Estate Sale or Cleanout?

Choosing the right path for a California home

A practical guide for Southern California families deciding what to do with a loved one's belongings.

Two good options, for different situations.

Both an estate sale and a cleanout can help empty a loved one's home. The right choice depends on what's inside, how much time you have, and how involved you want to be. Many families end up using both.

01 The difference at a glance
02 Which fits your situation?
03 Using both, in order
04 What's different in California
05 Questions to ask
06 Next steps

General information only, not legal or financial advice.

PART 01

The difference at a glance

An estate sale turns belongings into money. A cleanout turns a full house into an empty one. One earns, the other costs, and each saves you a different kind of work.

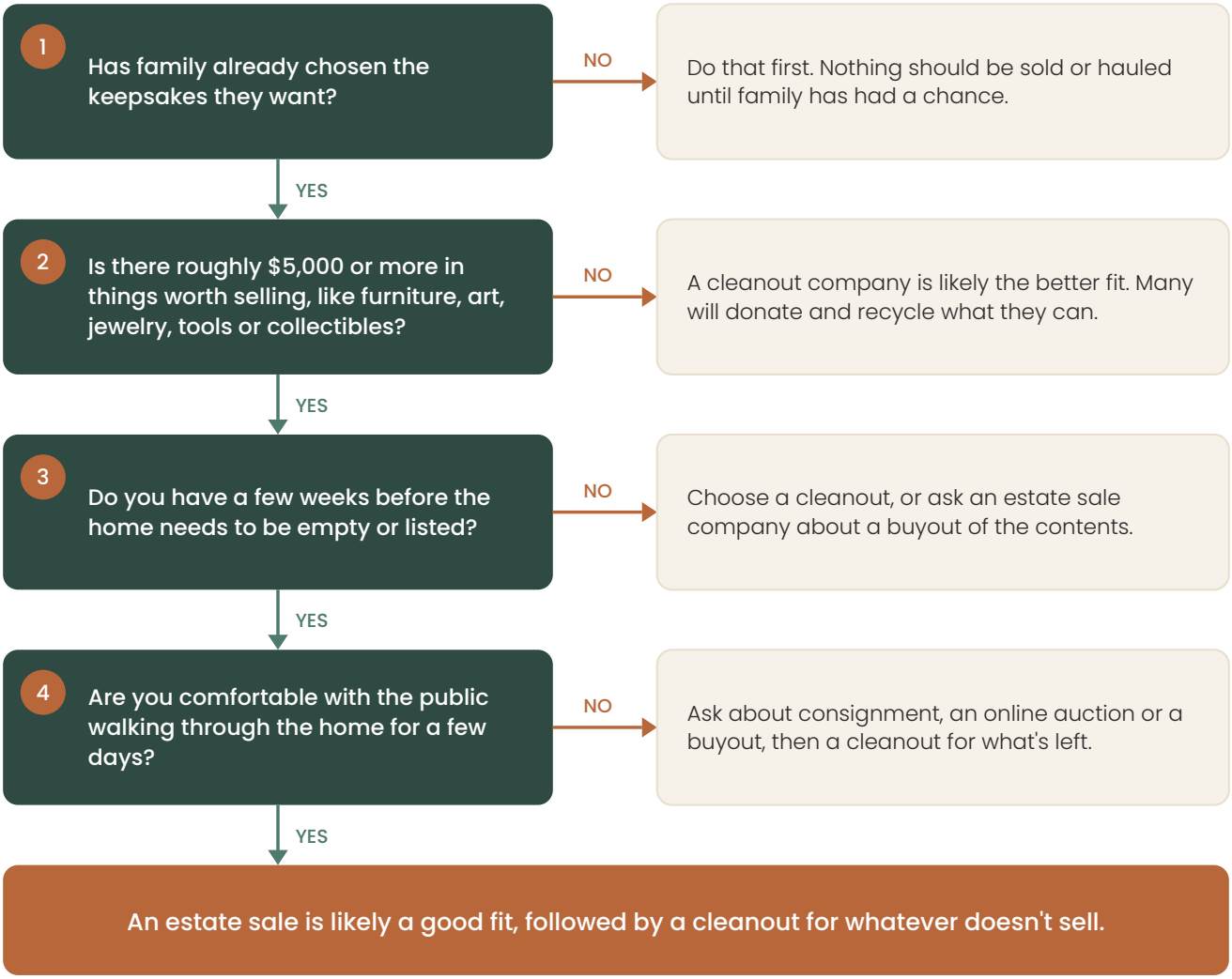
	Estate sale	Estate cleanout
What it does	Prices, stages and sells the contents to the public, usually over a weekend.	Removes everything from the home, then donates, recycles or disposes of it.
How you pay	The company keeps a commission, often 30% to 50% of sales. 35% to 40% is most common.	You pay a fee, usually based on volume. A typical 3-bedroom home often runs about $1,000 to $2,500, and Southern California prices can be higher.
What it takes	Enough to sell. Los Angeles companies often look for about $5,000 to $10,000 in expected sales.	Nothing special. Any amount of belongings, in any condition.
Time	Setup and pricing, then usually 1 to 3 sale days.	Often one day, or a few days for a large home.
Your role	Moderate. You agree on what's sold and review the final accounting.	Light. You walk through once, set aside what to keep, and let the crew work.
What's left after	Unsold items. Ask whether the company handles donation, a buyout or a cleanout.	An empty, usually broom-clean home.
Best for	Homes with good furniture, collectibles, art, jewelry or tools.	Modest contents, tight timelines, hoarding situations, or what's left after a sale.

Price ranges are typical figures reported by industry sources and vary widely. Always get written quotes from two or three companies.

PART 02

Which fits your situation?

Start at the top and answer each question. A “no” points you to the option that likely fits; four “yes” answers point to an estate sale.



Not sure about value? Many estate sale companies will walk through the home for free and tell you honestly whether a sale makes sense.

PART 03

Using both, in the right order

When there are things worth selling, many families get the best result by doing a sale first and a cleanout last.



Keep both companies in the loop

Some estate sale companies offer the cleanout too, or have a crew they trust. If you hire separately, schedule the cleanout soon after the sale so the home doesn't sit full of leftovers.

PART 04

What's different in California

California has stricter rules than most states about what can be thrown away and how some items can be sold. A good company knows these, but it helps to know them too.

ELECTRONICS, BATTERIES AND CHEMICALS

- Batteries, fluorescent bulbs, electronics, old TVs and monitors, mercury thermostats, and non-empty aerosol cans can't go in the trash anywhere in California (DTSC).
- Paint, pesticides, pool chemicals and motor oil go to a household hazardous waste site, such as the City of Los Angeles S.A.F.E. Centers, LA County collection events, or OC Waste & Recycling centers.
- Ask any cleanout company how they handle these items. A careful company will explain where they go.

MATTRESSES

- California's Bye Bye Mattress program takes mattresses and box springs for free. Most residents live within 15 miles of a drop-off site.

FIREARMS

- Firearms can't be sold at an estate sale between private parties. California requires private sales to go through a licensed California firearm dealer (CA Attorney General).
- A parent-to-child or grandparent-to-grandchild transfer is exempt from the dealer rule, but the person receiving it must report it to the state Department of Justice within 30 days. Siblings aren't covered by this exemption.
- Tell the estate sale or cleanout company about any firearms before they start, and talk with a licensed dealer or attorney about next steps.

IF A FAMILY MEMBER MAY KEEP THE HOUSE

- Under Proposition 19, a child who inherits a parent's home can keep the parent's lower property tax base only if they make it their primary residence within one year. The benefit is capped at the parent's taxable value plus $1 million (County Assessor).
- If someone may move in, decide that before clearing the home. It can change what you keep, sell or haul away.

LEGAL AUTHORITY COMES FIRST

- If the estate is in probate or held in a trust, check with the executor, trustee or attorney before anything is sold. Sale money belongs to the estate and should be tracked.
- Some Southern California cities and HOAs have rules about sale signs, parking or how often sales can be held. Ask the estate sale company whether they handle any needed permits.

PART 05

Questions to ask before you hire

A short call with two or three companies will tell you a lot. Good companies answer these questions easily and put the details in writing.

Estate sale company

- What is your commission, and what does it cover?
- Do you have a minimum sale size?
- Are you insured and bonded?
- How do you research and price valuable items?
- How do you protect the home and neighbors during the sale?
- What happens to unsold items, and what does that cost?
- When will I be paid, and will I get an itemized accounting?
- Can I speak with recent clients?

Cleanout company

- Are you licensed and insured?
- Is your price a flat quote or based on truckloads?
- Will you set aside papers, photos, cash or valuables you find?
- What do you donate, and can I get donation receipts?
- How do you handle electronics, chemicals and mattresses?
- Will the home be left broom-clean?
- How long will the job take?
- Have you worked with executors, trustees or realtors?

Red flags to watch for

An offer to buy everything for cash on the spot, before anyone has looked closely. No written contract. A large upfront fee for an estate sale, since commission normally comes out of sales. Pressure to decide today. Reluctance to show proof of insurance.

PART 06

Your next steps

- [ ] Let family choose keepsakes, and set aside papers, photos and valuables
- [ ] Confirm who has legal authority to sell or clear the home
- [ ] Decide whether anyone may keep or move into the house
- [ ] Note any firearms, chemicals, electronics or mattresses
- [ ] Get free walkthroughs from two or three companies
- [ ] Compare written quotes and choose your path
- [ ] Schedule the cleanout soon after any sale

Find trusted local help

Browse estate cleanout professionals across Southern California, by county, at **socalestatecleanup.com**.

SOURCES

- California DTSC, Universal Waste Fact Sheet
- LA Sanitation, S.A.F.E. Centers
- LA County Public Works, CleanLA Household Hazardous Waste
- OC Waste & Recycling, Household Hazardous Waste
- Mattress Recycling Council, California program
- California Attorney General, Overview of Key Firearms Laws
- Santa Clara County Assessor, Parent-Child Transfer (Prop 19)
- HomeLight, Estate sale companies in Los Angeles (commissions, minimums)
- College HUNKS, Estate cleanout cost guide

This guide is general information for Southern California families, not legal, tax or financial advice. Rules change, so confirm details with the agency or a qualified professional.