

Caring for the Caregiver in the Workplace

Millions of Americans provide ongoing care for older loved ones or those with chronic health conditions, including [approximately 20 percent of the workforce](#). This number is expected to grow, making caregiving a critical workplace issue. Employees who provide caregiving are more likely to experience stress, absences from work, presenteeism, and health problems. Further, caregiving takes a major toll on employees' work, and they tend to be less productive than their non-caregiving colleagues due to their responsibilities. Since November was National Family Caregivers Month, now is a great time for organizations to consider strategies to support employees who provide caregiving and may need help and resources.

Caregivers in the workplace include all ages, races, and genders. According to a [2020 survey from the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP](#), about 60 percent of caregivers are women, with an average age of 49. The vast majority of caregivers live in urban or suburban areas. The survey also found that caregivers spend an average of 24 hours a week providing care and support for their charge, but that number can be much, much higher. This is in addition to hours spent working, driving back and forth to provide care, caring for other family members, and managing further day-to-day tasks.

Challenges for Employees

For the 53 million Americans (and counting) who currently care for an older, ill or disabled loved one, finding work/life balance can be particularly challenging. The daunting tasks of searching for qualified in-home or nursing care, addressing Medicare issues and handling other concerns while working full-time and perhaps caring for young children can be overwhelming. Research shows working caregivers report higher levels of stress than their non-caregiving colleagues. Specifically, a [survey from the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers](#) found that emotional stress is the biggest challenge among caregivers who are also employed full-time.

Further, research shows caregivers may also be at a higher risk of experiencing their own health issues as a result of the time and energy they expend helping others. For example, research published in [JAMA Internal Medicine](#) found that caregivers are more likely to report facing emotional, physical and financial challenges, in addition to reduced productivity at work. While caregivers in general are at greater risk of developing chronic conditions, a survey from [MetLife and the National Alliance for Caregiving](#) looked specifically at employee caregivers, uncovering that they have a higher incidence of diabetes. These issues are likely due to the fact that working caregivers may find it difficult to make time to take care of themselves, including participating in preventive health screenings.

The Impact on the Workplace

Workplace caregiving issues have widespread effects. Non-caregivers may experience an additional workload when coworkers leave or miss work to manage an emergency or sudden illness. They may also have to pitch in during a prolonged absence. And the stress from an employed caregiver can spread to others. Furthermore, supervisors who lack the skills to effectively manage the caregiving situation can make the problems worse.

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Employees who provide caregiving support are more likely to be distracted at work or take time off to deal with issues stemming from their caregiving responsibilities. At some extremes, caregivers may need to quit work in order to focus full-time on caring for their loved one. Plus, as previously mentioned, caregivers tend to experience higher levels of stress and health issues, leading to increased costs. When considering medical costs, turnover, and lost productivity related to absenteeism and presenteeism, caregiving can have a total price tag to organizations of [up to \\$44 billion per year](#).

How Employers Can Help

Organizations have an opportunity to support employees who provide caregiving for loved ones by offering access to programs and resources that can help make their lives easier. A few ideas to consider include:

- **Transition to a Paid Time Off (PTO) Program** – Grouping all time off into one category (versus vacation, sick days, etc.) gives employees flexibility to take time off when they need it for whatever purpose, including caregiving.
- **Flexible Scheduling and Telecommuting** – Following the pandemic, an increased number of organizations are offering opportunities for employees to adjust their schedule or work from home as needed. For caregivers, this option can alleviate a lot of pressure for those who may need to help their loved ones first thing in the morning or at the end of the day.
- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** – EAPs, typically offered by an organization as part of their employee benefits program, offers personal and family counseling, crisis intervention, bereavement and other assistance, to help employees better balance work and caregiving responsibilities.
- **Referral Services** – Many EAPs provide referrals to adult day centers, in-home care and other services, in addition to [Eldercare Locator](#), a federally funded, toll-free number that connects caregivers with local resources.
- **Health Advocacy** - Offering an expert who can personally address healthcare issues during business hours, such as assisting with complex medical conditions, helping to find doctors, arranging transportation, locating nursing homes, assisting with Medicare, and interacting with insurance and providers, can help employees reduce worry and stay focused on their job.
- **Expanded or Flexible Benefits Option** – Consider allowing employees to add an adult family member to their healthcare plan under the family rate. There are also Dependent Care Assistance Plans (DCAP) that function like an FSA, enabling employees to set aside tax-free funds to help pay for the care of qualifying dependents.
- **Well-Being Program** - Encouraging employees to participate in the company's wellness or well-being program or initiatives can help ensure they take care of themselves, improving their overall well-being in order to better help their loved one.
- **Training and Education** – In order to maximize utilization of these services, offering training across the workforce can help to ensure employees feel comfortable accessing these services. Training can also help to avoid misunderstandings or discrimination between colleagues or managers and employees regarding caregiving responsibilities.

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- **Implement Policies to Protect Caregivers** - It's critical that organizations reinforce and frequently review recommendations from the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC\)](#) to ensure compliance with non-discrimination guidelines.

Employers can support their employees by providing access to services and resources that help take some of the weight off their shoulders, contributing to improved health and productivity as well as reduced costs. By offering workplace support to employees who provide caregiving to loved ones, organizations can make a positive impact, helping them be more effective in both their professional and personal roles.

How Health Advocate Can Help

LVBCH has partnered with Health Advocate to provide special rates and terms for coalition members to offer the Employee Assistance+Work/Life program to their employees. Health Advocate's EAP+Work/Life program provides support for employees as well as managers/supervisors and human resources staff, and specialists can support caregivers by helping to find resources, coordinate services, provide guidance with Medicare and Medicaid, and much more.

To learn more about how Health Advocate can support you and your organization, visit www.HealthAdvocate.com or contact Suzanne Starker at 215-880-6364 or [sstarker@healthadvocate.com](mailto:ssarker@healthadvocate.com).