

Family care taking toll on workplace

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UAlberta professor Janet Fast led a study showing that middle-aged Canadian workers miss an average 1.5 million workdays each month providing care for elderly relatives. Credit: John Ulan

(Medical Xpress)—Caring for aging family and friends is putting the squeeze on the Canadian workplace, with an average 1.5 million workdays being missed per month by middle-aged caregivers who are also trying to hold down jobs, according to University of Alberta research.

More than 520,000 workers aged 45 and older have missed at least one day of work per month to provide care for an elderly relative or friend with chronic health issues or disability, said professor Janet Fast, of the U of A Department of [Human Ecology](#).

Fast is collaborating with researchers from the University of Manitoba and the University of Guelph, and with government and community partners, in leading an extensive project to measure the societal

challenges that accompany an [aging population](#). The Research on Aging, Policies, and Practice (RAPP) initiative, based in the Department of Human Ecology, is exploring several related factors, including quality of life for seniors and the consequences of caregiving on the workplace.

"We want to make a meaningful difference in the lives of [older adults](#) and their families by bridging research, policies and practice, so that better decisions are made about how we respond as a society to population aging," Fast said. "This particular study supports that goal by providing an overall snapshot of the toll that caregiving takes for caregivers and their workplaces."

The study, based on the latest Statistics Canada survey on later-life families, shows that "work-care conflict is a serious problem for many Canadians," Fast noted.

"There's been an enormous loss of productivity to employers and to the economy in general—the equivalent of 157,000 full-time employees annually."

The findings, recently shared by RAPP with the federal government and at some international conferences, show that more than 313,000 employees aged 45 or older had to cut their hours of paid work to provide care for an ailing friend or relative, collectively reducing their [work time](#) by 2.2 million hours per week. Forty per cent of these workers were caring for two or more people. More than half of the caregivers (52.5 per cent) were women and 79 per cent of them worked full-time, but 47.5 per cent of men also had to leave work to help someone.

Tasks included performing household duties, personal care, transportation and medical procedures ranging from changing bandages and dispensing medication to administering IV drug therapy and

catheterization.

Fast hopes the findings help raise awareness of the pressures facing people in the workforce—and, she noted, those duties aren't going away.

"This is going to become an increasingly common experience for Canadians. This is already happening in the workplace and it is not too soon to figure out how we are going to cope with it."

Workers should become familiar with what their workplace policies allow for in terms of caregiving support, and check out what tax credits may be available. Employers with leave and flexible working policies may also have to consider broadening their understanding of flexibility, Fast added.

"Employers may think, for instance, that if they have rules in place for child care, then they have dealt with the elder-care issue, but there are important differences."

RAPP is now exploring how workplace policies can be improved to accommodate caregivers and their individual circumstances, Fast said.

"Absenteeism and turnover are costly to employers. The main message we want employers to hear is that these are avoidable costs."

More information: www.rapp.ualberta.ca/

Provided by University of Alberta

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