unborn person. An example of when this could be useful is where a parent is becoming an investment advisor as part of the proceeding, and as noted above, the parent would not be able to serve as the virtual representative for their own children due to the deemed conflict of interest. However, if the class of beneficiaries included the grantor's "descendants" (nieces or nephews of that parent), assuming the niece or nephew has a substantially identical interest as the child of the parent who cannot serve in this role, the parent of the niece or nephew (the sibling of

the conflicted parent) could serve as the virtual representative for all of the beneficiaries with the substantially identical interest, including the children of the parent who cannot serve in this role due to the deemed conflict.

Remainder beneficiaries acting as virtual representative. A presumptive remainder beneficiary can represent and bind contingent successor remainder beneficiaries as long as there is no material conflict.

Subsection (b) provides that contingent remainder beneficiaries may represent and bind more remote contingent successor remainder beneficiaries. As a result, in a situation where a presumptive remainder beneficiary is not able to represent and bind contingent successor remainder beneficiaries, for example, if the presumptive remainder beneficiary is assuming a fiduciary role, a contingent successor remainder beneficiary can fill the role of virtual representative for more remote beneficiaries.

Holders of power of appointment acting as virtual representative. Subsection (c) provides that “the holder of a general testamentary or inter vivos power of appointment — or a nongeneral testamentary or inter vivos power of appointment that is expressly exercisable in favor of any person or persons, excepting the powerholder, their estate, their creditors or the creditors of their estate — may represent and bind persons whose interests, as takers in default, are subject to the power, but only to the extent that there is no material conflict of interest between the powerholder and the persons represented with respect to the particular question or dispute.” This means that a holder of a power of appointment of any type, other than a power limited to a specific class, can serve as the representative. As a result, presumptive remainder beneficiaries, contingent successor remainder beneficiaries and more remote beneficiaries can all be represented by a holder of a power of appointment as long as there is no material conflict of interest. As a result, it is possible to represent and bind these beneficiaries without having a remainder beneficiary serving as a representative.

Trustee of beneficiary trust acting as virtual representative. Subsection (g) provides that “when a trust (the “beneficiary trust”) is a beneficiary of another trust, the beneficiary trust shall be represented by its trustee or, if the beneficiary trust is not in existence, the beneficiary trust shall be represented by those persons who would be beneficiaries of the beneficiary trust if the beneficiary trust were then in existence.”

Actions Against a Trustee

The Delaware statute places a limit on the time that a party may initiate a claim against a trustee.⁶³ Any person may initiate a proceeding up to the earlier of one year after the person was sent a report that adequately disclosed the facts constituting a claim (this is generally satisfied by trust statements showing the trust assets and transactions), or the date the proceeding was otherwise precluded by adjudication, release, consent, or pursuant to the terms of the governing document. If the trust is in the process of terminating, this period is 120 days. The period to bring a cause of action begins when the report is received by the person, and the statute codifies a presumption of receipt seven days after the notice is sent, absent evidence to the contrary.

Resignation of Officeholders

12 *Del. C.* § 3326(b) grants a trustee the statutory authority to resign. Prior to the 2025 amendment, the statute provided that a trustee could resign in the following circumstances: (1) in accordance with the terms of the governing instrument if that instrument allows a trustee to resign; (2) if the governing instrument neither expressly permits nor prohibits the trustee’s resignation, but does establish a procedure for the appointment of a successor trustee, then the trustee can resign by providing 30 days’ written notice to the parties with the power to appoint a successor trustee; or (3) in all other cases with the approval of the Court of Chancery.

The 2025 amendment broadened the statute to apply to “officeholders” rather than being limited to trustees. This includes officeholders who are fiduciaries and those who are not fiduciaries. This greatly broadens the scope of the statute to include other trust parties such as investment direction

advisors, distribution advisors and trust protectors. It also broadens the statute to include the new role of the enforcer of a purpose trust, which is discussed above in this paper on page 19.

The amendment also added the ability for a trustee to resign through the use of a nonjudicial settlement agreement or nonjudicial modification agreement, both of which are discussed above in this paper on page 22.

Electronic Execution of Documents

The Electronic Execution of Documents statute, 12 *Del. C.* § 3550, was enacted in 2021 partially due to the impact of COVID-19. Under this statute, inter vivos trust agreements as well as most other documents related to an inter vivos trust agreement can be executed electronically in accordance with Delaware's Uniform Electronic Transactions Act (UETA).⁶⁴

The statute works by providing that if a document is otherwise validly executed, the document may be executed in accordance with Delaware's UETA. The UETA has been a part of the Delaware Code since 2000. However, it has not been completely clear whether the UETA pertains to personal trusts. This is largely due to the following facts: that the UETA is contained in Title 6 of the Delaware Code, which pertains to Commerce and Trade, whereas fiduciary matters such as personal trusts, wills, estates and guardianships are addressed in Title 12 of the Delaware Code; and that the UETA refers to "transactions between two or more persons relating to the conduct of business, commercial or governmental affairs." Finally, the UETA excludes the execution of wills, codicils and testamentary trusts. To clarify its application, § 3550 references the UETA and provides that all of the documents covered in § 3550 are deemed to be a "transaction" as covered in the UETA. Section 3550 permits the electronic execution of inter vivos and testamentary trusts. It does not permit electronic execution of wills and codicils.

Section 3550 is the first statute to explicitly include the electronic execution of trust-related documents. This includes items such as: modification of a trust through modification agreement, merger or decanting; release agreements; resignation, removal, appointment, or acceptance of appointment of a trustee, advisor, designated representative, or protector; and any other documents covered under Chapters 33 and 35 of Title 12 of the Delaware Code that are not specifically excluded under the UETA. Thus, Delaware statute clearly allows electronic execution of all documents related to inter vivos and testamentary trusts. As noted above, the statute does not cover the execution of a will or a codicil.

Remote Online Notarization. Since 2023, Delaware law has permitted remote online notarization.⁶⁵ This means that a Delaware notary can use audiovisual communication technology to notarize the signature of a person located in a different location, whether the person who has signed the document is in Delaware or elsewhere. The point of this statute is that the person who has signed the document does not have to physically be with the notary when the person confirms to the notary that they have signed the document that the notary is looking at. This remote notarization can be for physical documents with a "wet signature" as well as for documents that have been signed electronically. Given the trend toward electronic execution of documents, it is interesting to consider how remote online notarization could be combined with electronic execution of a document. The statute requires that the remote online notarization process be recorded using audiovisual technology, and that the recording be maintained as proof of the notarization. The following could be the steps for remote online notarization of an electronic document: (i) the party electronically signs the document; (ii) the electronic record is sent to the notary by email; (iii) the notary is required to confirm the signing party's identity; and during the audiovisual recording the "notarial act" is recorded (meaning that the notary completes a record of the notarization).⁶⁶

While technology continues to become a larger part of life, including in estate planning, and there are now statutes permitting electronic execution of documents and remote online notarization, it will likely take some time for electronic execution and remote notarization to become the norm.

ASSET PROTECTION UNDER DELAWARE LAW

Asset Protection for Third-party Beneficiaries

Delaware law provides strong asset protection against creditors of a *non-grantor* beneficiary. Delaware statute provides that a creditor of a beneficiary of a trust has only such rights against the beneficiary's interest in the trust as are expressly granted to such creditor by the terms of the trust instrument or by the laws of the State of Delaware.⁶⁷ Over time Delaware case law has upheld this statute.⁶⁸ Delaware statute also provides that assets held in Delaware banks, trust companies, savings institutions and loan associations are exempt from state law attachment under Delaware law.⁶⁹

From time to time commentators outside of Delaware have expressed the view that Delaware does not protect trust assets from the spouses of trust beneficiaries during a divorce proceeding, often referring to the 1973 *Garretson v. Garretson* case.⁷⁰ In *Garretson*, the Delaware Supreme Court held that the spendthrift clause in a trust agreement of which the husband was a beneficiary did not apply to the claims of his wife during the divorce proceeding because she was not a creditor. Delaware practitioners have long believed that this was not a ruling that the spouse was entitled to the trust assets, because the ruling merely ruled that the husband's income interest in the trust could be sequestered to cause him to appear before the court. In 2023, Delaware statute was amended to provide that a former spouse of a trust beneficiary who has a claim against the beneficiary, the beneficiary's estate or the beneficiary's property is considered a creditor of the beneficiary, meaning that spendthrift protection does protect against claims against a trust beneficiary by a former spouse.⁷¹

A Discretionary Interest in a Trust Is Not a Property Right

In 2023 the Delaware statute was updated to provide that a beneficiary eligible to receive distributions from a trust in the discretion of a trustee or other fiduciary has a mere discretionary interest in the trust, which is not a property right. The statute provides that this is true even if the discretionary interest is subject to an ascertainable standard. Before this change in 2023, some non-Delaware practitioners viewed the statute as unclear as to whether a discretionary interest is a property right, which could be subject to the claims of creditors of discretionary beneficiaries of a trust. Given that there were still a few commentators who argued that Delaware law was unclear on this matter, the statute was updated again in 2025. Among other changes to this statute, the 2025 modification adds the following, "A beneficiary that has a discretionary interest in a trust shall not be deemed to have a right to compel a distribution from the trust... A creditor may not directly or indirectly compel the distribution of a discretionary interest except to the extent expressly granted by the terms of a governing instrument in accordance with § 3536(a) of this title."⁷² Although Delaware practitioners have believed for a long time that a discretionary interest in a trust is not a property right subject to the claims of a beneficiary's creditors, the 2025 amendment to the statute is another step to add certainty.

Gift in Trust to a Spouse Is Not a Marital Property

Delaware law recognizes that trust property is not marital property for the purposes of a divorce proceeding.⁷³ However, the statute did not clearly address property transferred in trust from one spouse to another. The statute was amended in 2025 to provide that unless the trust instrument expressly provides otherwise, gifted property held in a trust created by a donor spouse, of which trust the donee spouse is a beneficiary, regardless of whether other individuals are beneficiaries of the same trust, is not marital property.⁷⁴

Asset Protection Where the Grantor May Become a Beneficiary at a Later Time

There are scenarios where a grantor may become a beneficiary at a later time. For example, a grantor may create a trust that gives the current beneficiary a power of appointment that includes the grantor in the class of appointees. Delaware statute provides that a grantor shall not be considered a beneficiary for purposes of determining the rights of the grantor's creditors to reach the assets of the trust, and a grantor's creditors may not satisfy their respective claims from the trust, merely because the grantor is a proper object of the exercise of a power of appointment over

trust property held by someone other than the grantor.⁷⁵ The statute also provides the same result where the grantor has retained a beneficial interest that is contingent upon surviving the spouse of a marital trust.⁷⁶

Delaware Self-Settled Asset Protection Trusts (SSAPT)

Background of these trusts

We turn now to a topic that has received significant attention since 1997, when Alaska enacted the first SSAPT statute.⁷⁷ Oftentimes this topic is covered under the term Domestic Asset Protection Trusts (DAPT) or simply asset protection trusts. Because trusts created for third-party beneficiaries generally have spendthrift provisions, those can be viewed as asset protection trusts as well. However, beginning in 1997, new laws allowed a person to be both the settlor and a beneficiary of a trust (thus the term “self-settled”), and if done properly under the given statute, the assets in the trust should be shielded from the claims of the grantor’s creditors as well as the claims of creditors of the third-party beneficiaries of the trust.

This legislative change represents a shift in centuries-old law. The Restatement (Second) of Trusts provides a good example of the common law view. It reads that “where a person creates for his own benefit a trust for support or a discretionary trust, his transferee or creditors can reach the maximum amount which the trustee under the terms of the trust could pay to him or apply for his benefit.”⁷⁸ Thus, the SSAPT legislation overrides the Restatement (Second) of Trusts. Currently there are at least 20 states with some type of legislation enabling the creation of a SSAPT.⁷⁹

The Delaware Statute

In 1997, Delaware became the second state to enact an SSAPT statute with the Qualified Dispositions in Trust Act (QDTA).⁸⁰ Under the Delaware statute, a settlor can be both a beneficiary and settlor of a trust, and their creditors should not be able to reach the assets in the trust as long as certain rules are followed. These rules include the following: (i) the transfer is to an irrevocable trust; (ii) the trust must have a Delaware resident trustee; (iii) the trust must incorporate Delaware law; and (iv) the trust must have a spendthrift clause. The settlor is allowed to retain certain rights, which include: (i) the ability to be a permissible beneficiary as to principal and income; (ii) the right to veto distributions of income or principal to other beneficiaries; and (iii) the ability to have a limited inter vivos and/or testamentary power of appointment, the power to appoint and remove trustees and advisors, and the ability to serve as an investment advisor. Note that the settlor cannot serve as a trustee. In short, the settlor can be a permissible beneficiary and their creditors should not be able to bring a cause of action against the trust to settle an order to satisfy a debt owed by the settlor to the creditor, provided none of the asset transfers are found to be fraudulent. The time period that a creditor can bring a cause of action is limited. If the person is a creditor when the assets are transferred to the trust, the creditor must bring the cause of action within the later of four years after the transfer to the trust is made, or two years after the transfer could have been reasonably discovered by the creditor. If the person becomes a creditor after the transfer of assets to the trust, the creditor must bring the cause of action within four years. To be successful during this period, the creditor must prove that the settlor’s transfer of assets to the trust was a fraudulent transfer.

Exception creditors under the Delaware Statute

Most SSAPT statutes have various types of “exception creditors” where there is no limitation on the time that the claim can be brought against the trust. The Delaware statute has exception creditors that include marital relations claims such as an order for alimony, child support or property division, as well as claims based on torts such as property damage, bodily injury or death.

2023 Update to the Delaware Statute

In 2023 the statute was amended to provide that a qualified disposition under the QDTA will not be subject to claims by the grantor’s current spouse even if the trust is created during marriage provided the spouse against whom this is to be enforced: (1) is given written notice of the transfer, a copy of the Qualified Dispositions in Trust Act, a copy of the trust instrument, a list of the property subject to the transfer into the trust, disclosure of all material information relating to the value of such property

including an estimate of its value, and the basis for such estimate; and (2) the spouse consents *in writing* to the transfer after receipt of the foregoing. The notice provided to the spouse must be in all capital letters and must contain the following language:

YOUR SPOUSE IS CREATING OR HAS CREATED AN IRREVOCABLE TRUST INTO WHICH PROPERTY IS BEING TRANSFERRED. A COPY OF THE TRUST INSTRUMENT THAT WILL GOVERN OR GOVERNS SUCH IRREVOCABLE TRUST IS ANNEXED HERETO AS AN EXHIBIT. THE PROPERTY THAT IS TO BE TRANSFERRED TO THE IRREVOCABLE TRUST, WHICH IS THE SUBJECT OF A PROPOSED DISPOSITION UNDER DELAWARE'S QUALIFIED DISPOSITIONS IN TRUST ACT (12 Del. C. §§ 3570 et seq.), IS AS FOLLOWS: _____. THE ESTIMATED VALUE OF SUCH PROPERTY IS _____. YOUR CONSENT TO YOUR SPOUSE'S TRANSFER TO THE TRUST DESCRIBED HEREIN IS IRREVOCABLE AND YOUR RIGHTS TO THIS PROPERTY AS A SPOUSE OF THE TRANSFEROR WILL BE AFFECTED DURING YOUR MARRIAGE, UPON DIVORCE (INCLUDING THE PAYMENT OF ALIMONY OR A DIVISION OR DISTRIBUTION OF PROPERTY IN A DIVORCE), OR AT THE DEATH OF YOUR SPOUSE.⁸¹

This change is intended to put self-settled asset protection trusts on par with pre- and post-nuptial agreements. That is, as long as both parties are fully aware of what is occurring, the agreement should prevent the ownership of property from becoming in dispute if a marital dissolution occurs in the future.

Case law regarding SSAPT

The case law regarding SSAPT has had mixed results. Often, the fact pattern involves a debtor who has created a SSAPT knowing that a claim existed prior to creating the SSAPT, which has led to several cases finding in favor of the creditor and not upholding the provisions of the SSAPT.⁸² However, there have been two cases in the Delaware Court of Chancery with positive results for the settlor of a SSAPT. In the 2015 case, *TrustCo Bank v. Susan M. Mathews*,⁸³ the Delaware Court of Chancery issued a Memorandum Opinion granting the defendant's motion for partial summary judgment ruling that the plaintiffs were time barred in their claim that transfers to a Delaware SSAPT created under the Qualified Dispositions in Trust Act were fraudulent transfers. In 2025, the Delaware Court of Chancery, in Chancery, in the case, *In the matter of the CES 2007 Trust*, granted summary judgment against a creditor who brought a claim against a Delaware SSAPT to enforce a judgment against the trust's settlor, even though the settlor retained various powers over the LLCs held in the trust.⁸⁴ Even though the settlor retained use and control of some of the assets held in LLCs owned by the trust, the Court held that the trust met the requirements of a valid SSAPT under the Delaware statute and was not subject to the claims of the settlor's creditor.

Self-settled asset protection trusts in practice

Asset protection trusts serve a variety of well-intentioned individuals who simply seek to safeguard a portion of their net worth from unforeseen and uninsured claims against their wealth; however, they should be a part of the individual's overall estate planning. SSAPTs should be funded with a portion of a grantor's net worth, but the grantor should retain sufficient assets outside of the trust to satisfy their ongoing lifestyle expenses. Although there has been some case law upholding the asset protection nature of these trusts, in large part the cases across the country have had mixed results for settlors seeking to use SSAPTs to protect their assets from the claims of their creditors.

CONCLUSION

Delaware continues to be a leading jurisdiction for personal trusts, largely due to the flexible laws, its deep infrastructure for the trust and estates industry, a sophisticated legal bar and judicial system, and a progressive and amenable legislative process.

Let us help you explore Delaware's unique advantages. To learn more, please contact your Northern Trust representative or one of the individuals provided below.

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APPENDIX

KEY MILESTONES OF DELAWARE TRUST LAW

2025	• Update to Delaware's Noncharitable Purpose Trust Statute
2024	• Letters of Wishes codified Beneficiary Well-being Trusts statute — first of its kind in the nation
2023	• Remote Online Notarization; clarification of creditors' rights in certain matters; clarification between trust laws and marital rights
2022	• Clarification to various statutes, including those addressing notice provisions, the ability to release beneficial interests, and the period of limitations for bringing a claim against a trustee
2021	• Enactment of electronic signature provisions, and expansion of the designated representative statute
2020	• Clarification to various statutes, including those addressing nonjudicial modifications, and the ability to allocate duties among successor and additional trustees by use of trustee appointment document
2019	• Ability to allocate duties among successor and additional trustees by use of trustee appointment document
2018	• Reducing the period to one year to bring a claim against a trustee; further expansion of virtual representation statute
2017	• Creation of co-trustee/excluded trustee structure plus amendment of decanting statute to allow the "second trust" to be the first trust as modified by the decanting
2016	• Addition of trust modification statute when grantor is still living
2015	• Liberalization of trust merger rules
2014	• Addition of inter vivos limited power of appointment to asset protection trusts
2013	• Enactment of Nonjudicial Settlement Agreement (NJSA) statute
2007	• Expansion of virtual representation rules, which simplified the process of obtaining consent to trust petitions filed with the court
2005	• Ability for a grantor, by express direction in the trust instrument, to maintain confidentiality for a designated period of time
2000	• Enactment of the nation's first total return unitrust statute
1997	• Adoption of a self-settled spendthrift trust statute
1995	• Repeal of the Rule Against Perpetuities
1986	• Formal recognition of administrative trusts or directed trusts
1971	• Creation of deduction for trust income accumulated in irrevocable trusts for future distribution to nonresident beneficiaries

ENDNOTES

- 1 2009 WL 2913893 (Del. Ch. 2009).
- 2 12 *Del. C.* § 3302(a).
- 3 12 *Del. C.* § 3302(a)(4).
- 4 Uniform Directed Trust Act 2017, www.uniformlaws.org.
- 5 Willful misconduct means “intentional wrongdoing, not mere negligence, gross negligence or recklessness.” 12 *Del. C.* § 3301(g). The 2011 amendment to § 3301(g) further clarified the meaning of willful misconduct by defining “wrongdoing” as “malicious conduct or conduct designed to defraud or seek an unconscionable advantage.” Notably, in July 2017, the Uniform Laws Commission finalized the Uniform Directed Trust Act, which is a model law that states can adopt. The willful misconduct standard in this Uniform Act is based on the Delaware statute, affirming Delaware’s leadership in the development of directed trusts.
- 6 C.A. No. 20033 N.C. (Del. Ch. 2004).
- 7 *Id.* at 2.
- 8 12 *Del. C.* § 3313A(a)(1).
- 9 IRC § 2601.
- 10 Pub. L. 119–21, 139 Stat. 72.
- 11 IRC § 2631(a); An Act to provide for reconciliation pursuant to titles II and V of the concurrent resolution on the budget for fiscal year 2018, Pub. L. 115-97, 131 Stat. 2126 (2017).
- 12 25 *Del. C.* § 503(a). Three other states — South Dakota, Idaho and Wisconsin — had repealed the Rule prior to 1986, for reasons unrelated to the advent of the GST tax.
- 13 25 *Del. C.* § 503(e).
- 14 See, R. Sitkoff and M. Schanzenbach, *Jurisdictional Competition for Trust Funds: An Empirical Analysis of Perpetuities and Taxes*, 115 *Yale Law Journal* 356 (2005).
- 15 30 *Del. C.* § 1635(a).
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Cal. Rev. and Tax. Code § 17742(b).
- 18 See, e.g., Cal. Rev. and Tax. Code §§ 17734, 17737; N.Y. Tax Law § 633(a).
- 19 504 U.S. 298 (1992) (due process clause requires minimum contacts between a state and a taxpayer to justify state’s authority to impose tax).
- 20 See, e.g., *Chase Manhattan Bank v. Gavin*, 733 A.2d 782 (Conn. 1999); *District of Columbia v. Chase Manhattan Bank*, 689 A.2d 539 (D.C. 1997).
- 21 *McNeil v. Commonwealth of Pa.*, 67 A.3d 185 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2013) (holding that despite the grantor’s Pennsylvania residency at the time of the trust’s creation, because the trust had no Pennsylvania beneficiaries or other connections, the imposition of a Pennsylvania fiduciary income tax violated both the Pennsylvania and U.S. Constitutions); *Linn v. Department of Revenue*, 2 N.E.3d 1203 (Ill. App. Ct. 2013) (finding that the income taxation of the trust in question violated the Due Process Clause of the U.S. Constitution because there was not a sufficient minimum connection between the trust and the state of Illinois); *Fielding v. Commissioner of Revenue*, 916 N.W. 2d 323 (2018) (holding that four irrevocable inter vivos trusts lacked sufficient relevant contacts with Minnesota during the relevant tax year to be permissibly taxed, consistent with due process, on all sources of income as resident trusts).
- 22 *North Carolina Department of Revenue v. Kimberly Rice Kaestner 1992 Family Trust*, 588 U.S. (June 21, 2019).
- 23 See, Nikè Anani, Todd A. Flubacher, Kristen Keffeler, and Phillip J. Hayes, *Letting Go of the Dead Hand: Part III*, *Trusts & Estates*, April 2024. See also, Todd A. Flubacher, Kristin Keffeler, Elizabeth M. Luk, and Jennifer E. Smith, *Delaware’s New Beneficiary Well-Being Statute*, *Trusts & Estates*, January 2025.
- 24 12 *Del. C.* 3345, referred to as the Beneficiary Well-Being Trust Statute.
- 25 12 *Del. C.* 3345(c).
- 26 12 *Del. C.* 3345(b).
- 27 12 *Del. C.* 3345(d)(1).
- 28 12 *Del. C.* 3325(32).
- 29 12 *Del. C.* 3303(a).
- 30 12 *Del. C.* 3301(g).
- 31 12 *Del. C.* 3315(c)(2).
- 32 12 *Del. C.* 3315(c)(3).
- 33 12 *Del. C.* 3315(c)(4).
- 34 12 *Del. C.* § 3315(c)(5).
- 35 12 *Del. C.* § 3315(c)(6).
- 36 See, *McNeil v. Bennett*, 792 A.2d 190 (Del. Ch. 2001), *aff’d* in part sub nom. *McNeil v. McNeil*, 798 A.2d 503 (Del. 2002).
- 37 12 *Del. C.* § 3303(c).
- 38 12 *Del. C.* § 3546(a).

- 39 In a case of first impression, the Delaware Supreme Court upheld § 3546(a). See *In re Restatement of Declaration of Trust Creating the Survivor's Trust Created Under the Ravet Family Trust Dated Feb. 9, 2012*, C.A. No. 7743-VCG (Del. Ch. 2014), *aff'd* sub nom. *Ravet v. Northern Trust Co. of Delaware*, No. 369, 2014 (Del. 2015) (individual who had received notice under the statute and brought a cause of action after the 120-day period was denied relief because he failed to bring his claim within the statutory period).
- 40 *Burd v. Elliman*, C.A. No. 2023-1172-LM, 2025 WL 2809180 (Del. Ch. June 5, 2025).
- 41 12 Del. C. §§ 1311 for pre-mortem validation of the will, and 1346 for the pre-mortem validation of the trust.
- 42 12 Del. C. §§ 1311 for wills, and § 1312 for powers of appointment.
- 43 12 Del. C. § 3329.
- 44 See, *Morice v. Bishop of Durham*, 9 Ves. 399 (1804).
- 45 12 Del. C. § 3556(c).
- 46 OR. REV. STAT. § 130.193.
- 47 12 Del. C. § 3541.
- 48 12 Del. C. § 3556(3).
- 49 12 Del. C. § 3556(2).
- 50 For an in-depth discussion on the use of purpose trusts for the transfer of a business, see, Susan N. Gary, *The Changing Landscape of Business Succession, How and Why Purpose Trusts Matter*, Ohio State Business Law Journal, Vol. 18:1, 2024. See also, Susan N. Gary, David A. Diamond, and Eric Czepyha, *Using Purpose Trusts to Own a Private Business*, Trusts & Estates, May 2024. See also, David A. Diamond, Susan N. Gary, and Ellen Harrison, *Taking Care of Business - Why (and How) a Purpose Trust Might Be the Answer to Your Client's Business Succession Challenges*, ACTEC Annual Meeting, March 20, 2025, www.actec.org.
- 51 State by State Summaries of The Uniform Trust Decanting Act (2025), www.actec.org.
- 52 Uniform Decanting Trust Act 2015, www.uniformlaws.org; See also, *State by State Summaries of The Uniform Trust Decanting Act* (2025), *id.*
- 53 12 Del. C. § 3528 *et seq.*
- 54 *In the Matter of the Niki and Darren Irrevocable Trust and the N and D Delaware Irrevocable Trust*, C.A. No. 2019-0302-SG, July 24, 2024.
- 55 12 Del. C. § 3338.
- 56 Uniform Trust Code § 111, Nonjudicial Settlement Agreements.
- 57 See, e.g., Vincent C. Thomas, *A Trustee's Modification Toolbox: Does it Really Include Nonjudicial Settlement Agreements?*, Delaware Banker, Vol. 10, No. 2, Spring 2014, for the view that the Delaware NJSA should not be used to modify a trust; But see also, Michael M. Gordon and Daniel F. Hayward, *Another View: Utilizing Nonjudicial Settlement Agreements to Modify Trusts*, Delaware Banker, Vol. 10, No. 3, Summer 2014, for the view that the Delaware NJSA is one of several tools available to modify a trust in Delaware.
- 58 12 Del. C. § 3338(c).
- 59 12 Del. C. § 3325(29).
- 60 *In re the Ethel F. Peierls Charitable Lead Unitrust*, C.M. No. 16811-N-VCL (December 10, 2012); *In re the Peierls Family Inter Vivos Trusts*, Consolidated C.M. No. 16812-N-VCL (December 10, 2012); *In re the Peierls Family Testamentary Trusts*, Consolidated C.M. No. 16810-N-VCL (December 10, 2012).
- 61 *IMO Peierls Family Inter Vivos Trusts*, No. 16812 (Del. 2013); *IMO Ethel F. Peierls Charitable Lead Trust*, No. 16811 (Del. 2013); *IMO Peierls Family Testamentary Trusts*, No. 16810 (Del. 2013).
- 62 *In re Trust Under Will of Wallace B. Flint for the Benefit of Katherine F. Shadek*, C.A. No. 10593-VCL (Del. Ch. 2015).
- 63 12 Del. C. § 3585.
- 64 Uniform Electronic Transactions Act, 6 Del. C. Chapter 12A.
- 65 29 Del. C. § 4320 (c).
- 66 Acknowledgement and appreciation is given to Jennifer E. Smith, Esq. and J. Garrett Miller, Esq. for their explanation of the remote online notarization process.
- 67 12 Del. C. § 3536.
- 68 See, e.g., *Gibson v. Speegel*, C.A. No. 124 (Del. Ch. May 30, 1984); *Parsons v. Mumford*, 1989 WL 63899 (Del. Ch. June 14, 1989);
- 69 10 Del. C. § 3502(b).
- 70 *Garretson v. Garretson*, Del. Supreme Court, 306 A.2d 737 (1973).
- 71 12 Del. C. § 3536(a). For more detail on this topic, see also, Jocelyn M. Borowsky and Gregory J. Weinig, *Delaware Law Update – New Laws, New Cases and Other News*, 2023 Delaware Trust Conference, www.debankers.com.
- 72 12 Del. C. § 3315(b). The reference to § 3536(a) is to the statute that provides the rights of creditors and assignees of a beneficiary of a trust. That statute reads as follows, “... a creditor of a beneficiary of a trust shall have only such rights against or with respect to such beneficiary's interest in the trust or the property of the trust as shall be expressly granted to such creditor by the terms of the instrument that creates or defines the trust or by the laws of this State. The provisions of this subsection shall be effective regardless of the nature or extent of the beneficiary's interest, whether or not such interest is subject to an exercise of discretion by the trustee or other fiduciary, and shall be effective regardless of any action taken or that might be taken by the beneficiary. Every interest in a trust or in trust property or the income therefrom that shall not be subject to the rights of creditors of such beneficiary as expressly provided in this section shall be exempt from execution, attachment, distress for rent, foreclosure, garnishment and from all other legal or equitable process or remedies instituted by or on behalf of any creditor, including, without limitation, actions at law or in equity against a trustee or beneficiary that seeks a remedy that directly or indirectly affects a beneficiary's interest such as, by way of illustration and not of limitation, an order, whether such order be at the request of a creditor or on the court's own motion or other action ...”

- 73 13 *Del. C.* § 1513(b).
- 74 13 *Del. C.* § 1513(b)(1)(a)(5).
- 75 12 *Del. C.* § 3536(c)(3).
- 76 12 *Del. C.* § 3536(c)(4).
- 77 Alaska Stat. §§ 13.36.310, 34.40.110.
- 78 Restatement (Second) of Trusts § 156 (1969).
- 79 Fourteenth ACTEC Comparison of the Domestic Asset Protection Trust Statutes (2025), www.actec.org.
- 80 12 *Del. C.* § 3528 *et seq.*
- 81 12 *Del. C.* § 3573(c)(2)(a).
- 82 For a discussion of SSAPT, including case law, see, David A. Diamond and Scott M. Hancock, *Self-Settled Asset Protection Trusts: What You Need to Know if These Come to Texas*, Estate Planning and Community Property Law Journal, Texas Tech University School of Law, (January 2026).
- 83 *TrustCo Bank v. Susan M. Mathews*, C.A. No. 8374-VCP, V.C. Parsons (Del. Ch. Jan. 22, 2015).
- 84 *In the matter of the CES 2007 Trust*, C.A. No. 2023-0925-SEM (May 2025).

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