Millions of people in the United States provide unpaid caregiving to their parents, siblings, children and others. A large percentage of those caregivers are employed full-time. According to a report by Harvard Business School, more than 80% of employees with caregiving responsibilities admitted that caregiving affects their productivity at work.

This article provides insight on how caregiving affects the workplace and offers practical solutions for employers to consider.

Who Are Unpaid Caregivers?

Most people will have caregiving responsibilities at some point in their working lives. They may provide care for a child, a loved one with a chronic condition or disability, or an older adult. Approximately 60% of caregivers are employed. Thus, these people are essentially working two jobs: one paid, one unpaid.

Caregivers are diverse. They include every age, job title, socioeconomic, racial and ethnic group:

• Approximately 43.5 million caregivers have provided unpaid care to an adult or child in the last 12 months.
• Approximately 39.8 million provide care to adults with a disability or illness.
• About 15.7 million adult family caregivers care for someone with Alzheimer’s disease or other dementia.
• About 75% of all caregivers are female, and they may spend as much as 50% more time providing care than males.
• Hispanic caregivers have the highest reported prevalence of caregiving at 21%. African-Americans are at 20.3%, Asian-Americans at 19.7% and whites at 16.9%. And, 9% of caregivers self-identify as LGBT.
• The majority of caregivers tend to a relative or other loved one. Statistically, 42% care for a parent; 15% for a friend, neighbor or another nonrelative; 14% for a child; 7% for a parent-in-law; and 7% for a grandparent or grandparent-in-law.

The Impact of Unpaid Caregiving on Employees

Employees with caregiving responsibilities are more likely to experience physical health issues, emotional stress, financial challenges and employment-related changes:
• About 17% of caregivers report their health as fair or poor.\textsuperscript{11}
• Compared with noncaregivers, caregivers have higher levels of depression.\textsuperscript{12}
• On average, caregivers spent nearly $7,000 per year on caregiving-related costs in 2016.\textsuperscript{13} According to data from 2002 to 2014, spousal caregivers age 59 to 66 had fewer retirement assets and less income than married noncaregivers of the same age.\textsuperscript{14}
• More than 60% of caregivers experienced at least one employment-related change as a result of their caregiving duties.\textsuperscript{15} These include reducing work hours, taking a leave of absence, or receiving a performance or attendance warning.

**Child-Care Benefits**

Options for employers range from providing information to offering on-site care and can include financial assistance:

- Child-care resource and referral services
- Backup child-care services
- Dependent care assistance programs
- Subsidies for child-care services and centers
- On-site, near-site or consortium child-care centers
- Paid child-care expenses while the employee is on business travel.

**Elder-Care Benefits**

Legal resources and insurance are among the wide range of elder-care benefits:

- Elder-care resource and referral services that address a variety of needs, such as home health care, home safety, transportation and medical management
- Medical concierge services that offer coordinated care and second opinions
- Subsidies for elder-care services
- On-ramping programs for family members with elder-care responsibilities
- Educational programs related to specific health conditions
- Legal and financial counseling for workers and parents
- Long-term care insurance.

**The Impact of Unpaid Caregiving on Employers**

The stressors noted above are bad news for businesses as well as employees. Caregiving-related costs for employers are estimated at more than $47 billion.\textsuperscript{16} These are caused by a variety of factors, including the following.

- **Absenteeism.** Caregivers miss an average of six to seven days of work each year due to caregiving responsibilities.\textsuperscript{17} Many of these absences are unplanned. This results in a domino effect on the rest of the staff. It also requires additional supervisor time. About 50% of caregivers have arrived late to work, left early or taken time off.\textsuperscript{18}

- **Lost productivity.** Unpaid caregivers are distracted from work while handling care-related tasks. This includes dealing with phone calls, appointments and crises.

- **Increased health care costs.** Caregivers cost their employers an estimated 8% more ($13.4 billion a year) in health care costs than noncaregivers. They are also more likely to smoke (26% vs. 19%) and have more outpatient visits over a six-month period (4.1 vs. 2.7).\textsuperscript{19}

- **High turnover.** Caregivers have higher turnover rates, resulting in more expense to recruit and train new staff. A 2019 Harvard Business School study found that more than half of employees who are caregivers quit to care for a newborn or adopted child. Another 32% quit to help an elderly family member. That number will grow as the population ages and the incidence of chronic conditions and disabilities rises. The same Harvard study noted that quit rates related to caregiving were higher among workers in more senior roles and highly paid workers—those who may directly influence a company’s performance.\textsuperscript{20}
• **Undermined diversity and inclusion efforts.** Women and minorities shoulder a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities. This can impede their opportunities for advancement if they reduce work hours or leave the workforce. Unplanned absences, late arrivals, taking time off and leaving early can also undermine career progression. As noted above, family caregivers spend about $7,000 a year on caregiving. This amounts to about 14% of income for white caregivers, 44% for Hispanic caregivers and 34% for black caregivers.21

**What Can Employers Do?**

Depending on the organization’s workforce composition, offering an array of caregiver benefits and promoting them properly can help workers balance caregiving and work responsibilities. Organizations can:

• **Review employee benefits.** Employers should review the benefits offered by their employee assistance program (EAP) to confirm it provides caregiver support. This should include care coordination, home health care services and legal assistance. Many employers are extending these benefits to the employee’s family members. Just as important as offering the benefits is making sure employees are aware of them. Employees are not always aware of the availability of benefits to help with their caregiving duties. Communication and outreach is a must.

• **Offer child-care resources.** Child care—both arranging it and figuring out how to afford it—tops the list of items that can distract and stress employees. Employers can support their workforce by offering benefits that double as recruitment and retention tools. (See the sidebar, “Child-Care Benefits,” for options.)

• **Provide elder-care resources.** A growing number of employers offer elder-care benefits. (Refer to the sidebar, “Elder-Care Benefits.”) The number of services, point solutions and vendors is also growing.

• **Offer support groups.** Caregiving can be isolating. It can be helpful to provide support services like those listed in the “Support Services” sidebar.

• **Create a flexible and supportive work environment.** Caregiving can be a 24-hour job. Employers need to be flexible if unanticipated events arise during the workday. One of the most impactful ways an employer can support its caregiving employees is to revisit its paid-time-off and leave policy to confirm that it offers the right level of support. It is also important to communicate the policy and employees’ rights under the Family and Medical Leave Act. Finally, organizations should offer flexible work arrangements and remote work options and encourage a supportive culture where colleagues fill in for one another as needed.

• **Train managers to identify caregiver burnout.** Supervisors need to know how to spot people who show signs of depression, appear overwhelmed or over-tired, and are concerned about their financial security. They also need to watch for employees who are absent more frequently than normal, leave work during regular working hours or show signs of substance abuse. Regularly checking on employees and looking for signs of burnout will help manage the effects of caregiving in the workplace.

**The Benefits of Caring for Your Unpaid Caregivers**

A thoughtful and well-designed unpaid caregiver benefit program that is properly administered and communicated will strengthen an employer’s connection with its workforce. This can lead to improved productivity, engagement and retention.  

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Support Services
These services for caregivers include information about all aspects of caregiving, as well as:

- Online platforms to access caregiving benefits and services
- Digital tools to help manage ongoing caregiving
- Employee assistance programs (EAPs) with caregiver resources
- Seminars or classes on caregiving topics
- Stress-reduction programs
- Access to respite care*
- Financial literacy courses.

*The Lifespan Respite Care Program, authorized in 2006 under Title XXIX of the Public Health Service Act, also provides family caregivers access to respite care. Lifespan Respite Care programs are coordinated systems of accessible, community-based respite care services for family caregivers of children and adults of all ages with special needs.

Endnotes
1. The National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP sponsored study Caregiving in the U.S. defines caregivers as those who provided unpaid care in the last 12 months to a relative or friend 18 years or older to help them take care of themselves.
4. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
14. Ibid.