

Balancing Work and Caregiving: A Guide for Employers¹

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Providing care for older family members has become a way of life for millions of Americans. In Florida, over 4 million people provide care for family members or friends. Many are often faced with balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. In fact, 60% of caregivers are employed. This percentage is expected to continue to grow given the increase in the number of older adults. The “average” caregiver in the United States is a 49-year-old woman who spends nearly 20 hours per week providing unpaid care to her mother for nearly five years while remaining employed.

Caregiving Costs Businesses

U.S. businesses are highly impacted by caregiving. Each year, businesses suffer an estimated \$33 billion loss in productivity due to caregiving. That equals approximately \$2,110 per full-time employed caregiver. Research has shown a link between employed caregivers and their health care costs. Caregivers often use the company’s health care plan more, potentially costing U.S. businesses an additional estimated \$13.4 billion per year.

Employees who find the competing demands of work and caregiving to be too much may have to leave their jobs. They may face serious financial and emotional challenges. AARP estimated that over a lifetime the average caregiver forgoes over \$300,000 in lost income and benefits and may in fact increase their own risk of poverty at older ages. This is especially true for women caregivers.



Figure 1. Millions of Americans must care for older family members, and many of these caregivers face the challenges of balancing home and work responsibilities. Employers need to offer support for these caregivers and encourage employees to ask for help.

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What Can Employers Do?

Providing in-house support and flexible schedules for caregivers may help keep employees on the job longer. This will help reduce the stresses on the employee, his or her co-workers, and you, the employer. Nearly 70% of caregivers report making work accommodations such as arriving late, leaving early, taking time off, cutting back on work hours, changing jobs, or stopping work entirely because of caregiving responsibilities.

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Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

As an employer, you may be required by law to abide by the Family Medical Leave Act. Although this law was written to provide families with secure employment during times of family crisis, employers can sometimes see it as expensive and disruptive, especially when abused.

While some employees take FMLA for the birth or adoption of a child, those who take leave to be full-time caregivers are not leaving for happy times. Most would likely prefer continuing to work as opposed to providing care for a critically ill or dying family member.

Tips Regarding FMLA

- Know your responsibilities as an employer.
- Respect your employees' rights under FMLA.
- Offer solutions such as flexible work hours, telecommuting, or job-sharing when possible.

Develop an In-House Support Program for Caregivers

Human resource departments routinely deal with employee personal issues. They handle such concerns as drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, absenteeism, and financial concerns. Yet many do not provide specific support for caregivers of elderly or disabled family members. Employees may come to you with other problems, but after a closer look, the human resource specialist may learn that the problems are related to caregiving. Is your human resource department ready to help employees with caregiving concerns?

The following five steps provide a simple outline for a program to support family caregivers:

1. Assess employee needs for caregiving support.

Assess employee needs in two ways. First, consider surveying employees to find out how many are currently providing caregiving and their caregiving concerns. Second, screen for caregiving issues when employees are referred or self-refer to human resources. Caregiving often becomes such a routine part of the employee's life that they do not see it as a concern.

2. Identify a key HR staffer to specialize in caregiving resources.

Provide specific training in gerontology and aging issues to HR employees. If your company is large, you may need someone to specialize full-time in caregiving and aging issues. This position can develop strategies that will help employees balance work and caregiving.

3. Develop a caregiving support campaign.

Campaign using your company's established communication tools. Let your employees know that you are aware of the realities of caregiving and have services available to support them. Avoid one-shot informational programs.

4. Provide follow-up to the employees.

Ask HR employees to conduct routine follow-up evaluations throughout the caregiving period and beyond.

5. Assess results of the program.

Assess the results of the program to see what difference it made in the lives of your employees and in your company's productivity. Get suggestions from current employee caregivers to help improve the program for others.

Informal Support Systems for Smaller Businesses and Offices

If you do not have a formal Human Resources department, talk to your employees about caregiving. Keep the focus on communication. Contact your local Extension office to request that an Extension agent provide workshops related to caregiving for your employees.

Final Recommendations

Talk openly with your employees. Let them know that you value them as employees and as people. Tell them that you want to do whatever you can to keep good employees. Let them know about the resources you can offer. In an open and honest discussion, explain what temporary adjustments you can make in the work setting and what adjustments or accommodations you cannot make.

Encourage employees to ask for help. If your company has an HR department that is prepared to deal with such issues, then refer them to HR. On the other hand, if you do not have an HR department, suggest they start by calling 2-1-1 (<http://www.211.org/>). 2-1-1 is an information and referral network developed and sponsored nationally by the United

Way and available in larger cities and counties. Or they can start by calling Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116. Eldercare Locator (<http://www.eldercare.gov/Eldercare.NET/Public/Index.aspx>) will put caregivers in touch with local Area Agency on Aging information and referral specialists. It is a public service provided by the United States Administration on Aging. Information can also be found at the Administration on Aging's website at <http://www.eldercare.gov>.

References

Feinberg, L., Reinhard, S.C., Houser, A., & Choula, R. (2011). Valuing the invaluable: 2011 update. AARP Public Policy Institute. Retrieved July 2012 from <http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/ppi/ltc/i51-caregiving.pdf>

For More Information

This is one of six publications in a series on caregiving and aging. The other publications in this series are:

FCS2257: *Long-Term Care: Places to Call Home* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy869>)

FCS2258: *Contact Organization for Caregivers* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy870>)

FCS2259: *Puzzled by Your Care Receiver's Refusal of Services?* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy871>)

FCS2260: *Balancing Work and Caregiving: Tips for Employees* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy872>)

FCS2262: *Final Wishes: End-of-Life Decisions* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy874>)