

SUPPORT WORKING CAREGIVERS

By **Jennifer Paterson**



With many Canadians struggling to balance their work responsibilities with their duties as caregivers for loved ones, employers are facing the challenge of how to step up and offer support.



BALANCING WORK AND CARE

6.1 million

Number of Canadians who are juggling both work and unpaid caregiving responsibilities

74%

of employee caregivers provided nine hours or less of care each week on top of their full-time workweek; 16% provided 10-29 hours of care

38%

of caregivers who provided 20 or more hours of care per week reduced their regular working hours

Source: Report from the federal employer panel for caregivers, January 2015

“Business has to come to the table and take a proactive role. Besides it being the right thing to do, it makes economic sense,” says Audrey Miller, founder and managing director of Elder Caring Inc.

Many employers are doing just that. BMO Financial Group, for example, offers a program to help employees who are caring for a family member with dementia. Offered at no cost to employees, the program provides hands-on caregiver skills training, education and emotional support.

Victoria-based health-care organization Connect Hearing offers a compassionate care fund through a minimal payroll deduction, matched by the employer, that’s available to employees and their families in times of need. “We had an employee whose niece was undergoing cancer treatments, so we supported travel accommodations so she could attend treatment,” says Chris Barker, the organization’s director of human resources.

The federal Liberal government is stepping up as well. This year, it consulted with employers and employees on the right to request flexible working arrangements. In its first budget, it also confirmed its promise to increase the compassionate care benefit, offered through employment insurance, and make it more flexible, easier to access and more inclusive.

“Right now, it’s restricted to [those caring for] people who are at the end of their life, but there are also a lot of caregivers who are caring for someone with a chronic condition,” says Catherine Suridjan, public policy and stakeholder relations lead at Carers Canada.

The employer’s role

So how can employers help their employee caregivers excel at work and care for their loved ones, without damaging their own health and well-being?

“It starts with accommodation, which can happen in a number of ways,” says Miller, noting employers can provide flexible working hours, job sharing and opportunities to work from home.

There are also resources available through employee assistance programs that can refer employees to a database of counsellors and provide informational material. Elder Caring works with two programs. “We go out and see clients on their behalf,” says Miller. “They’ve provided a certain amount of time for their employees to access our services at no additional cost.”

In addition, human resources departments can host educational sessions for employees. “For those who have yet to experience the caregiving journey, it’s difficult for them to truly understand it,” says Miller, noting educational seminars are an excellent way to provide general information about what caregiving means and the challenges employees are facing. “It doesn’t matter if you’re the CEO of the company or you’re the receptionist at the front desk. This is a universal issue that’s affecting everybody.”

Finally, flexible health benefits, perhaps through a health spending account, can provide working caregivers with access to the targeted services they need.

“There’s an option there to be able to access resources that have some coverage or some shared coverage from the employer,” says Miller.

“Social work, for example, is often covered as a paramedical benefit. Flex benefits are a wonderful option, especially for smaller businesses that have that control.”

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A LOOK AT WHO’S PROVIDING CARE

8.1 million

Number of Canadians who provided care to a family member or friend

54%

Percentage of caregivers who are women

44%

Percentage of caregivers in their peak earning years between the ages of 45 and 64

Source: Statistics Canada 2013 report on caregivers in Canada