



Family caregiving is everybody's business

Madison, WIS. - No matter where you live—in a city, the suburbs or on a farm—family members step in to care for their spouses or aging relatives. Caring for someone with medical problems takes time away from family activities and can create stress for the caregiver and other family members. Sometimes family caregiver concerns are invisible in the community. But employers are experiencing first hand that caregiver stress can affect people's performance at work, says Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist in aging.

In 2002, close to half (42 percent) of U.S. workers provided some form of caregiving. In a study of employers, more than two-thirds (70 percent) reported staffing problems related to caregiving increases in the last 10 years. Yet, 40 percent had no plan in place to assist caregivers. This costs U.S. business dearly. Employers lose an estimated \$11 to \$29 billion each year, and attribute this loss to their employees' need to care for family members over age 50.

"When caregiving demands intensify," Brintnall-Peterson says, "caregivers take leaves of absence, reduce their work hours or quit their jobs. These decisions take a financial toll." One study states that a caregiver can lose more than \$650,000 in wages, Social Security benefits and pensions during the course of a family caregiving "career".

A caregiving "career" often starts with running errands and helping shop or manage financial affairs. Some may provide 24-hour care in their home, while others provide long-distance, after work or weekend care. Half of all caregivers provide care for at least eight hours a week and 20 percent provide 40 hours or more per week to those needing long-term care. The rest (30 percent) provide less than eight hours of care per week.

"Aside from a sudden accident or illness, the caregiver career may evolve over time and gradually turn into a major time-consuming responsibility that may be stressful," says Brintnall-Peterson. Nearly one out of every four U.S. households—22.4 million or 23 percent—are involved in caring for a person age 50 or older. By 2007, that number is projected to reach 39 million households, nearly doubling in less than a decade.

Of older adults living in the community and needing long-term care, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) depend upon informal caregivers—family and friends—as their only source of help. Many women have assumed this informal caregiving along with their family roles. Many female caregivers (40 percent) are raising their own children and two-thirds also work outside the home, mostly full time.

Family caregiving is unpaid work and according to conservative estimates, the economic value of this unpaid informal care nationwide is \$257 billion a year. This figure dwarfs annual national spending for formal home health care (\$33 billion) and formal nursing home care (\$83 billion). Wisconsin family caregivers provide almost \$4 billion in caregiving services annually. This ranks Wisconsin 18th in the nation for the dollar value caregivers contribute to the economy.

"In addition to the economic hardship medical care may place on a family, there are other costs to caregivers," Brintnall-Peterson says, "including loss of health and well-being, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and family conflict. Caregiver stress can lead to depression, burnout, self-neglect, excessive use of drugs or alcohol, and even neglect or abuse of the care recipient." In Wisconsin, an estimated 103,000 adults age 65 and older have some form of dementia, most of whom (84 percent) live in the community. Their caregivers are at a much higher risk for depression than other caregivers.

A growing number of households with fewer family members will be expected to share caregiving

as Wisconsin's population ages. Based on census data, Wisconsin can expect the older adult population to increase rapidly—in 2011, the first post-World War II baby-boomers turn 65. By 2030, more than a fifth (21 percent) of Wisconsin's population will be age 65 or older—meaning one in five people will be retirement age. The 1990 U.S. Census found 11 potential caregivers for each person needing care. By 2050, the number of potential caregivers per recipient is projected to drop to four to one. This shortage of family caregivers will have major ramifications for families, communities and health care providers.

Communities can help support family caregivers in many ways. Individuals can volunteer to help through community organizations or their county or tribal aging office, or they may offer companionship and support directly to family caregivers.

Employers can develop plans, policies and procedures for family care, such as flexible use of sick leave, vacation and family leave for eldercare crisis and end-of-life situations. They can provide workshops and forums on caregiving issues and resources; and referrals on medical, legal, financial, communication, counseling or bereavement services. Workplaces can also encourage wellness efforts to ease stress and help caregivers maintain their health.

As Wisconsin's population ages, employers can work to meet the needs of working caregivers, thus creating a win-win situation for employers and employees who are trying to balance their jobs and caring for an older relative.

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