

UNIONS WIN IT: Family Caregivers

BACKGROUND

Workplace programs can be invaluable in helping those who are helping others, like a spouse, child, or aging parent. Handling both work and family caregiving is a difficult balancing act. Each employee's situation is unique and complex.

One study estimates there are over 65 million caregivers in the United States. And as the number grows, so does the demand for benefits and services. Eldercare in particular is on the rise. People 65 and over represented 12.4 percent of the population in the year 2000, and that figure is expected to increase to 19 percent by 2030. More and more workers are a part of the "sandwich generation," those taking care of both their children and their senior parents.

Family caregivers are more prone to physical and mental issues, such as back problems from lifting, depression and anxiety from lack of sleep. Yet many caregivers feel uncomfortable identifying themselves as such and asking for help. They see themselves simply as caring parents, spouses, and children.

Good workplace and business practices for caregivers add to employee morale and worker retention. Protecting the health and well-being of caregiving workers lowers healthcare costs, absenteeism, and conflict.

FEDERAL AND STATE SUPPORT

The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993

This federal law applies to employers with 50 or more employees, public agencies, and elementary schools. Eligible employees are entitled to take unpaid, job-protected leave for up to 12 workweeks in a 12-month period for the birth and care of a newborn child, the placement and care of a child for adoption or foster care, and the serious health condition of the employee or a spouse, child, or parent. Several states have legislated their own family leave laws that lower the threshold to cover more workers, expand the definition of family to include a wider range of family members, and increase the options of how workers can use their FMLA leave. <http://www.dol.gov/whd/fmla/>

National Family Caregiver Support Program

Funded by the federal Older Americans Act, Title III E, this helps persons of any age who serve as unpaid caregivers for persons 60 or older. The goal of this program is to relieve the emotional, physical, and financial hardships of providing continual care. http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/AoA_Programs/HCLTC/Caregiver/index.aspx

Lifespan Respite Care Program

This funding brings together resources to provide respite care services for family caregivers of adults or children with special needs. http://www.aoa.gov/AoA_programs/HCLTC/LRCP/index.aspx

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

While existing federal and state laws are nonnegotiable, they set the floor to bargain for broader work family language. From the legal framework, unions can negotiate wording that offers additional protections by clarifying terms and expanding definitions to be more inclusive and flexible.

Here are several areas where unions can bargain to strengthen and enhance family caregiver benefits:

Consultation and Advice

Negotiate a one-stop referral center or helpline for employees to identify service options and get information and support. Establish onsite or offsite individualized case managers. Or, establish a tax credit for caregiving.

Mandate specific resources, such as legal consultation to advise caregivers on issues such as conservatorships, LGBT caregiver rights, planning for incapacity, finding an attorney, power of attorney, and living trusts. Targeted help can include keeping a current list of available eldercare, home health care or adult daycare services; educational seminars on topics such as caregiving and eldercare; and onsite resources such as a lending library with print materials and videos.

Flexible schedules

Forge contract terms that let workers modify their schedules including telecommuting and flextime; refuse overtime, relocation, travel, or new assignments, and even defer promotion without losing benefits or suffering career setbacks. Let caregivers use unpaid leave or sick time to fulfill their family responsibilities.

Paid Time Off

Expand all paid time off to include a wide range of family members such as domestic partners,

siblings, foster children, grandparents, grandchildren, in-laws and others. Offer more paid family leave options.

Emotional support

Create a support system and a supportive environment for employees with dual responsibilities by designing contract terms that create a “culture” of tolerance and understanding. Set up support groups and counseling services.

See other fact sheets on [Flexibility](#), [Family Leave](#) and [Paid Sick Days](#).

A wide range of actual contract language and resources is available at www.learnworkfamily.org

GET INVOLVED

Labor’s involvement is crucial to building the 21st century family-friendly workplace. Unions have made much progress to support worker-controlled flexibility through strong contract language. It is equally important for unions to participate in efforts to advance family-friendly workplace policies at the local, state and national level.

Join the Labor Project’s efforts to advance family-friendly workplace policies.

California Work & Family Coalition: Learn about and join our California-specific campaigns on issues such as family leave, caregiver discrimination, and paid sick days. www.workfamilyCA.org

Family Values @ Work: Learn about and join efforts in states with labor-community coalitions working for paid sick days, family leave insurance and other policies that value families at work. www.familyvaluesatwork.org