

LIGHTENING THE LOAD OF ELDER CARE

Nearly 25 million U.S. workers are caring for an elderly parent or loved one. Employers, unions and welfare funds can offer benefits to help workers balance the demands of work and caregiving.

It's 8:30 p.m. on a Tuesday, and Joan Nauman has just hung up her cell phone after wishing her three school-aged children goodnight. She walks around the house to start her regular routine, checking that everything is in its proper place. First, Joan walks up to the stove to make sure the handles are all removed. Then she opens the kitchen drawers; the knives have all been taken away. Then she checks the front door. It's locked, and the skeleton key that opens it is hidden in the cabinet next to the door.

Joan walks over and listens to the baby monitor connected to her father's bedroom. It's quiet for now, and Joan is tired. Inevitably, though, her dad will soon begin to stir and attempt to wander the house once again—not even recognizing his own daughter. She knows it's going to be another long night until her sister Theresa arrives to relieve her in the morning. Twice a week, this is Joan's routine. This is your life when you have to care for a parent with Alzheimer's living in his or her own home.

For Joan and her siblings, this around-the-clock parental care would end up lasting for five years between her dad's Alzheimer's and her mom's declining health. Joan is fortunate that her employer, New York State United Teachers, offered flexibility with her work schedule to help care for her parents along with empathy for the situation thrust upon her and her family.



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As the average life span of humans has steadily increased over the years, we are now seeing people routinely live into their 80s, 90s and beyond. While this change in longevity often means more time to spend with loved ones, it also has created a number of significant challenges as millions of people in the United States attempt to balance work responsibilities, raise families with young children and provide care to aging loved ones increasingly dealing with chronic illnesses or disabilities.

Years ago, it was commonplace for aging parents to move into their children's homes if they needed assistance. Many considered putting parents into a care facility both disrespectful and financially unattainable. However, it was much more common at that time to have one spouse in the home full-time.

Today, elder care is a growing crisis as families struggle with how to care for loved ones who can't care for themselves. Elderly family members often are reluctant to give up their independence and move into a nursing facility. However, what often starts with helping aging loved ones with their basic needs can eventually escalate into around-the-clock care. Analysts have been talking about this growing issue for more than 20 years. It is not a new conversation, and the challenges are expected to continue.

The Sandwich Generation

A report by the U.S. Department of Labor titled *Navigating the Demands of Work and Eldercare* revealed that nearly

25 million workers in the United States (one out of every six) care for an elderly parent or loved one over the age of 65.¹ The report indicated that 77% of working caregivers hold full-time jobs. The majority of these working caregivers are between the ages of 45 and 64 (Baby Boomers and Generation X), while almost 25% are Millennials between the ages of 15 and 34.

Approximately 30% of U.S. working caregivers are part of what is known as the *sandwich generation*, since they are caring for both a younger and older generation simultaneously (children under 18 and a loved one over the age of 65), often while trying to maintain careers in the workforce.²

A Pew Research study released in 2013 found that the sandwich generation covers a variety of ages in the workforce, with 71% of the group aged 40 to 59, 19% younger than 40 and another 10% aged 60 or older.³ Among those adults aged 60 or older with a living parent, a full 50% stated their elderly parents needed help with daily living activities. These caregivers can expect that more emotional or physical support will be needed as elderly loved ones continue to age into their 80s, 90s or beyond.⁴

While some employers are recognizing the need to offer flexible time so employees can care for loved ones, many working caregivers often still find themselves forced to significantly cut back on their work hours or even end their employment altogether. The Family Caregiver Alliance states that approximately 10% of working caregivers ultimately leave their jobs to provide full-time elder care, resulting in a loss of more than \$300,000 in lost wages, Social Security and pension benefits over their lifetime.⁵ In addition, a study by the National Alliance for Caregiving and the MetLife Foundation found that working Americans caring for elderly loved ones cost U.S. businesses approximately \$34 billion annually in missed work time, replacement costs and lost productivity.⁶

How Can Employers Assist Employees?

Caring for an elderly loved one is both physically and mentally exhausting for the working caregiver. Therefore, it is important that employers have services in place to assist the employee when this burden is thrust upon them. While more and more organizations are now offering employee assistance programs (EAPs) to help employees during challenging times, forward-thinking employers understand that EAP services are not necessarily a one-stop cure for issues such as elder care.

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International Foundation. 2017.

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Under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), eligible employees of covered employers can take up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave in a 12-month period to care for a parent who has a serious health condition.

However, some employers take additional measures to assist working caregivers, including offering flexible work options, paid time off (some even offer unlimited paid time off), referrals for support and services, dependent-care flexible spending accounts and subsidies for the cost of elder care.⁷ Dependent-care flexible spending programs, in particular, benefit employees by allowing them to pay for certain dependent-care expenses such as child-care or elder-care services. They also benefit employers by reducing taxable income for employees.⁸

According to the *2014 National Study of Employers* by the nonprofit organization Families and Work Institute, the percentage of employers offering elder-care resource and referral services to employees increased from 31% in 2008 to 43% in 2014.⁹ The study also found that the number of employers offering dependent-care assistance programs for elder care increased from 23% in 2008 to 41% in 2014; however, still only 7% of employers offer access to *respite care* (planned or emergency temporary care of ill or dependent loved ones that can provide some relief to a working caregiver). In addition, the 2014 study indicated that 78% of employers now offer EAPs that include confidential services to assist employees with workplace, personal and family issues.

According to the Department of Labor report mentioned previously, approximately 10,000 Baby Boomers in the United States reach the age of 65 ev-

takeaways

- More than three-quarters of U.S. workers caring for an elderly parent or loved one have a full-time job, and the burden of elder caregiving for U.S. workers costs U.S. businesses approximately \$34 billion annually in missed work time, replacement costs and lost productivity.
- Employers that want to assist workers with balancing caregiving with work should consider benefits such as an employee assistance program (EAP) and include elder-care services and referrals with the program.
- Other benefits that can help working caregivers include dependent-care flexible spending programs along with flexible and paid-time-off options.
- Unions can offer programs on a voluntary or group basis for purchase by union members or local associations that include an elder-care component.
- Welfare plans can use excess funds to create an elder-care fund that can provide some assistance to plan participants, including reimbursing elder-care expenses.

ery day.¹⁰ The elderly population in this country is expected to almost double to 88 million in 2050 (from 48 million in 2015), and it's predicted that more than 19 million people will be aged 85 or older by that time—likely leaving them in need of physical, emotional and financial assistance.

The Pew Research study also found a significant increase in the number of Generation X members that comprise the sandwich generation compared with a decade prior. In 2005, the Pew Research Center found that 45% of the sandwich generation was made up of Baby Boomers, while Gen X represented 20%. In the subsequent 2013 study, the results had significantly shifted, with 42% of those in the sandwich generation now being Gen Xers compared with 33% being Baby Boomers.¹¹ Clearly, as the Baby Boomer generation continues to age out of the sandwich generation, these numbers will change even more, and Millennials will make up a greater percentage.

How Can Unions Assist Their Members?

Unions can play a role in helping their members with elder-care issues. For ex-

ample, New York State United Teachers (NYSUT)—a labor organization representing more than 600,000 individuals working in the education and health care industries in New York State—houses a social services department that can provide referrals for elder care, elder housing, health issues and other services. NYSUT has a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) on staff with more than 25 years of experience in medical and mental health settings. Working with agencies and providers in the local community, the NYSUT Social Services Department can help in-service or retired NYSUT members and their families with connecting with services for elderly loved ones and provide guidance in caregiving.

The NYSUT Social Services Department can also assist NYSUT members by helping them access their own EAPs if they have one available through their employer. If they do not have such a program, department staff can recommend convenient support groups that match their particular needs.

In addition, the NYSUT organization makes available a number of programs and services to the NYSUT membership (in-service and retirees) and their

families through a benefit trust that it created in 1983 (NYSUT Member Benefits Trust). The trust offers endorsed programs that can be purchased on a voluntary basis by individual NYSUT members or on a group basis through NYSUT local associations or benefit funds. The programs available to the NYSUT membership that include additional services for loved ones are voluntary and group legal service plans, which offer an elder-care rider available for purchase. The rider provides access to a national panel of attorneys who specialize in elder law, estate planning, wills, trusts, pre-nursing-home planning, probate and conservatorship.

Meanwhile, the NYSUT Member Benefits Corporation began offering an elder-care rider option through its financial counseling program in February 2018 that provides presentations and one-on-one meetings to parents and parents-in-law of NYSUT members in the program. Participants in the NYSUT Member Benefits Corporation-endorsed Financial Counseling

Program receive the new elder-care rider at no additional cost. The trust also endorses a group term life insurance program that includes an elder law assistance component providing nursing home and home health care assistance.

How Can Welfare Funds Assist Plan Participants?

Labor unions can also set up welfare funds that act as a separate legal entity for the purpose of providing plan benefits to participants to address specific needs such as elder care. The money in the welfare fund is used exclusively to provide these benefits as well as cover plan administration expenses.

The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA)—the largest union and professional association for registered nurses in New York State with approximately 40,000 members—recognized that the growing elderly population and limited government resources dedicated to elder care created a strong need for a resource for such services.¹²


In 2016, NYSNA negotiated and won benefits to establish a child- and elder-care fund for eligible members. Prior to the fund effective date of September 1, 2016, there was no reimbursement for child- or elder-care expenses for union membership. The new fund covers formal elder care for providers outside or inside of the home. It also covers transportation for the eligible elderly individual and one accompanying person to and from health care providers and senior care programs.¹³

Contributing employers make contributions to the fund on behalf of NYSNA members. The maximum annual reimbursement available from the fund for full-time nurses is \$650 combined for both child-care and elder-care expenses and \$325 for part-time nurses. **6**


Endnotes

1. See www.dol.gov/sites/default/files/NavigatingTheDemandsOfWorkAndEldercare.pdf.
2. See www.agingcare.com/articles/pulled-in-too-many-directions-185936.htm.
3. See www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/01/30/the-sandwich-generation/.
4. Ibid.
5. See www.caregiver.org/work-and-elder-care.
6. See www.agingcare.com/articles/caregiving-issues-and-work-95637.htm.
7. See www.winstonbenefits.com/The-Employee-Benefits-Blog/bid/205355/6-Elder-Care-Benefits-Employers-Can-Offer.
8. See www.coredocuments.com/why-every-employer-should-have-a-section-129-dependent-care-assistance-plan-dcap-flexible-spending-account-fsa/.
9. See <http://familiesandwork.org/downloads/2014NationalStudyOfEmployers.pdf>.
10. See www.dol.gov/sites/default/files/NavigatingTheDemandsOfWorkAndEldercare.pdf.
11. See www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/01/30/the-sandwich-generation/.
12. See www.nysna.org/child-and-elder-care-fund#.WmZe7DRG2os.
13. See <https://salsa4.salsalabs.com/o/50772/images/cccecFundSPD.pdf>.

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