

CARING FOR AN AGING AMERICA:

Unions Step Up

6:00 A.M.

IN SAN FRANCISCO, CA: Helen Wong, a full-time housekeeper at the Marriott Hotel, leaves home for her early morning shift. Every morning Helen wishes she could check in on her old and frail mother-in-law who lives close by. But it is too early and Helen has to be at work on time. Her 83-year-old mother-in-law is unable to walk unaided and also suffers from high blood pressure. In the Chinese community, a daughter-in-law is responsible for the care of her mother-in-law. Helen visits her mother-in-law after work every day, taking her groceries and keeping her company. However, she worries about leaving her mother-in-law alone all day.

Helen is among the growing number of middle-aged workers in the United States today who face the task of caring for their older relatives.

AN AGING AMERICA

The American population is aging, living longer and becoming more dependent on family members for day-to-day care and assistance.

BY VIBHUTI MEHRA

By 2030, one out of five people in the U.S. will be aged 65 or older, making us a nation with the third largest older population in the world following India and China.

'SANDWICHED' CARE PROVIDERS

Caring for an elderly dependent may include a wide range of responsibilities such as looking after the dependent's personal needs (washing, dressing, eating); financial needs (paying bills, bank deposits); household needs (shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundry); and transportation needs (rides to and from the doctor and/or hospital).

By 2008, over 65% Americans under the age of 60 are expected to become caregivers for elders. As the baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) get older, the "sandwich generation" of American workers will find themselves dealing with the increased pressure of providing care for their aging relatives, in addition to their children.



"I was torn between my job and family in Boston and taking care of my mother in Toronto.... it made me experience first hand what it means to be part of the sandwich generation."

— Monica Halas
UAW 2320

TOLL ON WORKERS

Almost one in five caregivers provide 40 or more hours of informal care per week, and at least one-third of caregivers provide care for five years or longer.

It is estimated that in caring for an elderly relative, a worker may suffer an average loss over a lifetime of more than \$600,000 in wages, pension and Social Security benefits.

A majority of the caregivers work full time and often end up going to

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Marilyn Watkins of the Economic Policy Institute shares a photo (left to right) of her aunt Sandra Tannler, mother Billie Watkins, and grandmother Ellen Caton. Billie visits her 100-year-old mother at her foster care home 3-4 times a week and handles her affairs.

INSIDE STORY

work late, leaving work early, taking time off during the day, or missing work to provide elder care. Some workers have to use their vacation and sick time for care-giving.

Monica Halas, UAW 2320 member and Vice President of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, recalls caring for her late mother: "I was torn between my job and family in Boston and taking care of my mother [who had severe osteoporosis] in Toronto.... it made me experience first hand what it means to be part of the sandwich generation."

Monica had a supportive boss, union protection, and the support of her immediate colleagues as she cared for her mother. However, the clients Monica represents as an attorney at the Greater Boston Legal Services were not as fortunate. "Many of our clients – especially our immigrant clients – who returned home to care for an ill parent or close relative, came back to find out that they had been fired. It has even been difficult to secure unemployment benefits for folks in this situation," she informs.

UNIONS STEP UP

Unions can fight for careworn workers by bringing elder care issues to the bargaining table. "We have bargaining rights and resources that allow us to carve out solutions for our members that relieve the stress and strain of care-giving situations," says Leeann Anderson of the United Steelworkers (USW).

One such creative solution is the Child and Elder Care Fund for hotel employees negotiated by Helen Wong's union UNITE HERE Local 2. The Fund helps offset non-reimbursed expenses incurred by workers in caring for a spouse, parent, parent-in-law, grandparent, or domestic partner. The benefit has been a blessing for Helen. "With the monthly benefit I receive from the Fund, I am able to pay someone to clean up my mother-in-law's house and check in on her periodically throughout the day. This gives me great peace

of mind because I know she is safe and is being cared for," she says.

Through contract negotiations, the Steelworkers have been able to expand the Family and Medical Leave Act to include caring for the elderly even when it does not qualify as a serious health condition. The Union has also been attempting to negotiate dependent care surveys and task forces in union contracts so that USW locals and local management can use the surveys to craft solutions that fit the needs of the membership.

Unions like the UAW, IBEW and CWA have successfully negotiated elder care resource and referral services for their members. Other unions have bargained for family leave (paid or unpaid) and flexible work options for members who provide dependent care.

MORE EFFORTS ARE NEEDED

Undoubtedly, unions are reaching out to workers dealing with elder care issues. But more efforts are needed. "Labor needs to take a much more visible role in protecting the rights of workers to also be responsible family members. It is not enough to bargain for wages - labor needs to recognize that...it is impossible to keep the job you need if it doesn't allow you the flexibility to also care for those you love," says Monica Halas.

Leeann Anderson sees this as a moral issue that unions are uniquely capable of giving voice to. "As our parents and elders age, we are morally obligated to respect and honor them through adequate care and to reciprocate their care for us when we were children. It is part of the societal safety net that unions have been in the forefront of crafting," she says.

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UNITE HERE Local 2

ELDER CARE IN UNION CONTRACTS

Here are some types of contract provisions unions have negotiated to help members address their elder care needs:

Resource and Referral

Services: Match care providers with appropriate elder care resource and services.

Pre-Tax Programs: Establish a tax-free flexible spending account for dependent/elder care expenses.

Elder Care Fund: Provide direct cash payments or reimbursement for elder care expenses.

Support Services: Provide information and support services for retired members and their families.

Long Term Care Insurance:

Help workers pay for long-term care for self or dependents including spouse or parent.

Sick Time for Family

Members: Enable workers to use their accumulated sick leave to care for sick dependents.

Flextime Options: Enable workers to use their accumulated sick leave to care for sick dependents.

Sample contract language available at <http://www.working-families.org/contractlanguage/index.html>. For more information, call (510) 643-7088 or email info@working-families.org

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