

# The Caregiver Employee in Our Aging Workforce

*by Abba Belgrave, Sales Support Manager*

There's a looming caregiver crisis in America and employees are feeling it. Nearly 20% of American employees were caregivers in the last 12 months. Some sources suggest a quarter of the entire workforce are currently unpaid family caregivers. While the government has acknowledged the dilemma and taken steps to assist, the implications of this worsening trend will affect all employers if not addressed proactively.

Unfortunately, there is no one size fits all solution because the needs of each organization are unique. In addition to this, caregiver stressors are complex and vary depending on socioeconomic class and other demographic considerations. At least two thirds of family caregivers are full or part time workers. Those caregiver employees spend an average of 24 hours per week providing care. This shows up in the workplace as decreased productivity. As a result, caregiver employees often face increased financial risk from lost income and diminished career opportunities. Not to mention the out of pocket expenses faced by caregiver employees as they provide care for their ill relatives. Burdened with the support of a family member, some employees leave the workforce altogether and employers must spend time and money replacing them.

Similar in some ways to the discussion around [workplace burnout](#), caregiver employees often experience increased physical, psychological and emotional distress due to the conflicting demands of caregiving and employment. Employers that can support caregiver employees through these challenges will be better prepared for the economic liability of an aging workforce.

Yet 79% of caregivers do not have access to caregiver support benefits in the workplace. Employees increasingly believe that their employer has a responsibility to help with their mental, physical and financial well-being. So having the right mix of workplace policies and well-being benefits can help protect employers and give caregivers the support they need to keep working.

1. **Flexible work hours.** Caregiving does not take time off during regular working hours. Flexibility is one of the most important benefits for caregiver employees as they juggle their competing responsibilities. If remote work is not an option, consider how part-time arrangements can provide the opportunity to keep an employee working.
2. **PTO & leave policies.** Flexibility may not be enough when caregiver employees need an extended break to provide care. Paid time off and FMLA help with short-term acute concerns but the average length of time as a caregiver is four and a half years, if not longer. Having a specific company policy in place for caregivers can bridge the gap.
3. **Supportive well-being benefits.** These can be consultations with experts, online resources or backup care programs. Start by evaluating your company's EAP. Discover what it offers for caregiver issues and promote consistently. Online resources could be lists of local skilled nursing facilities and information on what to know before becoming a healthcare proxy or power of attorney. Backup care programs such as [Bright Horizons](#) and [Care.com](#) have been implemented by employers to great success.

None of the above is simple to implement but employers should start building mitigation strategies. A [recent AARP report](#) revealed that unpaid family caregivers are the backbone of our nation's long-term care system. A situation that exposes the fragility of that system. One in three Americans is now 50 or older. By 2030, one out of every five people will be over 65. Many, if not all these people will require increasing levels of care. Given the current structure, that care will come from family members. Start small and aim to overcommunicate current benefits while working to enhance or place new ones.

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