



## Stone Steps Financial, LLC

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Encinitas, CA 92024

### **Form ADV Part 2A – Firm Brochure**

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[www.stonestepsfinancial.com](http://www.stonestepsfinancial.com)

Dated March 13, 2024

This Brochure provides information about the qualifications and business practices of Stone Steps Financial, LLC, "SSF". If you have any questions about the contents of this Brochure, please contact us at 760-456-7147. The information in this Brochure has not been approved or verified by the United States Securities and Exchange Commission or by any state securities authority.

Stone Steps Financial, LLC is registered as an Investment Adviser with the State of California and notice-filed in Texas. Registration of an Investment Adviser does not imply any level of skill or training.

Additional information about SSF is available on the SEC's website at [www.adviserinfo.sec.gov](http://www.adviserinfo.sec.gov) which can be found using the firm's identification number 175289.

## Item 2: Material Changes

Since the last annual filing of this Form ADV Part 2A, dated February 10, 2023, there have been no material changes to report. In the future, any material changes that are made will be reported here.

Please note, this section only discusses changes we deem material.

# Item 3: Table of Contents

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# Item 4: Advisory Business

## Description of Advisory Firm

Stone Steps Financial, LLC is registered as an Investment Adviser with the State of California and notice-filed in Texas. We were founded in February of 2015. Scott Frank is the principal owner of SSF. As of 12/31/2023, SSF reports \$87,558,692 in Discretionary Assets Under Management.

The firm provides fee-only financial planning and investment management services. Depending upon each client's unique circumstances or specific request, these services may be broad-based or focused on particular areas of interest or need. The firm holds itself to a fiduciary standard, which means Stone Steps Financial and its associates will act in the utmost good faith and performing in a manner believed to be in the best interest of its clients.

Stone Steps Financial is a fee-only financial planning and investment advisory firm. The firm does not sell annuities, insurance, stocks, bonds, mutual funds, limited partnerships, or other commissioned products. The firm is not affiliated with entities that sell financial products or securities. No commissions in any form are accepted. No finder's fees are accepted.

## Types of Advisory Services

### **Financial Life Management – Comprehensive Financial Planning & Investment Management**

SSF provides comprehensive financial planning & investment management for a flat annual fee. Clients will have regularly scheduled meetings throughout the term of the engagement, depending on their individual situation. In addition to scheduled meetings, additional face-to-face, e-mail and/or phone consultations are included at no additional charge.

SSF's services in these engagements may include, but are not limited to, the following primary areas:

- Financial & Life Goals
- Retirement Planning
- Investments
- Insurance
- Estate Planning
- Tax Planning

The following are additional topics that may be discussed:

- Goal Creation & Prioritization
- Emergency Savings
- Income Planning
- Investment Advisory & Management
  - Retirement Income Planning
  - Employee Benefit Maximization
  - Insurance Review & Planning
  - Small Business Advisory Services
  - Big Purchase Planning
  - Stock Option Planning
- Expense Management
- Debt Management
- Portfolio Review & Analysis
- Education Funding
- Executive Compensation Planning
- Enhanced Tax Strategies
- Wealth Transfer Planning
- "Windfall" or Inheritance Planning
- Family Education
- Social Security Maximization

SSF provides investment management services and is provided discretionary authority by the client in these engagements. SSF is given the authority to conduct trades in a client's account and give instructions to the account's custodian, without prior consent of the client. At no time will SSF accept or maintain custody of client's funds or securities, except for the authorized deduction of SSF's fee, as explained in more detail in Item 5 of this Brochure.

### **Investment Management Services**

We are in the business of managing individually tailored investment portfolios. Our firm provides continuous advice to a client regarding the investment of client funds based on the individual needs of the client. Through personal discussions in which goals and objectives based on a client's particular circumstances are established, we develop a client's personal investment policy or an investment plan with an asset allocation target and create and manage a portfolio based on that policy and allocation target. During our data-gathering process, we determine the client's individual objectives, time horizons, risk tolerance, and liquidity needs. We may also review and discuss a client's prior investment history, as well as family composition and background.

Account supervision is guided by the stated objectives of the client (i.e., maximum capital appreciation, growth, income, or growth and income), as well as tax considerations. Clients may impose reasonable restrictions on investing in certain securities, types of securities, or industry sectors. Fees pertaining to this service are outlined in Item 5 of this brochure.

### **Financial Planning**

Financial planning is a comprehensive evaluation of a client's current and future financial state by using currently known variables to predict future cash flows, asset values and withdrawal plans. The key defining aspect of financial planning is that through the financial planning process, all questions, information and analysis will be considered as they impact and are impacted by the entire financial and life situation of the client. Clients purchasing this service will receive a written or an electronic report, providing the client with a detailed financial plan designed to achieve his or her stated financial goals and objectives.

In general, the financial plan will address any or all of the following areas of concern. The client and advisor will work together to select the specific areas to cover. These areas may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Business Planning:** We provide consulting services for clients who currently operate their own business, are considering starting a business, or are planning for an exit from their current business. Under this type of engagement, we work with you to assess your current situation, identify your objectives, and develop a plan aimed at achieving your goals.
- **Cash Flow and Debt Management:** We will conduct a review of your income and expenses to determine your current surplus or deficit along with advice on prioritizing how any surplus should be used or how to reduce expenses if they exceed your income. Advice may also be provided on which debts to pay off first based on factors such as the interest rate of the debt and any income tax ramifications. We may also recommend what we believe to be an appropriate cash reserve that should be considered for emergencies and other financial goals, along with a review of accounts (such as money market funds) for such reserves, plus strategies to save desired amounts.
- **College Savings:** Includes projecting the amount that will be needed to achieve college or other post-secondary education funding goals, along with advice on ways for you to save the desired amount. Recommendations as to savings strategies are included, and, if needed, we will review your financial

picture as it relates to eligibility for financial aid or the best way to contribute to grandchildren (if appropriate).

- **Employee Benefits Optimization:** We will provide review and analysis as to whether you, as an employee, are taking the maximum advantage possible of your employee benefits. If you are a business owner, we will consider and/or recommend the various benefit programs that can be structured to meet both business and personal retirement goals.
- **Estate Planning:** This usually includes an analysis of your exposure to estate taxes and your current estate plan, which may include whether you have a will, powers of attorney, trusts and other related documents. Our advice also typically includes ways for you to minimize or avoid future estate taxes by implementing appropriate estate planning strategies such as the use of applicable trusts.

We always recommend that you consult with a qualified attorney when you initiate, update, or complete estate planning activities. We may provide you with contact information for attorneys who specialize in estate planning when you wish to hire an attorney for such purposes. From time-to-time, we will participate in meetings or phone calls between you and your attorney with your approval or request.

- **Financial Goals:** We will help clients identify financial goals and develop a plan to reach them. We will identify what you plan to accomplish, what resources you will need to make it happen, how much time you will need to reach the goal, and how much you should budget for your goal.
- **Insurance:** Review of existing policies to ensure proper coverage for life, health, disability, long-term care, liability, home and automobile.
- **Investment Analysis:** This may involve developing an asset allocation strategy to meet clients' financial goals and risk tolerance, providing information on investment vehicles and strategies, reviewing employee stock options, as well as assisting you in establishing your own investment account at a selected broker/dealer or custodian. The strategies and types of investments we may recommend are further discussed in Item 8 of this brochure.
- **Retirement Planning:** Our retirement planning services typically include projections of your likelihood of achieving your financial goals, typically focusing on financial independence as the primary objective. For situations where projections show less than the desired results, we may make recommendations, including those that may impact the original projections by adjusting certain variables (i.e., working longer, saving more, spending less, taking more risk with investments).

If you are near retirement or already retired, advice may be given on appropriate distribution strategies to minimize the likelihood of running out of money or having to adversely alter spending during your retirement years.

- **Risk Management:** A risk management review includes an analysis of your exposure to major risks that could have a significant adverse impact on your financial picture, such as premature death, disability, property and casualty losses, or the need for long-term care planning. Advice may be provided on ways to minimize such risks and about weighing the costs of purchasing insurance versus the benefits of doing so and, likewise, the potential cost of not purchasing insurance ("self-insuring").

- **Tax Planning Strategies:** Advice may include ways to minimize current and future income taxes as a part of your overall financial planning picture. For example, we may make recommendations on which type of account(s) or specific investments should be owned based in part on their “tax efficiency,” with consideration that there is always a possibility of future changes to federal, state or local tax laws and rates that may impact your situation.

We recommend that you consult with a qualified tax professional before initiating any tax planning strategy, and we may provide you with contact information for accountants or attorneys who specialize in this area if you wish to hire someone for such purposes. We will participate in meetings or phone calls between you and your tax professional with your approval.

## **Retirement Plan Services**

SSF offers consulting and advisory services for employer-sponsored retirement plans that are designed to assist plan sponsors of employee benefit plans (“Sponsor(s)”). SSF may also assist Sponsors with enrollment and/or providing investment education to plan participants and beneficiaries. A fee may be charged for these services as described in this Form ADV Part 2A and the Retirement Plan Consulting Agreement.

## **Client Tailored Services and Client Imposed Restrictions**

We offer the same suite of services to all of our clients. However, specific client financial plans and their implementation are dependent upon the client Investment Policy Statement which outlines each client’s current situation (income, tax levels, and risk tolerance levels) and is used to construct a client specific plan to aid in the selection of a portfolio that matches restrictions, needs, and targets.

## **Wrap Fee Programs**

We do not participate in wrap fee programs.

## **CCR Section 260.235.2 Disclosure**

For clients who receive our Financial Planning services, we must state when a conflict exists between the interests of our firm and the interests of our client. The client is under no obligation to act upon our recommendation. If the client elects to act on any of the recommendations, the client is under no obligation to affect the transaction through our firm.

# **Item 5: Fees and Compensation**

Please note, unless a client has received the firm’s disclosure brochure at least 48 hours prior to signing the investment advisory contract, the investment advisory contract may be terminated by the client within five (5) business days of signing the contract without incurring any advisory fees. How we are paid depends on the type of advisory service we are performing. Please review the fee and compensation information below.

## **Financial Life Management – Comprehensive Financial Planning & Investment Management**

Financial Life Management includes ongoing financial planning and investment management. The fee for Financial Life Management is an ongoing annual fee that may be paid monthly or quarterly, in advance. Clients who engage in investment management and comprehensive planning services may have their AUM fees applied to their annual Financial Life Management fee. The amount of the annual Financial Life Management fee will be reviewed and adjusted at least every 2 years. The fee may be negotiable in certain cases. The fee

may be paid either by check, through an unaffiliated payment processing service, or debited from client accounts. This service may be terminated with notice. Upon termination of any account, the fee will be prorated and any unearned fee will be refunded to the client. The annual fee is as follows:

<b>Assets Under Management</b>	<b>Financial Life Management</b>	<b>Investment Management Fee</b>
<b>First \$1,000,000</b>	<b>\$7,500 - \$10,000/year based on complexity</b>	<b>Included</b>
<b>\$1,000,000 +</b>	<b>\$10,000 + / year based on complexity</b>	<b>Included</b>

## **Investment Management Services**

Our standard advisory fee is based on the market value of the assets under management and is calculated as follows:

<b>Account Value</b>	<b>Annual Advisory Fee</b>
<b>First \$3,000,000</b>	1.00%
<b>Next \$2,000,000</b>	0.75%
<b>Next \$10,000,000</b>	0.50%
<b>Amounts greater than \$15,000,000</b>	0.25%

The annual fees are negotiable and are pro-rated and paid in advance on a quarterly basis. The advisory fee is a blended fee and is calculated by assessing the percentage rates using the predefined levels of assets as shown in the above chart, resulting in a combined weighted fee. For example, an account valued at \$4,000,000 would pay an effective fee of 0.9375% with the annual fee of \$37,500.00. The quarterly fee is determined by the following calculation:  $((\$3,000,000 \times 1.0\%) + (\$1,000,000 \times 0.75\%)) \div 4 = \$9,375.00$ . No increase in the annual fee shall be effective without agreement from the client by signing a new agreement or amendment to their current advisory agreement.

Advisory fees are directly debited from client accounts; however, the client may pay by check with the approval of SSF. Accounts initiated or terminated during a calendar quarter will be charged a pro-rated fee based on the amount of time remaining in the billing period. An account may be terminated with written notice. Upon termination of the account, any unearned fee will be refunded to the client.

## **Financial Planning Hourly Fee**

On occasion, Financial Planning is also offered at an hourly rate of \$250.00. The fee may be negotiable in certain cases and is due at the commencement of the engagement. The fee may be paid either by check or through an unaffiliated payment processing service. This service may be terminated with notice before the financial plan is delivered. Upon termination of any account, the fee will be prorated and any unearned fee will be refunded to the client.

## **Retirement Plan Services**

SSF will be compensated for retirement plan services according to the value of plan assets based on the following fee schedule.



Plan Assets	Annual Plan Consulting Fee
\$0 - \$1,000,000	0.75%
Next \$4,000,000	0.50%
Next \$5,000,000	0.40%
Next \$10,000,000	0.30%
\$20,000,001 Plus	0.20%

Stone Steps may charge a minimum fee of \$500 per year. The annual fees are negotiable and are pro-rated and paid in arrears on a quarterly basis. The retirement plan consulting fee is a blended fee and is calculated by assessing the percentage rates using the predefined levels of assets as shown in the above chart, resulting in a combined weighted fee. For example, an account valued at \$8,000,000 would pay an effective fee of 0.49% with the annual fee of \$39,500.00. The quarterly fee is determined by the following calculation:  $((\$1,000,000 \times 0.75\%) + (\$4,000,000 \times 0.50\%) + (\$3,000,000 \times 0.40\%)) \div 4 = \$9,875.00$ . No increase in the annual fee shall be effective without agreement from the client by signing a new agreement or amendment to their current advisory agreement.

Plan consulting fees are directly debited from client accounts by the Third Party Administrator, however the client may pay by check with the approval of SSF. Accounts initiated or terminated during a calendar quarter will be charged a pro-rated fee based on the amount of time remaining in the billing period. An account may be terminated with written notice. Upon termination of the account, any unearned fee will be refunded to the client.

### Other Types of Fees and Expenses

Our fees are exclusive of brokerage commissions, transaction fees, and other related costs and expenses which may be incurred by the client. Clients may incur certain charges imposed by custodians, brokers, and other third parties such as custodial fees, deferred sales charges, odd-lot differentials, transfer taxes, wire transfer and electronic fund fees, and other fees and taxes on brokerage accounts and securities transactions. Mutual fund and exchange traded funds also charge internal management fees, which are disclosed in a fund's prospectus. Such charges, fees and commissions are exclusive of and in addition to our fee, and we shall not receive any portion of these commissions, fees, and costs.

Item 12 further describes the factors that we consider in selecting or recommending broker-dealers for client's transactions and determining the reasonableness of their compensation (e.g., commissions).

We do not accept compensation for the sale of securities or other investment products including asset-based sales charges or service fees from the sale of mutual funds.

### CCR Section 260.238(j) Disclosure

Please note, lower fees for comparable services may be available from other sources.

## Item 6: Performance-Based Fees and Side-By-Side Management

We do not offer performance-based fees.

## Item 7: Types of Clients

We provide financial planning and portfolio management services to individuals and high net-worth individuals. We do not have a minimum account size requirement.

## Item 8: Methods of Analysis, Investment Strategies and Risk of Loss

### Passive Investment Management

We typically employ passive investment management. Passive investing involves building portfolios that are comprised of various distinct asset classes. The asset classes are weighted in a manner to achieve a desired relationship between correlation, risk and return. Funds that passively capture the returns of the desired asset classes are placed in the portfolio. The funds that are used to build passive portfolios are typically index mutual funds or exchange traded funds.

Passive investment management is characterized by low portfolio expenses (i.e. the funds inside the portfolio have low internal costs), minimal trading costs (due to infrequent trading activity), and relative tax efficiency (because the funds inside the portfolio are tax efficient and turnover inside the portfolio is minimal).

In contrast, active management involves a single manager or managers who employ some method, strategy or technique to construct a portfolio that is intended to generate returns that are greater than the broader market or a designated benchmark. Academic research indicates most active managers underperform the market.

### Material Risks Involved

**All investing strategies we offer involve risk and may result in a loss of your original investment which you should be prepared to bear.** Many of these risks apply equally to stocks, bonds, commodities and any other investment or security. Material risks associated with our investment strategies are listed below.

**Market Risk:** Market risk involves the possibility that an investment's current market value will fall because of a general market decline, reducing the value of the investment regardless of the operational success of the issuer's operations or its financial condition.

**Strategy Risk:** The Adviser's investment strategies and/or investment techniques may not work as intended.

**Small and Medium Cap Company Risk:** Securities of companies with small and medium market capitalizations are often more volatile and less liquid than investments in larger companies. Small and medium cap companies may face a greater risk of business failure, which could increase the volatility of the client's portfolio.

**Turnover Risk:** At times, the strategy may have a portfolio turnover rate that is higher than other strategies. A high portfolio turnover would result in correspondingly greater brokerage commission expenses and may result in the distribution of additional capital gains for tax purposes. These factors may negatively affect the account's performance.

**Limited markets:** Certain securities may be less liquid (harder to sell or buy) and their prices may at times be more volatile than at other times. Under certain market conditions we may be unable to sell or liquidate investments at prices we consider reasonable or favorable, or find buyers at any price.

**Concentration Risk:** Certain investment strategies focus on particular asset-classes, industries, sectors or types of investment. From time to time these strategies may be subject to greater risks of adverse developments in such areas of focus than a strategy that is more broadly diversified across a wider variety of investments.

**Interest Rate Risk:** Bond (fixed income) prices generally fall when interest rates rise, and the value may fall below par value or the principal investment. The opposite is also generally true: bond prices generally rise when interest rates fall. In general, fixed income securities with longer maturities are more sensitive to these price changes. Most other investments are also sensitive to the level and direction of interest rates.

**Legal or Legislative Risk:** Legislative changes or Court rulings may impact the value of investments, or the securities' claim on the issuer's assets and finances.

**Inflation:** Inflation may erode the buying-power of your investment portfolio, even if the dollar value of your investments remains the same.

## Risks Associated with Securities

Apart from the general risks outlined above which apply to all types of investments, specific securities may have other risks.

**Commercial Paper** is, in most cases, an unsecured promissory note that is issued with a maturity of 270 days or less. Being unsecured the risk to the investor is that the issuer may default.

**Common stocks** may go up and down in price quite dramatically, and in the event of an issuer's bankruptcy or restructuring could lose all value. A slower-growth or recessionary economic environment could have an adverse effect on the price of all stocks.

**Corporate Bonds** are debt securities to borrow money. Generally, issuers pay investors periodic interest and repay the amount borrowed either periodically during the life of the security and/or at maturity. Alternatively, investors can purchase other debt securities, such as zero coupon bonds, which do not pay current interest, but rather are priced at a discount from their face values and their values accrete over time to face value at maturity. The market prices of debt securities fluctuate depending on such factors as interest rates, credit quality, and maturity. In general, market prices of debt securities decline when interest rates rise and increase when interest rates fall. The longer the time to a bond's maturity, the greater its interest rate risk.

**Bank Obligations** including bonds and certificates of deposit may be vulnerable to setbacks or panics in the banking industry. Banks and other financial institutions are greatly affected by interest rates and may be adversely affected by downturns in the U.S. and foreign economies or changes in banking regulations.

**Municipal Bonds** are debt obligations generally issued to obtain funds for various public purposes, including the construction of public facilities. Municipal bonds pay a lower rate of return than most other types of bonds. However, because of a municipal bond's tax-favored status, investors should compare the relative after-tax return to the after-tax return of other bonds, depending on the investor's tax bracket. Investing in municipal bonds carries the same general risks as investing in bonds in general. Those risks include interest rate risk, reinvestment risk, inflation risk, market risk, call or redemption risk, credit risk, and liquidity and valuation risk.

**Options and other derivatives** carry many unique risks, including time-sensitivity, and can result in the complete loss of principal. While covered call writing does provide a partial hedge to the stock against which the call is written, the hedge is limited to the amount of cash flow received when writing the option. When selling covered calls, there is a risk the underlying position may be called away at a price lower than the current market price.

**Exchange Traded Funds** prices may vary significantly from the Net Asset Value due to market conditions. Certain Exchange Traded Funds may not track underlying benchmarks as expected.

**Investment Companies Risk.** When a client invests in open end mutual funds or ETFs, the client indirectly bears its proportionate share of any fees and expenses payable directly by those funds. Therefore, the client will incur higher expenses, many of which may be duplicative. In addition, the client's overall portfolio may be affected by losses of an underlying fund and the level of risk arising from the investment practices of an underlying fund (such as the use of derivatives). ETFs are also subject to the following risks: (i) an ETF's shares may trade at a market price that is above or below their net asset value; (ii) the ETF may employ an investment strategy that utilizes high leverage ratios; or (iii) trading of an ETF's shares may be halted if the listing exchange's officials deem such action appropriate, the shares are de-listed from the exchange, or the activation of market-wide "circuit breakers" (which are tied to large decreases in stock prices) halts stock trading generally. The Adviser has no control over the risks taken by the underlying funds in which clients invest.

## Item 9: Disciplinary Information

Registered investment advisers are required to disclose all material facts regarding any legal or disciplinary events that would be material to your evaluation of SSF or the integrity of our management. We have no information applicable to this Item.

## Item 10: Other Financial Industry Activities and Affiliations

Scott Frank currently does not participate in other financial industry activities and is not affiliated with other financial firms.

### Recommendations or Selections of Other Investment Advisers

As referenced in Item 4 of this brochure, SSF recommends clients to sub-advisors for investment management and other advisory services for their accounts. In the event that we recommend a sub-advisor, please note that we do not share in their advisory fee. Our fee is separate and in addition to their compensation and will be described to you prior to engagement. However, in order to facilitate fee payments, SSF will collect both its fees and those of its sub-advisors, subsequently remitting sub-advisors' fees to them. You are not obligated, contractually or otherwise, to use the services of any sub-advisor we recommend. Additionally, SSF will only recommend a sub-advisor who is properly licensed or registered as an investment adviser.

### Disclosure of Material Conflicts

All material conflicts of interest under CCR Section 260.238(k) are disclosed regarding SSF, its representatives or any of its employees, which could be reasonably expected to impair the rendering of unbiased and objective advice.

# Item 11: Code of Ethics, Participation or Interest in Client Transactions and Personal Trading

As a fiduciary, our firm and its associates have a duty of utmost good faith to act solely in the best interests of each client. Our clients entrust us with their funds and personal information, which in turn places a high standard on our conduct and integrity. Our fiduciary duty is a core aspect of our Code of Ethics and represents the expected basis of all of our dealings. The firm also adheres to the Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility adopted by the CFP® Board of Standards Inc., and accepts the obligation not only to comply with the mandates and requirements of all applicable laws and regulations but also to take responsibility to act in an ethical and professionally responsible manner in all professional services and activities.

This code does not attempt to identify all possible conflicts of interest, and literal compliance with each of its specific provisions will not shield associated persons from liability for personal trading or other conduct that violates a fiduciary duty to advisory clients. A summary of the Code of Ethics' Principles is outlined below.

- Integrity - Associated persons shall offer and provide professional services with integrity.
- Objectivity - Associated persons shall be objective in providing professional services to clients.
- Competence - Associated persons shall provide services to clients competently and maintain the necessary knowledge and skill to continue to do so in those areas in which they are engaged.
- Fairness - Associated persons shall perform professional services in a manner that is fair and reasonable to clients, principals, partners, and employers, and shall disclose conflict(s) of interest in providing such services.
- Confidentiality - Associated persons shall not disclose confidential client information without the specific consent of the client unless in response to proper legal process, or as required by law.
- Professionalism - Associated persons' conduct in all matter shall reflect credit of the profession.
- Diligence - Associated persons shall act diligently in providing professional services.

We will, upon request, promptly provide a complete code of ethics.

A recommendation made to one client may be different in nature or in timing from a recommendation made to a different client. Clients often have different objectives and risk tolerances. At no time, however, will our firm or any related party receive preferential treatment over our clients.

In an effort to reduce or eliminate certain conflicts of interest involving the firm or personal trading, our policy may require that we restrict or prohibit associates' transactions in specific securities transactions. Any exceptions or trading pre-clearance must be approved by our Chief Compliance Officer in advance of the transaction in an account, and we maintain the required personal securities transaction records per regulation.

Additionally, SSF requires adherence to its Insider Trading Policy, and the CFA Institute's Asset Manager Code of Professional Conduct and Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Conduct.

## **Investment Advice Relating to Retirement Accounts**

When we provide investment advice to you regarding your retirement plan account or individual retirement account, we are fiduciaries within the meaning of Title I of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act and/or the Internal Revenue Code, as applicable, which are laws governing retirement accounts. The way we make money creates some conflicts with your interests, so we operate under a special rule that requires us to act in your best interest and not put our interest ahead of yours. Under this special rule's provisions, we must:

- Meet a professional standard of care when making investment recommendations (give prudent advice);
- Never put our financial interests ahead of yours when making recommendations (give loyal advice);
- Avoid misleading statements about conflicts of interest, fees, and investments;
- Follow policies and procedures designed to ensure that we give advice that is in your best interest;
- Charge no more than is reasonable for our services; and
- Give you basic information about conflicts of interest.

In addition, and as required by this rule, we provide information regarding the services that we provide to you, and any material conflicts of interest, in this brochure and in your client agreement.

## Item 12: Brokerage Practices

### Factors Used to Select Custodians and/or Broker-Dealers

Stone Steps Financial, LLC does not have any affiliation with Broker-Dealers. We recommend the brokerage and custodial services of Charles Schwab & Co.

We seek to recommend a custodian/broker that will hold your assets and execute transactions on terms that are, overall, the most favorable compared to other available providers and their services. We consider various factors, including:

- Capability to buy and sell securities for your account itself or to facilitate such services.
- The likelihood that your trades will be executed.
- Availability of investment research and tools.
- Overall quality of services.
- Competitiveness of price.
- Reputation, financial strength, and stability.
- Existing relationship with our firm and our other clients.

#### 1. Research and Other Soft-Dollar Benefits

We currently do not receive soft dollar benefits.

#### 2. Brokerage for Client Referrals

We receive no referrals from a broker-dealer or third party in exchange for using that broker-dealer or third party.

#### 3. Clients Directing Which Broker/Dealer/Custodian to Use

We do recommend a specific custodian for clients to use, however, clients may custody their assets at a custodian of their choice. Clients may also direct us to use a specific broker-dealer to execute transactions. By allowing clients to choose a specific custodian, we may be unable to achieve most favorable execution of client transaction, and this may cost clients' money over using a lower-cost custodian.

### Aggregating (Block) Trading for Multiple Client Accounts

Generally, we combine multiple orders for shares of the same securities purchased for advisory accounts we manage (this practice is commonly referred to as "block trading"). We will then distribute a portion of the shares to participating accounts in a fair and equitable manner. The distribution of the shares purchased is

typically proportionate to the size of the account, but it is not based on account performance or the amount or structure of management fees. Subject to our discretion, regarding particular circumstances and market conditions, when we combine orders, each participating account pays an average price per share for all transactions and pays a proportionate share of all transaction costs. Accounts owned by our firm or persons associated with our firm may participate in block trading with your accounts; however, they will not be given preferential treatment.

## Item 13: Review of Accounts

Client accounts with the Investment Management Service will be reviewed regularly on a quarterly basis by Scott Frank, Managing Member and CCO. During the regular review the account's performance is compared against like-managed accounts to identify any unacceptable performance deviation. Additionally, reasonable client imposed restrictions will be reviewed to confirm that they are being enforced. Events that may trigger a special review would be unusual performance, addition or deletions of client imposed restrictions, excessive draw-down, volatility in performance, or buy and sell decisions from the firm or per client's needs.

Clients will receive trade confirmations from the broker(s) for each transaction in their accounts as well as monthly or quarterly statements and annual tax reporting statements from their custodian showing all activity in the accounts, such as receipt of dividends and interest.

SSF will provide written reports to Investment Management clients on a quarterly basis that will include account holdings and performance. We urge clients to compare these reports against the account statements they receive from their custodian.

## Item 14: Client Referrals and Other Compensation

We do not receive any compensation from any third party in connection with providing investment advice to you nor do we compensate any individual or firm for client referrals.

Refer to the *Brokerage Practices* section above for disclosures on research and other benefits we may receive resulting from our relationship with your account custodian.

## Item 15: Custody

SSF does not accept custody of client funds. Clients should receive at least quarterly statements from the broker dealer, bank or other qualified custodian that holds and maintains client's investment assets. We urge you to carefully review such statements and compare such official custodial records to the account statements or reports that we may provide to you. Our statements or reports may vary from custodial statements based on accounting procedures, reporting dates, or valuation methodologies of certain securities.

For client account in which SSF directly debits their advisory fee:

- I. SSF will send a copy of its invoice to the custodian at the same time that it sends the client a copy.
- II. The custodian will send at least quarterly statements to the client showing all disbursements for the account, including the amount of the advisory fee.
- III. The client will provide written authorization to SSF, permitting them to be paid directly for their accounts held by the custodian.

## Item 16: Investment Discretion

For those client accounts where we provide investment management services, we maintain discretion over client accounts with respect to securities to be bought and sold and the amount of securities to be bought and sold. Investment discretion is explained to clients in detail when an advisory relationship has commenced. At the start of the advisory relationship, the client will execute a Limited Power of Attorney which will grant our firm discretion over the account. Additionally, the discretionary relationship will be outlined in the advisory contract and signed by the client.

## Item 17: Voting Client Securities

We do not vote Client proxies. Therefore, Clients maintain exclusive responsibility for: (1) voting proxies, and (2) acting on corporate actions pertaining to the Client's investment assets. The Client shall instruct the Client's qualified custodian to forward to the Client copies of all proxies and shareholder communications relating to the Client's investment assets. If the client would like our opinion on a particular proxy vote, they may contact us at the number listed on the cover of this brochure.

In most cases, you will receive proxy materials directly from the account custodian. However, in the event we were to receive any written or electronic proxy materials, we would forward them directly to you by mail, unless you have authorized our firm to contact you by electronic mail, in which case, we would forward you any electronic solicitation to vote proxies.

## Item 18: Financial Information

Registered investment advisers are required in this Item to provide you with certain financial information or disclosures about our financial condition. We have no financial commitment that impairs our ability to meet contractual and fiduciary commitments to clients, and we have not been the subject of a bankruptcy proceeding.

We do not have custody of client funds or securities or require or solicit prepayment of more than \$500 in fees per client six months in advance.



# Item 19: Requirements for State-Registered Advisers

## **Educational Background and Business Experience of Principal Officer**

Refer to the Part(s) 2B for background information about our principal executive officers, management personnel and those giving advice on behalf of our firm.

## **Other Business Activities**

Our firm is not actively engaged in any business other than giving investment advice that is not already disclosed above.

## **Performance Based Fees**

SSF is not compensated by performance-based fees.

## **Material Disciplinary Disclosures**

No management person at Stone Steps Financial, LLC has ever been involved in an arbitration claim of any kind or been found liable in a civil, self-regulatory organization, or administrative proceeding.

## **Material Relationships That Management Persons Have With Issuers of Securities**

Neither our firm, nor any of our management persons have a material relationship or arrangement with any issuer of securities.