

# IDENTIFYING EMPLOYER SUPPORTS FOR FAMILY CAREGIVERS OF OLDER ADULTS

## KEY POINTS

- Providing care to older or disabled family members while being employed can lead to increased stress and burden, and also negatively affect the caregivers' own personal health and work performance.
- To support these working family caregivers, employers have increasingly implemented caregiver-friendly workplace policies and strategies as part of benefit packages, which can improve employee morale and workplace culture while reducing turnover.
- Some of these policies include paid and unpaid leave, support groups, information, referral and care coordination, employee assistance programs, and subsidized back-up care.

## BACKGROUND

An estimated 22.5 million people, or 61% of the 37 million caregivers of older adults in the United States, are balancing caregiving with employment [1]. These working caregivers provide an average of 64.8 hours of assistance per month [2], including hands-on help with daily activities like feeding and toileting and household activities like medication management. Many arrange and manage support by other unpaid or paid caregivers, as well as help navigate health care. Family caregivers often pay out-of-pocket for expenses that support the care recipient, such as home modifications and medical care [3]. Family caregivers are currently estimated to comprise 20% of the United States labor force [4], a proportion that is expected to grow as the United States population ages and the demand for caregivers increases [5].

In the last few years, competition in the labor market has led employers to expand the number and types of benefits they offer, while at the same time, there has been broad recognition of the impact of childcare and family caregiving on employees and the economy as a whole [6]. Increasingly, recruiting and retaining a talented workforce requires employers to implement supports for family caregivers who are balancing the dual roles of working and caregiving [7,8]. Expanding workplace flexibility policies can improve employee satisfaction for caregivers of older adults and lead to increased employee retention and productivity [9].

Several organizations and state governments have created resources to help employers create caregiver/caregiving-friendly workplaces and caregiver-friendly workplace policies [10,11,12,13,14,15]. Caregiving-friendly workplaces have “benefits, policies and resources designed to help employees more easily manage the balance between work and caregiving responsibilities, and to support them in taking care of their own health care needs -- both physical and mental” [14]. These resources encourage employers to adopt policies that create supportive workplace environments by getting leadership invested in culture change and innovation, while also focusing on inclusion for various types of family caregivers and reducing the stigmas that may arise for working caregivers [12,13]. Many of the resources focused on creating caregiver-friendly workplaces encourage employers to conduct self-assessments and use surveys to better understand the needs of their employed family caregivers [12,16].

A growing number of employer benefits packages include supports for family caregivers such as providing informational resources, stress-reduction programs, support groups, allowing paid sick days to be used to care for a family member, individualized coaching to assist in developing a care plan, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) with caregiver-specific information, and providing employees with subsidized back-up home care. This issue brief describes the array of supports that employers are offering for family caregivers of older adults. We conducted searches of the Internet, grey literature, and peer-reviewed literature to identify the types and components of these supports, and, to the extent possible, understand best practices.

## **SUPPORTS FOR WORKING CAREGIVERS**

We identified six types of support that employers are providing to their employees who are caring for an older family member or friend: paid and unpaid leave, support groups, information, referral and care coordination, EAPs, and subsidized back-up care.

### ***Leave for Family Caregiving***

Most family caregivers cannot afford to take unpaid leave, so paid leave that can be used for caregiving tasks is an important support. The U.S. Department of Labor defines paid family and medical leave as “policies that enable workers to receive wage replacement when they take extended time off from work for qualifying reasons, such as bonding with a new child, recovering from their own serious health condition or caring for a loved one with a serious health condition” [18]. An analysis of leave laws observed that care provision increases when states concurrently implement both paid family leave laws and paid sick leave laws [19].

As of 2022, 77% of the private sector workforce had paid sick leave [20]. Some employers allow employees to use paid sick leave to care for a relative that has a serious health condition, but companies have discretion to determine what is considered a serious health condition and to define the types of relationships would qualify as family under paid sick leave (i.e., “Closely related by blood or marriage” or specifically named relationships such as spouses, domestic partners, parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, or others) [21,22].

Some employers provide paid leave specifically for family caregiving. Seventeen states and the District of Columbia have enacted legislation for mandatory or voluntary employer-provided family leave [18,25]. Some employers will provide caregiver leave that is paid through a combination of employer-sponsored short-term disability benefits and state-mandated paid family leave [24,25].

Finally, employees can take unpaid leave for up to 12 weeks, if they have worked for a covered employer for at least 12 months, on the Family Medical Leave Act. Family caregivers have protected leave when they are caring for a child, spouse, or parent who has a serious health condition, and when caring for a current service member or recent veteran with a serious injury or illness [26]. While this leave is unpaid, it ensures the employee can return to their position [26].

### ***Support Groups and Stress-Reduction Programs***

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are set up by employers and led by employee volunteers to support employees who share a common identity, interest, and/or hobby, with the intention of improving overall employee well-being through opportunities such as relationship-building, creating a sense of belonging in the workplace, leadership training, and cultural awareness [27,28]. The concept of ERGs began as a partnership between the National Black Employee Caucus and Xerox in 1970 [29]. ERGs focusing on family caregivers of older adults can be incorporated into workplace practices as a Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiative, focusing on the diverse experiences of family caregivers [7], as ERGs contribute to company strategies by allowing underrepresented employees to share their knowledge and expertise to improve the overall operations and culture of a workplace [29]. The Caregiving ERG toolkit, developed by the Elevate Team and sponsored by

AARP, provides practical and actionable ideas for employers to understand and support caregivers, develop leadership skills among caregivers, and help employers recruit and retain caregivers in the workforce [8]. For prospective employees that are returning to the workforce after a caregiving absence, formal return-to-work support groups could be beneficial in adjusting to job duty routines and re-establishing social connections with professional colleagues [30]. In addition, informal support groups at work can occur organically through social connections, where relationships with supervisors, coworkers, or clients are able to help the family caregiver feel greater support from people who may be able to relate to their lived experience and offer a safe space for those that do not want to be immersed in an employer-established ERG or who are in a workplace without formal ERGs [31].

Recognizing that employed family caregivers may be at risk for burnout due to high levels of stress, some employers offer stress-reduction and mental health resources specifically tailored to working caregivers. Evidence-based programs such as the Stress-Busting Program for Family Caregivers teach family caregivers about effective stress management techniques and problem-solving skills. This 9-week program focuses on coping strategies, positive thinking, and wellness [32]. Employers are also partnering with mental health companies such as Headspace for Employers [33] and Calm Business [34] to give family caregivers access to mindfulness and psychotherapy resources [11].

### ***Information, Referral, and Care Coordination***

Many caregivers need assistance identifying the type and options for assisting their aging family members. Distributing information to employees through free educational workshops and presentations from aging professionals can help caregivers understand and navigate the resources and services that are available in their local communities [15,35] such as meals, housing, transportation, aging in place resources, home care, and financial and legal advice [36].

Care coordination involves organizing information about the resources and activities that can meet the health needs of the care recipient [37]. Family caregivers of older adults often interact with health care professionals and social service systems, as well as with other family members to communicate and decide with the recipient on their plan of care, including doctors' appointments, test results, medications, hospitalizations and facility care, long-term services and supports, and mental health services [11,37]. To assist with this care coordination, employers can implement a supportive solution that provides family caregivers with expert guidance by a personal navigator [38], who is a highly credentialed caregiving expert [39] that understands the complexity of the social services and health care systems. These navigators establish ongoing trusting relationships with family caregivers to assist with anticipating the future needs and challenges that may arise, discussing potential solutions and preferences, and providing unbiased advice and culturally appropriate referrals [40].

### ***Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Resources***

EAPs provide support and benefits to employees to help them with personal issues that may impact their job performance [41]. EAP benefits are generally paid in full by the employer [42], but the types of services vary by an employer's EAP provider [43]. Employed family caregivers of older adults may be able to get an initial assessment and consultation with EAP professionals that can then refer them to helpful community resources for elder care assistance, which could include supportive services, information on living arrangements, care management, transportation services, hospice, respite, meal delivery, in-home services, and legal planning [43]. Family caregivers of older adults can also be referred for pre-paid counseling sessions to discuss their experiences related to various topics, including grief, stress, sleep difficulties, work/life balance, anxiety, depression, relationship strains, and setting boundaries [44].

## ***Subsidized Back-Up Care***

Some employers assist family caregivers by subsidizing the cost of services through back-up care when a usual care provider is unavailable. Back-up care can also be referred to as companion care, respite care, light housekeeping, in-home care, or on-site (or nearby) adult day care and adult day services. The importance of work schedule predictability, especially among employees who may be called on short notice to cover a shift, has been highlighted as a crucial need for working family caregivers of older adults [9]. When there is a breakdown or disruption in care coverage for an older adult such as a sick home health worker or adult day facility closures, some employers offer back-up care services that can be used to find care quickly so that the employee can avoid missing work that day [45,46]. Most of these services are provided through an employer-sponsored partnership with a third party [45,47]. In this model, the third party ensures that their network of paid caregivers is adequately credentialed and always available to assist nationwide. The employer has flexibility in establishing their own payment and reimbursement policies. Some employers provide back-up care free of charge, while other employers collect copayments, provide reimbursements, or allow payroll deductions [48,47,49,50,51].

## **Using Third Parties to Assist Family Caregivers**

Several vendors have put these caregiver supports into a variety of packages that employers can purchase and make available to their employees. These packages may include access to resources such as referrals to care coordinators, licensed health care professionals, non-medical support staff, back-up caregiving, peer support groups, document sharing, medication tracking, vitals monitoring, and educational materials, as well as the ability to add friends and family for scheduling and task management [14].<sup>a</sup>

While there is no public data on how many employers use these vendors to provide these packages, they are offered by an array of employers [50,52,53,54,55,56,57]. Early analysis of data from employers using some of these vendors showed reduced employee turnover and absenteeism, and increased feelings of workplace support [52]. Another potential outcome has been return on investment for employers, as the cost of replacing an employee is greater than the cost of retaining the employee [52]. Some programs may also improve workers' personal support system by allowing them to connect with others who could help, such that the caregiver did not have to do all the caregiving tasks by themselves [58].

## **CONCLUSION**

Ensuring that family caregivers feel supported can reduce the stress of balancing responsibilities at home and in the workplace, and ultimately reduce the likelihood of the employee cutting back on hours or leaving their job [59]. Even though employer best practices for supporting family caregivers of older adults have been identified by governments and organizations, more evidence is needed to support the efficacy of such practices. In the meantime, employers may want to conduct needs assessments to understand the specific experiences of family caregivers in their workforce. Employers can then use the information gained to identify next steps in improving supports and workplace culture for caregivers. It may also be important to consider the long-term future financial security and health of family caregivers of older adults. Future research can examine whether expanding employer initiatives could provide better support to working family caregivers of older adults.

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<sup>a</sup> We identified six vendors that currently offer these services, specifically for family caregivers of older adults, including Bright Horizons, Care.for Business, Torchlight Parenting & Caregiving, Family First, Wellthy, and ianacare. The Employer Caregiving Toolkit (<https://employercaregivingtoolkit.com/>) compares these digital tools and includes summary information, approximate costs, delivery methods (i.e., through the employer, health plan, benefits counselor, direct to consumers), other languages supported, and outcome studies, if applicable [15].

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