

Caregivers Manage a Delicate Balance

BY JEANNE MELL

Cancer's impact on the workplace doesn't stop with employees who have cancer. It extends further, reaching into the cubicles and offices of working people who are caring for family members and loved ones who have the disease.

Caregivers face a special set of challenges and needs that employers are often at a loss to address. Medical treatment and delivery have changed. Hospitals tend to discharge patients sooner, and caregivers often find themselves administering medication and providing post-surgical care in addition to preparing meals, driving patients to doctors' appointments and providing emotional support. "There are inordinate demands on time," says Janet Teixeira, Co-Executive Director of Cancer Care Connection. "There are so many appointments, and so many different doctors involved, and so many treatments. It is not uncommon for caregivers to be the front-line person for all of this."

Company Support

There's no question that maintaining the delicate balance between the demands of work and caregiving is stressful. "It is a traumatic and scary experience to say the least," says Dave McGuigan of George & Lynch, Inc., whose teenaged son was diagnosed with cancer three years ago. "The first few weeks are pure hell. The support of my company was critical. I could not function very well anyway with this crushing weight on our shoulders."

McGuigan was fortunate. George & Lynch encouraged him to take the time he needed to care for his son and allowed him to work from home when he was able. "I never kept track of time I took off," McGuigan notes. "In my role I could do a lot of things from the house by computer. It was easy for me to keep contact with people."

George & Lynch doesn't have a formal program in place. However, the company is committed to ensuring that employees like McGuigan have as much time off as they need, explains Will Robinson, CEO/Chairman.

"I've learned that you don't give them what you think you want to give them; you give them what they need," he says.

Stress and Burnout

"Caregivers have the burden of worrying about work and the repercussions that time away will have," says Alisa Olshefsky, M.P.H., Chronic Disease Bureau Chief of the Department of Health and Social Services.

Sean Hebbel, Program Director at the Wellness Community – Delaware, agrees. "One of the major concerns I hear is the balancing act between trying to keep a job and focus emotional and physical energy on that, and the difficult choice between working and not working when somebody really needs the care," he reports.

Financial issues can also contribute to stress and burnout, says Olshefsky citing monetary burdens such as hiring someone to assist with personal care and paying for medications that often carry high co-pays. Non-reimbursable items have increased costs as well. Caregivers' paychecks may be smaller because of lost time at work, but they still need gas to get to appointments and money to pay for nutritional supplements. Sometimes it's as basic as scrambling to pay for takeout because the caregiver is too exhausted to make dinner.

Employers and co-workers are affected as well. According to a study by the Fatigue Coalition, caregivers often missed as many workdays as those patients for whom they were caring. And when they are in the office, "presenteeism," or how much caregivers are focused on the job when they are at work, is also an issue, Teixeira says.

FMLA

What can employers do to help? Companies with 50 or more employees are legally bound to follow the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) which provides eligible employees with up to 12 weeks to care for a spouse, parent or child with a serious health condition. FMLA requires that caregivers return to their same or equivalent

job and their health care coverage be continued while they are on leave.

FMLA leave itself is not paid. However, any other sick time or vacation time the worker has accrued can be substituted for the unpaid FMLA leave. The substituted paid leave will count toward the employee's 12-week entitlement. For example, if an employee uses three weeks of untaken vacation and one week of unused sick time to care for a family member, those four weeks will be considered part of the 12-week FMLA leave, explains William Bowser of Young Conaway Stargatt and Taylor.

Many companies that are too small to be covered by FMLA use it as a guideline in developing their own policy, says Bowser, who encourages employers to develop the attitude that "we'll watch your job as long as we can."

"It's Going to Happen"

Planning ahead is crucial, notes Bowser, who specializes in employment law and chairs the Delaware Cancer Consortium. "It's going to happen," he says. "This just takes it to another level when the

employee has to be out to care for a loved one. It's all about thinking ahead." Advance planning and evaluating available resources will ultimately reduce the cost to employers and employees, he notes.

Employers who are in the thick of a situation, or those who are preparing a policy, should ask themselves the following questions, says Teixeira:

- What flexibility do I have?
- Can I offer flex time?
- Can I offer a telecommuting option?
- Do I want to allow coworkers to donate their

unused vacation or sick time?

- If my company has less than 50 employees and is not obligated to comply with FMLA, can I offer paid or unpaid leave?
- Can I temporarily reduce or redistribute schedules?
- Can I offer a part-time schedule?
- Is job sharing an option?
- How much does the company want to get involved in helping to coordinate employees who want to help?
- How can I help coworkers who are affected by increased workload?

- What kind of support do I want to give employees who may have to administer unpopular policies? Both Bowser and Teixeira point to Employee Assistance Plans, or EAPs, as a resource to which companies can turn. EAPs, which generally cost an employer anywhere from \$1.50 to \$3 per employee per month, can help employees find caregiving resources or back-up care through referrals

to such organizations as the American Cancer Society or Wilmington's Family & Workplace Connection.

The peace of mind services like this offer often allows people to return to work quicker, Bowser explains. "If they feel good about the care their loved one is getting, they'll come back quicker."

"People being absent is nothing new," Bowser reminds employers. "Caregivers are just out of the office for a different reason. But they do come back." And when they do, Robinson notes, "they are ferocious." ■



Dave McGuigan, of George & Lynch, Inc., left, looks over scale drawings with his associate Preston Ayers. When McGuigan's teenaged son was diagnosed with cancer, George & Lynch encouraged him to take the time he needed to care for his son. Photo by Tom Nutter/tom Nutter Photography