

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2024 Edition

Feature

The Challenges of Elder Care -

How employers can help

Caring for one's parents, older relatives or loved ones is an experience most people will have. It is also one for which we receive little to no preparation. As this problem continues to escalate, it has become clear that issues relating to elder care require creative responses by government in terms of legislation, programming and funding. From an employer's point of view, employees need workplace flexibility and other accommodations to ensure that caregivers are supported in their provisions of care. Here is an overview of why this issue matters and what employers can and should do to support their employees who are dealing with the added stress of elder care.

Accept that this issue is not going away

As the population continues to age, hospitals will be forced, as a matter of routine, to discharge patients at a faster rate due to limited capacity. Throw in the fact that inadequate provincial funding is available to community-based health care providers and you've got the makings of a very difficult situation for home care workers and caregivers. As this becomes the new norm, families will need to step up and accept an increasing level of responsibility for their aging relatives. As it stands, we acknowledge maternity leave, paternity leave and childcare programs as important components of employee wellness programs. The growing number of caregivers providing elder care presents an impending crisis for corporate productivity and employee retention if their needs are not acknowledged.

Understand the toll that caregiving takes

As anyone who has dealt with the situation themselves knows all too well, caregiving is a stressful and emotionally draining undertaking. Particularly when family members do not have the necessary training to provide appropriate care for their aging relative, the stress is further compounded and can cause both anxiety and depression. Accepting the reversal of roles can be extremely difficult for both the family and the older person, as it causes them to feel like a burden. In terms of the cost it has for employers, the reality is that workers who care for their aging parents are likely to be less productive, take more time off and arrive to work late on a regular basis. This should be concerning for companies of any size, as lower productivity often equates to lower revenue.

Account for the unpredictable nature of elder care

If the pandemic years have made anything clear, it is that circumstances can change quickly and those who are most adaptable will be in the best overall position. Employees can become caregivers overnight if a parent or loved one falls ill or has a condition that worsens suddenly. A person can go from being fully independent to realizing after one visit that they are needed in the role of caregiver. On top of that, the unpredictable way in which symptoms accelerate or decelerate means that each day presents new challenges and can be extremely taxing on the person providing the care.

Make changes to accommodate elder caregiving

Currently, the legal extent of an employer's duty to accommodate employees who care for older persons remains somewhat unregulated. As the issue becomes increasingly common though, it is in an organization's best interest to address the matter head on by coming up with creative solutions that could apply in the workplace and beyond. One of the easiest and most effective ways that employers can do this is through



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increased job flexibility. Similar to the current provisions for maternity leave, temporary leaves and reassignments should be expanded to help employees address caregiving obligations.

Other forms of support

In addition, employers can consider providing support in the form of care subsidies. This benefit would help employees with the cost of elder care by providing subsidies covering either direct costs or backup care. Support groups are another way employers can assist workers in dealing with their caretaking responsibilities. It can often feel like a lonely and isolating task, therefore creating onsite caregiver support groups will allow employees to speak with fellow coworkers dealing with caregiving and hopefully find some value in communicating.

Discuss the financial burden

The fact that the significant costs associated with elder care have not been formally recognized by current policies is causing many caregivers financial hardship. This can be an uncomfortable subject to broach, but the extra cost of care for an elderly loved one can mount up quickly. In the event that an employee is caring for a loved in their own home, the added cost of utilities, food and medicine can prove substantial. Employers can help people prepare for these situations by offering information sessions or workshops about planning for the added expenses associated with elder care. By knowing they have access to resources and support, employees will have greater peace of mind knowing that they're unlikely to incur debt they will be unable to repay. ■