

# Making Caregiving Work: Solutions to Help Employees Manage Eldercare Responsibilities

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The federal Administration on Aging projects that by 2040, the number of Americans 65 years and older will nearly double to 98 million, representing 21.7% of the U.S. population. As the American population and workforce age, an increasing number of workers are finding themselves providing unpaid care for family members. As a result, policymakers and employers must address the challenges faced by employee caregivers and work to create caregiver-friendly workplaces. Our analysis provides: an in-depth examination of the circumstances of family caregivers; a reflection on current policy options; and policy recommendations for ensuring economic security of working caregivers.

## WHO ARE CAREGIVERS AND HOW ARE THEY AFFECTED BY FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES?

Caregivers come from an array of diverse backgrounds and circumstances, though many will experience similar challenges.

- **16.1% of Americans are providing unpaid care to someone over the age of 65.** The Bureau of Labor Statistics found these providers were most likely to be between the ages of 45 and 64. Of the 16.1%, 57% of caregivers were women.<sup>1</sup>
- **Caregiving may put a severe strain on employees' physical and emotional well-being.** Caregiving has been linked to several adverse health effects. In 2015, one in five caregivers reported experiencing a high level of physical strain as a result of caregiving.<sup>2</sup> A 2005 survey from The Commonwealth Fund found 45% of caregivers reporting poor health, having one or more chronic conditions, or a disability.<sup>3</sup> Caregivers tend to have increased blood pressure,

"The typical caregiver is a 49-year-old female, currently caring for a 69-year-old female relative who needs care because of a long-term physical condition."

*-Caregiving in the U.S. 2015.<sup>2</sup>*

difficulty sleeping, increased insulin levels, and altered endocrine function.<sup>4</sup> This type of physical strain is disproportionately affecting women. A 2002 study published by the American Journal of Public Health showed that women who care for an ill spouse for more than thirty-six hours are six times more likely to suffer from depressive or anxious symptoms. Women who care for an ill parent are twice as likely to experience these symptoms.<sup>5</sup>

- **Taking time off for caregiving comes at a cost.** Roughly half of caregivers report taking time off from work to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities. Many take leaves of absence or reduce work hours. In 2015, only 56% of caregivers report working full-time. Caregivers may even opt to leave the workforce or retire early, risking economic instability.<sup>6</sup> The average male caregiver over 50 who leaves the workforce to care for a parent loses \$303,880 in wages, Social Security, or private pension. The average woman over 50 will lose even more—\$324,000.<sup>7</sup>

WHAT RESOURCES ARE CURRENTLY AVAILABLE TO CAREGIVERS? Recent efforts have been made to support caregivers in the workplace. While these are important first steps, many of these policies must be improved upon and strengthened.

- **Caregivers may be able to take job-protected family leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).** The FMLA allows eligible employees to take 12 workweeks in a 12-month period of unpaid, job-protected leave in order to care for a newborn or newly adopted child, care for a relative with a serious medical condition, or to recover from a health condition that impairs job performance. The FMLA applies to private-sector employers with 50 or more employees, public agencies, and public or private elementary or secondary schools and to employees who have worked for their covered employers for at least 12 months and 1250 hours in those months and who work at a location that has 50 employees within a 75-mile radius.<sup>8</sup>
- **FMLA covers many, but also leaves many out.** While FMLA's job protection is helpful, the leave is unpaid, and impractical for the many workers who depend on income. The FMLA also excludes Americans employed at small businesses with under 50 employees and those who have been working for an employer for less than a year.<sup>9</sup> For caregivers, FMLA's language can be insufficient. "Relative" as defined by FMLA does not include a grandparent, parent-in-law, adult child or sibling, and the "serious medical condition" stipulation doesn't take into account the day-to-day responsibilities such as taking relatives to doctors' appointments.<sup>10</sup>
- **Workplace flexibility is a smart solution, but is still inaccessible for many and often stigmatized.** Flexibility initiatives are great for accommodating family caregivers, but a survey from the Sloan Center on Aging & Work showed that only 31% of employers felt they had established strong workplace flexibility options for their employees.<sup>11</sup> Even in workplaces that do have established options, there may be stigma associated with their use. The same study found that 40.6% of respondents thought there might be negative career consequences associated with using flexible work options.<sup>12</sup>

**DISCUSSION & REFLECTION:** HOW CAN POLICYMAKERS AND BUSINESSES SUPPORT WORKING CAREGIVERS? Through a roundtable discussion with advocacy organizations, care managers and human resource managers, we were able to identify best practices and policy solutions that may go a long way to ensure that caregivers are supported in the workplace.

- **Workplace culture must be understanding of caregivers' needs.** Discussion participants emphasized the importance of a flexible, accommodating and compassionate workplace culture in easing the pressure of caregiving responsibilities. Attendees noted that this understanding should be extended to those with nontraditional family structures. An accommodating culture might be created through frequent workplace training sessions, in-house support groups and visible workplace flexibility or leave policies.
- **Working caregivers need strong paid family and medical leave policies.** For the caregivers who heavily depend on their incomes, FMLA isn't enough. Paid family leave is necessary to ensure caregivers are economically secure and can maintain that security. Private-sector employers—large and small—have begun implementing their own paid leave policies. Participants added that a federal paid leave policy would help to establish consistency for employers with employees across the nation. California, New Jersey and Rhode Island have implemented successful statewide leave policies, and New York is on track to implement a paid leave program by 2021.<sup>13</sup> A survey of California employers found that all employers reported positive outcomes associated with paid leave, and that small businesses in particular reported positive or neutral outcomes in profitability, productivity and employee morale. Paid leave also contributes to higher employee retention rates, reducing costs associated with hiring and training replacement workers.<sup>14</sup>
- **Programs specific to eldercare responsibilities are easy to implement and can be scaled to employers' budgets.** Several human resource managers present at the discussion oversaw benefit programs that

included services specific to eldercare. These programs included referrals to external resources on caregiving, counseling through employee assistance programs and connections to services at local hospitals. While cost of these programs may not be significant for larger employers, some expressed concern that these policies may not be accessible to small business owners. Discussion participants suggested that small business owners could steer employees to external support services and create a workplace culture of compassion and understanding. Participants also suggested comprehensive webinar or video seminars that could be easily screened or distributed to employees in different workplaces.

- **Workplace flexibility options should be more widely available, more utilized and less stigmatized.** Remote work options and alternative schedules provide working caregivers with needed flexibility. Small businesses may be able to implement these policies as well. Smaller employers may opt to provide online shift scheduling in advance or create a transferrable leave system under which employees can ‘donate’ leave to others. Employers must also be made aware of the significant returns that investments in caregiver-friendly policies create. A 2016 study of family caregiver support policies found that for every dollar invested in flexible hours options, businesses can expect a return of between \$1.70 and \$4.34. For every dollar invested in telecommuting, businesses can expect a return of between \$2.46 and \$4.45.<sup>15</sup>

- **Going forward, the technology and healthcare sectors must be involved and engaged in the effort to support working caregivers.** Care managers and caregivers in the discussion were disappointed with the lack of high-tech resources available to support eldercare providers. They highlighted the need for user-friendly websites and apps to locate and review eldercare resources.
- **Outreach efforts are needed to support and educate caregivers.** Care managers participating in the discussion pointed out that caregivers often don’t identify as caregivers. They may simply see themselves as family members helping out around the home. As a result, these caregivers will not seek outside resources or support. Targeted outreach initiatives to help caregivers better understand the options available to them may lead to a wider uptake of historically underutilized workplace eldercare benefits.
- **Further research will help employers, policymakers and advocacy groups better understand caregiver needs.** Wider research on employed caregivers would help to identify possible gaps in policy initiatives.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our discussion with stakeholders was helpful in identifying sensible solutions for the 21st century workforce. As momentum builds around aging advocacy and work-family issues, discussion and action around caregiving must remain at the forefront. ■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Eldercare.” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. October 26, 2015. <http://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/eldercare.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Caregiving in the U.S. 2015. Publication. National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP Public Policy Institute.

<sup>3</sup>Ho, Alice, Sara R. Collins, Karen Davis, and Michelle M. Doty. A Look at Working-Age Caregivers’ Roles, Health Concerns, and Need for Support. Issue brief. The Commonwealth Fund. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Cannuscio, Carolyn C., et al., “Reverberations of Family Illness: A Longitudinal Assessment of Informal Caregiving and Mental Health Status in the Nurses’ Health Study.” *Am J Public Health American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 8 (2002): 1305-311. doi:10.2105/ajph.92.8.1305.

<sup>5</sup> See note 4 above.

<sup>6</sup> See note 2 above.

<sup>7</sup>The MetLife Study of Caregiving Costs to Working Caregivers. Double Jeopardy for Baby Boomers Caring for Their Parents. Publication. Mature Market Institute, MetLife. NY: New York, 2011. 14

<sup>8</sup> US Department of Labor. Wage and Hour Division. Fact

Sheet #28: The Family and Medical Leave Act.

<sup>9</sup> Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (2016)

<sup>10</sup> “The Family and Medical Leave Act” Wage and Hour Division (WHD) - U.S. Department of Labor. Accessed 2016.

<sup>11</sup> “Flex. in US - Private Industry Sectors.” National Workplace Flexibility Initiative. 2009. Accessed 2016. [http://workplaceflexibility.bc.edu/us/us\\_industry](http://workplaceflexibility.bc.edu/us/us_industry).

<sup>12</sup> “Barriers to Flexibility.” National Workplace Flexibility Initiative. 2009. Accessed 2016. <http://workplaceflexibility.bc.edu/Barriers>.

<sup>13</sup> New York State. Office of the Governor. “New York Passes Nation’s Strongest Paid Family Leave Program.” News release, April 19, 2016. <https://www.ny.gov/programs/paid-family-leave-strong-families-strong-ny>.

<sup>14</sup> Appelbaum, Eileen, and Ruth Milkman. *Unfinished Business: Paid Family Leave in California and the Future of U.S. Work-Family Policy*. 2013. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

<sup>15</sup> Determining the Return on Investment: Supportive Policies for Employee Caregivers.