

## Elder Care Programs Take Center Stage as Baby Boomers Age

More employers are enhancing or launching elder care assistance to address employee needs.

By **Jessica Marquez** | *Sep 7, 2008*

Five years ago, when Rose Stanley's 81-year-old mother broke her hip while they were vacationing in San Diego, Stanley did what most people would do: She called 911.

And then she spent the next several days on the phone with various hospitals and nursing facilities.

Her mother needed major surgery. And after the operation, she couldn't travel by plane or car back to her hometown of Chandler, Arizona, for six weeks. This meant that Stanley had to find a nursing home in San Diego where her mother could stay while she recovered. She also needed to find someone to help her mother get around the house when she returned home.

"It was an extremely stressful time," Stanley says.

Stanley reached out to friends and family for help, and asked her supervisor for time off to deal with the situation. But it never occurred to her to call her HR manager and find out if her employer, WorldatWork, could provide assistance.

"I was the typical employee," she says. "At no time did I think of calling HR."

If Stanley had called HR, she, like many employees elsewhere, would have learned that her company's employee assistance program offered information on elder care services.

As people are living longer, many employees in their mid- to late 40s are finding themselves in Stanley's situation. Many have young children, but they also act as caregivers for their parents.

Despite this trend, only a small number of employers provide elder care services, experts say. Thirty-nine

percent of employers today offer information about elder care services to employees. That's an improvement over 1998, when 23 percent made such services available, according to the Families and Work Institute.

Most of the employers offering elder care services do so as part of their employee assistance programs and don't do enough to promote them, says Kathy O'Brien, senior gerontologist with the MetLife Mature Market Institute.

However, this is starting to change. An increasing number of employers are recognizing the return on investment in these programs, experts say. Employers such as Baptist Health South Florida, the law firm of Bryan Cave and WorldatWork are launching or enhancing their programs to help employees identify and receive care for parents. Elder care assistance can range from simply providing employees with a referral service to companies contracting out backup care providers to help employees.

During the first nine months of offering backup care to employees, Baptist Health has seen \$65,000 in savings. The cost savings is a direct result of not having to replace employees who need to take days off. It doesn't take into account productivity losses that have been avoided.

"Part of the reason that I have so much enthusiasm for this benefit is the fact that it has such a significant hard-dollar ROI," says Lil LeBlanc, corporate director of work/life effectiveness at Baptist Health South Florida, which launched a backup care program for its 12,000 employees in July 2007. "Very few work/life benefits yield this type of tangible savings."

And the business case behind offering elder care programs seems to be clearer every day, experts say.

Thirty percent of employees expect to have some kind of elder or adult care responsibilities in the next five years, according to a recent survey of 10,000 employees conducted by Summa Associates, a Tempe, Arizona-based provider of backup care and referral services for employers. Twenty-four percent of respondents say they are affected by co-workers' elder care responsibilities.

MetLife estimates that productivity lost as a result of employees taking time to deal with elder care issues amounts to \$33 billion annually.

And this is just the beginning, says Carol Sladek, principal global leader of work/life consulting at Hewitt Associates.

"Most of the employers that we work with are aware that it's an issue, but haven't felt the pain yet," she says.

## **Not Just Another Work/Life Benefit**

For several years, Baptist Health South Florida has provided employees with support groups for elder care issues, as well as information on where they could go for backup care. The health care provider introduced a formal backup care program for employees in July 2007, in response to employee demand. During the past few years, employees were increasingly stating in annual work/life surveys that they wanted more information on elder care services.

Unpredictable absences can be extremely difficult for a health care provider to manage, LeBlanc says. But picking the right provider was also particularly challenging, given the fact that Baptist Health's own employees are experts in providing care to the sick and disabled.

"Our employees tend to be more attuned to ways of caregiving and have higher expectations," she says.

As a result, Baptist Health took a year to perform due diligence on backup care providers, talking to clients, checking references and visiting providers' sites. In the end, the company chose Superior, Colorado-based Work Options Group.

Under Baptist Health's program, employees can receive up to 100 hours per year of care for loved ones at \$4 an hour.

"That fee covers the cost of one or three dependents," LeBlanc says. "So it could be for a parent and two kids, for example."

From January through June, employees have used 5,052 hours of backup care—32 percent of which was specifically for caring for an adult.

One of the main challenges employers encounter in offering elder care is making sure employees are aware of the program so they can take advantage of it when they need it, says Stanley, who is the practice leader of professional development at WorldatWork. It's not like child care, she says, noting that employees are often reluctant to make public the fact that they are caring for a parent.

WorldatWork, which has 150 employees, is working to consistently send out communications about its elder care services. The Scottsdale, Arizona-based organization has offered elder care information and support through brown-bag lunches and through its EAP for years.

Two years ago, it contracted with Health Advocate, a Philadelphia-based company that provides employers with a referral network of backup care services, says Karen Rozanoff, benefits manager at WorldatWork. Employees or loved ones can call a number and get assistance on choosing a nursing facility or finding a respite care provider in their area.

WorldatWork puts communications about the program on its intranet every other week and holds webcasts to further spread the word. The organization also hangs posters in break rooms at times when people might be thinking about their parents, such as Mother's Day and Father's Day, Rozanoff says.

Communications also was a challenge at Baptist Health. Its employees are spread across five hospitals and 10 outpatient centers, LeBlanc says. The biggest hurdle is that employees don't know that elder care benefits exist, she says. They tend to find out about them just as Stanley did—while in the throes of an elderly parent's health crisis.

To counteract that problem, LeBlanc made 34 presentations to employees. “I really felt that the opportunity to hear a personal explanation about the program really helped,” she says.

Baptist Health also did a number of e-mail blasts and had many discussions with managers so they could discuss the benefit directly with employees, LeBlanc says.

Communicating the benefits of an elder care program gets easier with time, she says. “The longer we have the program, the more employee testimonials we have,” she says. Word-of-mouth goes a long way with such a program, she says.

The St. Louis-based law firm of Bryan Cave introduced backup care services in June and also has found communications to be a challenge, says Lori Johnson, chief human resources officer.

Bryan Cave has signed up with Bright Horizons Family Solutions, a Watertown, Massachusetts-based provider of backup care services. Under the program, the law firm’s 1,882 employees in London and the U.S. have access to 20 days of backup care per dependent annually. Employees pay \$4 an hour for the service.

One challenge with such programs is getting people to sign up before they need backup care. It’s much easier if they pre-register and avoid having to do all the paperwork when they find themselves with a sick child or disabled parent, Johnson says.

“When you don’t pre-register, you are kind of scrambling,” she says.

## **Elder Care Evolution**

As the need for elder care support increases, experts say employers are going to have to think hard about offering flexible work arrangements that complement their backup care programs.

“Work/life flexibility is an untapped resource for elder care,” says Carol Sladek, global leader of work/life consulting at Hewitt Associates. “Employers can provide a lot with offering flexibility without spending a lot of money.”

WorldatWork is discussing adding additional paid days off for employees who need to take care of sick children or parents, Rozanoff says.

To get the full return on investment from elder care programs, companies need to embrace them as part of their culture, rather than just offer them as an ancillary benefit, gerontologist O’Brien says. For example, elder care issues could be a topic for manager training about generational differences in the workplace, she says.

“This has to be part of the culture so that people are encouraged to use this benefit,” O’Brien says. “Employers can offer this benefit, but unless managers buy into it, it’s worthless.”