

# How employers can help staff take care of aging parents

Linda Bicho-Vachon | March 20, 2020



Nola Miller remembers the day she received 19 calls from her mother at work. As a group home co-ordinator for Winnipeg Child and Family Services, she'd mastered the demands of her job, but the stress of caring for her aging mother was weighing on her.

“When you're at work, and you're getting calls like that, you feel like, ‘What am I going to do? How do I take care of her needs?’” she says.

In 2018, one in four Canadians were providing care to an elderly family member or friend, according to Statistics Canada. As Canada's population rapidly ages, this number will only increase, says Karen Henderson, founder of the Long Term Care Planning Network.

“Elder care is often crisis-driven. With childcare, you've got nine months to prepare and you can figure out how you're going to handle an emergency. But with elder care, you're not prepared for a 2 a.m. phone call from the hospital saying something has happened.”

When Miller moved her mother to a long-term care facility, she had help from a friend who worked at a seniors' residence. However, since seniors often move into care as the result of a crisis, their family is unlikely to be prepared to navigate the multiple resources, programs and services available.

## Who's providing care?

**25%** of Canadians aged 15 and older provided care to a family member or friend with a long-term health condition, a physical or mental disability or problems related to aging in 2018.

**61%** of these carers were between the ages of 45 and 64, their prime working years.

**64%** said they spent less than 10 hours a week on caregiving responsibilities, compared to 10 to 19 hours (**15%**) and 20 hours or more (**21%**).

**Source: Statistics Canada's general social survey, 2018.**

So what can employers do to support the growing population of carers in their workforces?

## Highlighting available resources

Employees with elder-care responsibilities can spend as much as 20 hours researching the available services, says Barb Veder, vice-president of clinical services and research at Morneau Shepell Ltd. “What we're doing is helping people make quality decisions on what the resources are and how to navigate both the public system and the private system.”

Employers can highlight their employee assistance program services, including information on elder-care resources, as well as access to legal and financial experts to help deal with some of the more practical matters or caring for a senior.

Another option is a service that helps employees cover the cost of home-care assistance. For instance, through health-care navigation service CAREpath Inc., employers can cover a set number of personal support worker hours, says Sherry Hnatyshyn-Webster, the service's managing director. Employers can also opt to pay for any additional hours required, set up a bank of hours or pay an added premium.

Canada Life offers its employees access to a health-care spending account that covers elder-care expenses, says Kristina Clarke, the insurer's director of employee wellness and benefits. "Employees have the ability to use those dollars towards a parent's in-home nursing care, for example."

### **Offering flexibility**

Canada Life also takes a holistic approach to caring for its employees, recognizing their lives are often dictated by unexpected circumstances outside of work. In early 2020, it introduced flexible working arrangements to provide employees with various options around their start and stop times. Staff also have access to a number of personal days.

Miller wishes she had access to flexible working when she was supporting her mother's care. The leave policy at her workplace only allowed for paid time off to care for a family member who lives in the same household. And since the policy didn't apply, Miller had to use vacation days to look after her mother.

### **Extending services**

For employers considering support for employees who are also carers, another option is to extend benefits plan coverage beyond spouses and children to also include parents.

Where employers offer Teledoc Health Inc.'s Best Doctors services, two of the core services can be extended to employees' parents, including the second opinion medical service and the 360 medical navigation service. Both services were extended in response to demand, says Karen Grant, vice-president of global product development at Best Doctors.

Since Canada Life introduced the services for employees' parents in 2019, it's been well received, says Clarke, but she'd like to see more services extended. "We're not even living in the same geographic area as our parents. One may live in Toronto and the parent may live in Northern Ontario, for example. So how do we navigate that space?"

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