

STATE OF CALIFORNIA

# **CALIFORNIA LAW REVISION COMMISSION**

RECOMMENDATION

**Nonprobate Transfers: Liability of a  
Surviving Spouse Under Probate Code  
Sections 13550 and 13551**

May 2019

California Law Revision Commission  
c/o UC Davis School of Law  
Davis, CA 95616  
[www.clrc.ca.gov](http://www.clrc.ca.gov)

## NOTE

This report includes an explanatory Comment to each section of the recommended legislation. The Comments are written as if the legislation were already operative, since their primary purpose is to explain the law as it will exist to those who will have occasion to use it after it is operative. The Comments are legislative history and are entitled to substantial weight in construing the statutory provisions. For a discussion of cases addressing the use of Law Revision Commission materials in ascertaining legislative intent, see the Commission's most recent *Annual Report*.

Cite this report as *Nonprobate Transfers: Liability of a Surviving Spouse Under Probate Code Sections 13550 and 13551*, 46 Cal. L. Revision Comm'n Reports 11 (2019).

STATE OF CALIFORNIA

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**CALIFORNIA LAW REVISION COMMISSION**

c/o UC Davis School of Law  
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May 30, 2019

To: The Honorable Gavin Newsom  
*Governor of California*, and  
The Legislature of California

Assets of a deceased person are distributed in a number of different ways, depending on the circumstances:

- (1) According to the terms of the decedent's will, if the decedent had a will;
- (2) According to the rules of intestate succession, if the decedent lacked a will or other estate planning instrument; or
- (3) By various forms of nonprobate transfer ("NPT"), if the decedent executed the necessary documentation for such a transfer (e.g., a beneficiary designation form or a living trust).

When a decedent's assets are distributed by will or intestate succession, they are usually subject to probate administration. In probate, the decedent's outstanding debts are paid from the decedent's assets before the heirs or devisees receive their shares.

To facilitate prompt transfer of a decedent's assets to a surviving spouse, Part 2 of Division 8 of the Probate Code creates an exception to the usual requirement of probate administration: It

allows a surviving spouse to receive property by will, or by intestate succession, *without* probate administration.

To ensure repayment of a decedent's debts, however, Part 2 of Division 8 also includes a rule imposing liability on a surviving spouse for a decedent's debts. Under Probate Code Sections 13550 and 13551, the surviving spouse's liability extends to any property received from the decedent "without administration."

In 2010, a California appellate court considered the scope of this liability rule. In particular, the court considered whether the rule would impose liability on a surviving spouse for the value of property received from a decedent via joint tenancy (i.e., not by will or intestate succession). The court concluded that the rule *would* apply to that situation. See *Kircher v. Kircher*, 189 Cal. App. 4th 1105, 117 Cal. Rptr. 3d 254 (2010).

The Commission reviewed the statutory context and history for this statutory liability rule. The Commission concluded that although the liability rule was drafted broadly, the rule probably was intended to have a narrower scope, applying only to property that a surviving spouse receives under Part 2 of Division 8.

The Commission recommends that the liability rule be revised to make clear that it applies only to property that a surviving spouse receives without probate administration under Part 2 of Division 8 of the Probate Code.

This recommendation was prepared pursuant to Resolution Chapter 158 of the Statutes of 2018.

Respectfully submitted,

Jane McAllister  
*Chairperson*

## NONPROBATE TRANSFERS: LIABILITY OF A SURVIVING SPOUSE UNDER PROBATE CODE SECTIONS 13550 AND 13551

This recommendation addresses a significant ambiguity in Probate Code Sections 13550 and 13551. These sections concern liability of a surviving spouse to creditors of a deceased spouse.

To explain the proposed reform, it is first necessary to describe the existing statutory scheme and identify the ambiguity in question. The discussion then turns to a 2010 appellate decision on the point.

Next, the Law Revision Commission analyzes the situation. Based on the work it has done, the Commission recommends revising Section 13551 to make clear that its liability rule only applies to property that a surviving spouse receives pursuant to the part of the Probate Code containing that section (Part 2 of Division 8, which authorizes distribution to a surviving spouse without administration under certain circumstances).

### EXISTING STATUTORY SCHEME

After death, a person's assets may be distributed in a number of different ways, depending on the circumstances:

- (1) According to the terms of the decedent's will, if the decedent had a will;<sup>1</sup>
- (2) According to the rules of intestate succession, if the decedent lacked a will or other estate planning instrument;<sup>2</sup> or
- (3) By various forms of nonprobate transfer ("NPT"), if the decedent executed the necessary documentation

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1. See Prob. Code § 7000.

2. See *id.*

for such a transfer (e.g., a beneficiary designation form or a living trust).<sup>3</sup>

When a decedent's assets are distributed by will or intestate succession, they are usually subject to probate administration.<sup>4</sup> In probate, the decedent's outstanding debts are paid from the decedent's assets before the heirs or devisees receive their shares of those assets.<sup>5</sup>

To facilitate prompt transfer of a decedent's assets to a surviving spouse, Part 2 of Division 8 of the Probate Code creates an exception to the usual requirement of probate administration: It allows a surviving spouse to receive property by will, or by intestate succession, *without* probate administration.<sup>6</sup>

However, Part 2 of Division 8 also contains a rule imposing liability on the surviving spouse for the debts of the decedent. More specifically, Sections 13550 and 13551 provide:

13550. Except as provided in Sections 11446, 13552, 13553, and 13554, upon the death of a married person, the surviving spouse is personally liable for the debts of the deceased spouse chargeable against the property described in Section 13551 to the extent provided in Section 13551.

13551. The liability imposed by Section 13550 shall not exceed the fair market value at the date of the decedent's death, less the amount of any liens and encumbrances, of the total of the following:

(a) The portion of the one-half of the community and quasi-community property belonging to the surviving spouse under Sections 100 and 101 that is not exempt from enforcement of a money judgment and is not administered in the estate of the deceased spouse.

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3. See generally Prob. Code § 5000.

4. See Prob. Code § 7001.

5. See generally Prob. Code §§ 11420, 21401.

6. See Prob. Code § 13500.

(b) The portion of the one-half of the community and quasi-community property belonging to the decedent under Sections 100 and 101 that passes to the surviving spouse without administration.

(c) The separate property of the decedent that passes to the surviving spouse without administration.

These sections ensure that property passing to a surviving spouse under Part 2 of Division 8 is available to satisfy a decedent's debts, even though the property is not probated.

In 2010, a California appellate court considered whether the liability rule contained in Sections 13550 and 13551 also applies to property that a surviving spouse receives through nonprobate transfers. The court's decision is discussed below.

#### *KIRCHER V. KIRCHER*

In *Kircher v. Kircher*,<sup>7</sup> the court considered the scope of the liability rule in Probate Code Sections 13550 and 13551. The court concluded that the liability rule applied to property that a surviving spouse received as the surviving joint tenant.<sup>8</sup>

This conclusion was based on the language of Section 13551.<sup>9</sup> The *Kircher* court found that the surviving spouse's liability under Section 13551 encompasses all property "properly characterized as community property or the decedent's separate property" that is received by the surviving spouse without probate administration.<sup>10</sup> The court's analysis suggests that the surviving spouse's liability extends to *any* property received from the decedent outside of probate.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, under the *Kircher* decision, the liability under Section 13551 extends beyond property that the surviving spouse is

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7. 189 Cal. App. 4th 1105, 117 Cal. Rptr. 3d 254 (2010).

8. See *id.* at 1115-16.

9. See *id.* at 1112-16.

10. *Id.* at 1113.

11. See *id.* at 1113-14.

statutorily authorized to receive without probate administration under Part 2 of Division 8 of the Probate Code.

## COMMISSION STUDY

The Commission studied the liability rule in Sections 13550 and 13551, particularly the scope of the liability imposed by these provisions and the implications of the *Kircher* decision. After explaining the scope of the study, the Commission reports its findings regarding legislative intent, potentially conflicting liability rules, and other policy considerations.

### Scope of Study

In this study, the Commission examined whether the liability rule stated in Sections 13550 and 13551 should be understood to impose liability for property that passes to a surviving spouse by NPT (as indicated by the analysis in the *Kircher* decision), not just liability for property that passes to a surviving spouse under the exception to probate administration established in Part 2 of Division 8. This recommendation only addresses that issue.

The recommendation does not address the broader question of whether, as a policy matter, property transferred by NPT *should* be liable for a decedent's debts.<sup>12</sup>

### Legislative Intent

The Commission considered whether the Legislature intended to have the liability rule of Sections 13550 and 13351 impose liability on a surviving spouse for property conveyed by NPT. In other words, the Commission sought to determine whether the Legislature intended the result that the court reached in *Kircher*.

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12. This broader question is discussed in a background report prepared for the Commission. See Nathaniel Sterling, *Liability of Nonprobate Transfer for Creditor Claims and Family Protections* (2010).

This background report and other Commission materials cited in this recommendation are available on the Commission's website ([www.clrc.ca.gov](http://www.clrc.ca.gov)).



The Commission found no evidence that the Legislature considered applying, or intended the liability rule to apply, to such property. To the contrary, the legislative history suggests that such an interpretation of the liability rule is in tension with prior legislative understanding and decisions regarding the liability of property conveyed by NPT.<sup>13</sup>

### **Potentially Conflicting Liability Rules**

For certain NPTs (including a trust or a revocable transfer on death deed), the Probate Code includes specific liability rules applicable to *any* recipient of such a transfer, not just a surviving spouse.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, if Sections 13550 and 13551 impose liability for NPTs, a surviving spouse recipient could be subject to

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13. See generally 32 *CEB Est. Plan Rep.* 85 (Dec. 2010).

In particular, the history of the California Multiple-Party Accounts Act suggests that the Legislature understood joint tenancy accounts to pass free from liability and, at that time, did not want to disrupt that treatment. See *Recommendation Relating to Non-Probate Transfers*, 15 Cal. L. Revision Comm'n Reports 1605, 1654 (1980) (Commission Comment to proposed Prob. Code § 6107 provides that the section “changes former law with respect to a true joint tenancy account. It was the former rule that the surviving joint tenant took the funds free of the claims of the deceased joint tenant’s creditors.”); CLRC Staff Memorandum 1981-26, p. 1 (“The bill [addressing deposit accounts and other nonprobate transfers] was not approved by [the Assembly Committee on Judiciary] because the chairman and at least one other member strongly objected to the provision of the bill which would change the existing law that a surviving joint tenant takes funds on deposit in a joint deposit account free of claims of creditors of the deceased joint tenant.”); CLRC Staff Memorandum 1982-36, p. 1 (“At the last meeting, the Commission was in general agreement that we should reintroduce the nonprobate transfer bill (AB 325) that was killed in the Assembly Judiciary Committee in 1981. ... The proposed legislation is in the same form as the last amended version of AB 325, except for the omission of provisions relating to rights of the decedent’s creditors in a joint account, P.O.D. account, or Totten trust account (Sections 6107 and 6107.5 in AB 325). These provisions were not acceptable to the members of the Assembly Judiciary Committee.”).

14. See Prob. Code §§ 5674(b) (liability of a revocable transfer on deed beneficiary), 19402(b) (liability of a trust distributee).

two potentially applicable liability rules, which might impose different levels of liability.<sup>15</sup> Such a conflict would be problematic.

### Other Policy Considerations

From a policy standpoint, imposing liability on a surviving spouse for NPTs under Sections 13550 and 13551 could have another adverse consequence: It could sometimes cause a surviving spouse to bear an inequitable share of liability.

For certain NPTs, the law does not provide a rule of liability.<sup>16</sup> A surviving spouse could therefore be liable under Sections 13550 and 13551 for receiving such an NPT, while a non-spouse recipient would not be subject to liability. The surviving spouse would thus have to bear a disproportionate burden of the creditor liability.

This result is inconsistent with the family protection policies in the Probate Code, which generally provide more favorable treatment for a surviving spouse (and children) than other recipients of the decedent's property.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, for NPTs, a surviving spouse does not have an opportunity to claim family protections (e.g., probate homestead) that would be available in probate administration.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the liability rule announced in *Kircher* would impose creditor liability as in probate administration, without providing the probate family protections. This result would appear to be at odds with the legislative policy for allocating a decedent's property where creditors are owed payment, but the family is in need of financial protection.

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15. Compare Prob. Code §§ 13550, 13551 with *id.* § 19402 (personal liability of trust distributee limited to pro rata portion of creditor's claim).

16. See, e.g., *supra* note 13 (discussing the Multiple-Party Accounts Act).

17. See generally Prob. Code §§ 6500-6615.

18. See Prob. Code §§ 6520-6528.

## RECOMMENDATION

For the foregoing reasons, the Commission recommends that Section 13551 be amended to impose liability for the decedent's property only when it would, absent the statutory authorization for the surviving spouse to receive the property without administration, be subject to probate administration.<sup>19</sup>

The Commission also recommends conforming changes to continue the existing liability treatment for community property with a right of survivorship.<sup>20</sup>

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19. See proposed amendment to Prob. Code § 13551 & Comment *infra*.

20. See proposed amendment to Civ. Code § 682.1 & Comment *infra*.

Currently, Civil Code Section 682.1 provides that "Chapter 3 (commencing with Section 13550) ... of Part 2 of Division 8 of the Probate Code" applies to community property with a right of survivorship ("CPWROS"). Sections 13550 and 13551 are contained within this chapter. Thus, it appears that CPWROS is currently subject to the liability rule in Sections 13550 and 13551. The proposed amendment to Civil Code Section 682.1 is intended to preserve the existing application of the liability rule to CPWROS.



## PROPOSED LEGISLATION

### **Prob. Code § 13551 (amended). Maximum liability of surviving spouse**

SEC. \_\_. Section 13551 of the Probate Code is amended to read:

13551. The liability imposed by Section 13550 shall not exceed the fair market value at the date of the decedent's death, less the amount of any liens and encumbrances, of the total of the following:

(a) The portion of the one-half of the community and quasi-community property belonging to the surviving spouse under Sections 100 and 101 that is not exempt from enforcement of a money judgment and is not administered in the estate of the deceased spouse.

(b) The portion of the one-half of the community and quasi-community property belonging to the decedent under Sections 100 and 101 that passes to the surviving spouse without administration under this part.

(c) The separate property of the decedent that passes to the surviving spouse without administration under this part.

**Comment.** Section 13551 is amended to specify that the liability imposed on the surviving spouse under Section 13550 only extends to property that the surviving spouse receives without probate administration according to the statutory authority in this part. See Section 13500.

This change does not affect the surviving spouse's liability under laws other than Sections 13550 and 13551.

## CONFORMING REVISION

### **Civ. Code § 682.1 (amended). Community property with right of survivorship**

SEC. \_\_. Section 682.1 of the Civil Code is amended to read:

682.1. (a)(1) Community property of spouses, when expressly declared in the transfer document to be community property with right of survivorship, and which may be accepted in writing on the

face of the document by a statement signed or initialed by the grantees, shall, upon the death of one of the spouses, pass to the survivor, without administration, pursuant to the terms of the instrument, subject to the same procedures, as property held in joint tenancy. Prior to the death of either spouse, the right of survivorship may be terminated pursuant to the same procedures by which a joint tenancy may be severed.

(2) Part 1 (commencing with Section 5000) of Division 5 of the Probate Code and Chapter 2 (commencing with Section 13540), Chapter 3 (commencing with Section 13550), and Chapter 3.5 (commencing with Section 13560) of Part 2 of Division 8 of the Probate Code apply to this property.

(3) For the purposes of Chapter 3 (commencing with Section 13550) of Part 2 of Division 8 of the Probate Code, this property shall be treated as if it had passed without administration under Part 2 (commencing with Section 13500) of Division 8 of the Probate Code.

(b) This section does not apply to a joint account in a financial institution to which Part 2 (commencing with Section 5100) of Division 5 of the Probate Code applies.

(c) This section shall become operative on July 1, 2001, and shall apply to instruments created on or after that date.

**Comment.** Section 682.1 is amended to make clear that Probate Code Section 13551 applies to community property with a right of survivorship, notwithstanding the addition of language that limits the application of that section. The added language provides that Section 13551(b) and (c) only apply to property that passes to a surviving spouse without administration under Part 2 (commencing with Section 13500) of Division 8 of the Probate Code.

This section is also amended to add paragraph numbers to subdivision (a).

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