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Eldercare Impacts Employers' Bottom Line

Did you know that eldercare now accounts for more lost work hours than childcare? Why? A recent survey concluded that no less than 93% of seniors want to live out their retirement years in their own homes. And currently 90% of all care provided in the home is done by a family caregiver.

Such family participation is an essential component in keeping the senior healthcare equation functioning. According to the Transform 2010 Report from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, for every one percent drop in the number of family caregivers, the cost to the statewide care system is \$30 million.

The record number of Minnesotans now caring for both their children and their parents has been termed the 'sandwich generation'. Typically this role carries unplanned financial, emotional and physical strains that take a toll on work performance. According to the National Caregivers Association, 61% of 'intense' family caregivers – those who provide over 20 hours of care per week – experience depression. Many become sick themselves from the resulting stress. Others are often late for work, leave early or ask for unscheduled time off.

The average length of family care giving is 4.3 years. And this is while these family members also work full time at their own jobs. In fact, one fifth of today's workers are also elder caregivers. Long-distance caregivers – those who live more than an hour away from their loved one – on average miss 20 hours of work per month.

Caught Betwixt and Between

Like Atlas carrying the world on his back, many employees try to handle eldercare all on their own. Here's a typical example:

Intent on avoiding nursing home care, one client's daughter was commuting 100 miles from Wisconsin to Minnesota to provide sole care for a parent. She tried working long-distance from her mother's house, and incurred much anxiety juggling her mother's constant care with her job. After she learned that she could arrange 24-hour care in her mother's home through Minneapolis-based Homewatch Home Care, she was able to move back to Wisconsin -- to her office and her own life. Today, she visits her mother on weekends and holidays and is free to focus on her work life Monday through Friday.

Other employees find their weekly work schedule drained by simple eldercare tasks, such

as bringing loved ones to see their doctors. They try to manage every such task by themselves, not knowing about alternative solutions. To meet such needs of the marketplace, one Duluth-based care provider -- Pathways to Achievement Home Healthcare and Special Transportation Services -- now offers a transportation program that both drives senior clients to their medical appointments and accompanies them once there to assist with coordination and clarification of information between patients, physicians and caregivers. They also offer family caregivers training, mentoring and coaching on how to provide various care services themselves.

While staying at home is far and away the preferred living choice for seniors, home care is a solution with which many people aren't yet conversant. A full range of skilled and non-skilled care services are available through service providers like Pathways to Achievement, including nursing and rehabilitation services. Non-skilled Home Health Aides also offer supportive personal care, wake-up and tuck-in assistance, meal preparation, housekeeping, help with errands and shopping, among others. Free in-home assessments by home care agencies help families discern what level of service best fits their unique situation.

Proactive Employer Action Steps

Given that the senior population is expanding as Baby Boomers reach 62, how are businesses going to absorb the impact on their employee forces resulting from this imminent age wave?

First and foremost, wherever possible, employers should consider offering flexible work schedules. This just makes good business sense... such flexibility of hours has been shown to decrease stress and absences while increasing worker productivity.

Second, It's essential to make basic how-to info available to your employees so they don't have to spend time desperately researching last-minute options on their own. A place to start: MN HomeCare Association's how-to audio for families thrust into eldercare for the first time:

<http://www.mnhomecare.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=11>

Another resource worth checking out is Minnesota's Working Family Resource Center. It has partnered with small and large businesses in Minnesota to provide eldercare education to working caregivers at their place of employment. For further info, go to: www.workingfamilyresourcecenter.org.

Many companies are now today supporting family caregivers by giving them tools such as respite services, training, mentoring/coaching, and advocacy. Just as ongoing training is beneficial for most employees, teaching caregivers how to optimally do the important job of home care makes sense too. Web-based education, for example, could enhance individual competencies and be a portal for sharing best practices.

Finally, collaborative partnerships among businesses, faith communities, educational institutions, health care providers and families will be essential. Each group provides an important piece of the puzzle that complements the others.

Change is in the Wind

The burgeoning needs of the eldercare marketplace will impact the vast majority of American businesses to one degree or another in the coming years. The stats tell the story... In 2004, there were 36.3 million people 65+ in the U.S., or 12 percent of the population. By 2030, this number is expected to increase to at least 20 percent, or about 71.5 million.

The saying 'it takes a village to raise a child' is also apropos to eldercare. Some positive community-focused changes in the caretaking process are already happening today. Co-housing communities are forming in several cities in which neighbors share the duties of eldercare and pay a membership fee for home care aides. Member-owned health care cooperatives such as Care Ventures -- made up of 17 long-term care organizations -- are taking shape. And there are currently 31 neighborhood-based block nurse programs in Minnesota.

Further examples of change: The U.S. Administration on Aging is currently paying for service coordinators at 60 'naturally occurring retirement communities' or NORCs. These are neighborhood blocks or apartment buildings where many people have grown old together. And a few state Medicaid programs are giving the elderly vouchers to purchase home care services.

Technology is playing an ever-larger role in enhancing eldercare as well. Telehealth service management, electronic medical records, and a variety of assistive technologies can all improve service levels. (A nurse using telehealth equipment, for example, can potentially make up to 15 visits a day rather than the standard 5). Sensors can also be placed around the home to remotely monitor a senior's activities and movement.

What's the Bottom Line?

Businesses need to be an essential participant in the eldercare equation. The task is enormous but can be accomplished through collaboration and cooperation. Together we all need to enlist that great and amazing trait that never fails -- American ingenuity -- to create a senior caretaking system that will serve us well both today and into the future.

Neil Johnson is Executive Director of MN HomeCare Association, the statewide voice for the home care industry. Find further info and an audio intro to home care on www.mnhomecare.org.