

AGING A FAMILY AFFAIR

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The cost of elder care in the United States is unprecedented, at the expense of both individuals and businesses nationwide. It is estimated that there are 34 million unpaid caregivers who forfeit an average of twenty-five hours per week, and thus thousands of dollars in earning potential over their lifetime. American businesses lose 33 billion dollars in productivity each year due to higher rates of employee absenteeism and distraction when on the job. The largest burden falls on the families of older Americans needing long term care. The cost of "informal care" represents a significant portion of this country's overall spending—33.2 percent. The amount in 2005 was \$102.7 billion, more than twice what the government spent on Medicare that year.

As expected, most caregivers are women (69.5) percent, and work full-time (53.1) percent. Under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, employees can take unpaid time off to care

for an aging parent. A number of companies are being proactive about this issue: 26% of companies offer an elder care referral service, 5% provide emergency elder care help, and 3% subsidize the cost of elder care. Americans anticipate a rise in the number of companies that offer this type of benefit, since by 2020, one in five Americans will be older than 65.

It is recommended that whenever possible, caregivers should try to keep working, even if it requires cutting back on hours or changing positions or employers. Some distinct benefits include:

- **Money** – Some income is of course better than none at all.
- **Stimulation/distraction** – It is difficult to spend 24/7 watching your loved one suffering from an illness. Having a job enables you to interact with people other than medical providers and insurance companies.
- **Avoiding a gap in experience** – Ultimately, most caregivers return to work. Searching for employment and/or returning to a previous position after a gap can be difficult and

depressing, especially at a time when you are least able to deal with another setback.

Some tips to confront the issue include:

- **Talk to your employer** – Do not be shy about letting your employer know what is going on. Sometimes in the absence of formal employee benefits, you must be the one to ask for what you need. Do not wait for the boss to come to you.
- **Seek community resources** – Geriatric Care Management agencies, such as Elder Life Management, can provide assistance with matters related to finances, Medicaid applications, community resources, care management, home health care assistance, facility placement, psychotherapy, and many other services all in one phone call. These services are helpful to individuals who are busy and do not have much time to do the research themselves, and/or those who would like to come up with a plan of action for their loved one's future with the assistance of informed professionals.

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