

DAYTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

NOVEMBER 16, 2007

dayton.bizjournals.com

Working caregivers juggle duties

FMLA allows leave for care of immediate family members

■ BY TRACY KERSHAW-STALEY
DBJ STAFF REPORTER

In early October, Christine Winters' phone rang at work with news that her mother had fallen at the nursing home, perhaps because of a stroke.

Winters, by this time a veteran in these emergency situations, popped into her boss's office, apprised her of the situation, and left.

Life calls, work stops.

For a growing number of American workers, the balance between work and caring for an aging parent is a daily reality. From the Family Medical Leave Act to flexible schedules, workers and companies are navigating their way through this growing workplace issue. It takes planning, communication and support from others to pull off successfully, human resources experts and caregivers say.

One-third to one-half of all caregivers work outside the home, according to the Family Caregiver Alliance. Nearly 12 percent quit their jobs to provide care full time and other 10 percent wind up going from full time to part time. American businesses can lose as much as \$34 billion each year due to employees' need to care for family members 50 years of age and older, according to a 2006 study the caregiving alliance conducted with Metlife.

"It can be a challenge," said Winters, who works in marketing at Standard Register Corp. and is responsible for her mother, Marjorie Metz, who lives at Trinity Community of Beavercreek.

For Winters, the challenge began last December, when her father died. He had been her mother's caretaker, watching out for her needs as she suffered from Alzheimer's Disease. Winters wound up taking five weeks unpaid leave under the Family Medical Leave Act — FMLA — to spend time in Akron preparing to sell her parents' home, finding a nursing home in the Dayton area for her mother and moving her



JAMES E. MAHAN ■ DBJ

Christine Winters, a Standard Register employee, uses flex days and the companies work-from-home policy to be the primary caregiver for her mother, Marjorie Metz, a resident at a Beavercreek retirement community.



"The more people try to work with their employer, the the more the employer will try to work with them on these things."

Cindy Swigert
Wright Patt Credit Union

here. Now Winters uses flex days and Standard Register's work-from-home policy to shuttle her mother to doctor's appointments and to respond to emergency situations, like her mother's recent fall.

"Without that kind of a flexible schedule and the benefit of family leave, I truly don't know

how I would have made it through those things," Winters said. "It wouldn't have been a matter of choice; I would have had to taken care of my mother. I might have to have given up my job."

Options

Working caregivers can find ways to balance the double demands on their time.

Under the Family Medical Leave Act, workers are guaranteed up to 12 weeks unpaid leave from work during a 12-month period to care for an immediate family member — spouse, parent, or child — with a serious health condition.

Companies often allow — or sometime even require — that workers using FMLA leave apply their paid time off, be it vacation, personal

CAREGIVER: Communication key in dealing with both aging parents, work duties

or sick days, to that time

Outside of the law, human resource directors urge workers to approach their supervisors or HR directors as soon as possible to arrange flexible schedules that can help reduce the burden on both sides.

"It does get to be quite a bit of juggling," said Cindy Swigert, vice president for human resources at Wright-Patt Credit Union. "It is hard on the worker. It is hard on the organization when someone is under that kind of stress at home and then you need to be able to depend on them in the business."

At the credit union, the company follows FMLA but also takes each situation into consideration. Some employees have positions that allow for more flexibility than others, Swigert said.

Karen Palmer, manager of training and development at Wright-Patt Credit Union, has worked with her boss to use flex time to travel to Illinois to care for her 79-year-old mother, Cecilia. Over the years, her mother has had hip surgeries and treatment for breast cancer, requiring Palmer to stay with her for weeks at a time. Palmer said she's found that it's useful to talk with both the boss and co-workers who would be affected by time away.

"I think you need to keep them informed; you don't need to tell them every single detail," she said. "It is easier for them to assist you and suggest things that will help you manage."

Swigert agrees. She suggests workers try to show that they are interested in what's best for the business. For instance, a worker could try to arrange taking her mother to a doctors appointment on a day of the week that's usually not as busy for the company.

"The more people try to work with their employer, the the more the employer will try to work with them on these things," she said.

Joyce Conrad, director of human resources at AAA-Miami Valley, said it all boils down to communication.

She suggests workers approach their supervisors with ideas of how they can stay involved in the office during times they may need more time off, such as working on a special project.

Conrad said it's in a company's best interest to work with their employees when these situations arise. With so many baby boomers retiring, the drain on talent and experienced employees is already starting to be apparent, she said.

Working with employees can also make them more loyal to the company, Winters said. When she found that Standard Register was helpful to her, it made her even more dedicated to her job, she said.

"For employers out there concerned



JAMES E. MAHAN ■ DBJ

Christine Winters and her mother Marjorie Metz walk out the front door of Trinity Community of Beavercreek for a trip to the dentist.

about the time, they may be reticent to think about a flexible schedule," Winters said. "I can only tell you with the support that I got, I walked feeling that I couldn't do enough for this company."

At Standard Register, some employees can use the flex time policy, which requires them to work for certain core hours and work their other hours around that time.

Wanda Willis, community development officer for National City Bank, has a more flexible schedule than most. Because she attends evening and weekend events for her job, she can often get away from the office during the traditional work week, a perk she was grateful for during the years she helped care for her mother, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease.

Even so, Willis says balancing work and caregiving was a struggle.

"Certainly it's difficult," Willis said. "You feel very guilty that maybe you aren't giving as much time to your job as you should be, and there are times where you feel you're not giving as much time to your loved one."

Sometimes, though, the job situation doesn't allow for flexible hours.

"I am very fortunate in that my schedule

is flexible," Willis said. "If I were a teller, I wouldn't be able to do that."

Finding help

Willis and others who have been in her shoes recommend that working caregivers resist the urge to do it all themselves.

She reached out to the Alzheimer's Association of the Miami Valley. Other organizations, such as Senior Resource Center and the Area Agency on Aging, can help find resources such as adult day care, transportation and meal delivery. The Alzheimer's Association has caregiver support groups around Dayton area.

Goodwill Easter Seals of the Miami Valley offers workplace training for companies and their employees.

Winters said she's had to remind herself to ask for help. She relies on the nurses and staff at her mother's nursing home, Trinity Community of Beavercreek.

Families are more disbursed," she said. "You really do need a support structure to help you out, because you can't do it all."

■ E-mail tkershaw-staley@bizjournals.com. Call 528-4425.