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5 ways to support staff giving care to elderly parents

If you have not had an employee that was caring for an elderly parent yet, give it a couple more years. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, nearly 25 million employees provide informal care for an elderly family member who needs help with basic personal needs and daily activities - and this number is growing.

Unfortunately, the AARP reports that 39 percent of caregivers leave their jobs to care for loved ones. Losing key employees is a detriment to any business, and taking time to find, hire and train new employees can be an unwelcome distraction from operations. Firing a caregiver employee could also open the employer up to a lawsuit for caregiver discrimination in certain situations. Business owners can take steps to retain employees who are caring for elderly parents, avoid potential lawsuits, and protect profitability.

Be open: Talk to your employees. Some employees are hesitant to say they are caregiving for fear they will appear uncommitted or unable to perform their job. Communicate to your employees that you value them and are committed to evaluating them based on job performance only. Encourage employees to seek help before a work-related problem arises.

Be flexible: Emerging technologies allow alternate work arrangements that benefit the caregiver employee and the business. Adopt a policy that allows employees to flex hours, work compressed-time (10 hour working days), telecommute, or work part-time seasonally. The utility of each arrangement will depend on your industry, but your business can find a structure that works.

Review policies: Revamp your absenteeism policy. For hourly employees, do away with no-fault policies that provide grounds for termination based on the number of absences. Incorporate rules that allow excused absences when employees follow procedures for calling out and finding shift coverage.

Offer support: Provide employees

with resources to help them manage caregiving and work responsibilities. Caregivers often suffer from fatigue and stress-related illnesses. You can offer support without crossing professional boundaries by providing helpful reading materials or a list of referral services printed in your employee handbook or posted in employee common areas. Your support will foster loyalty and respect from your employees.

Offer training: Provide your supervisors with information about employment law and caregiver discrimination. While your business may have fewer than 50 employees and may thus be exempt from FMLA guidelines, lawsuits against employers for caregiver discrimination are occurring with greater frequency. Tennessee does not have a statute that specifically protects caregivers from discrimination, but there are several laws that include protections for caregivers, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and The Age Discrimination in Employment Act.

Caregiving for an elderly parent is an experience many of your employees will have at some point in the future. With a little adaptability and compassion, employers can retain good, loyal employees who are caregiving for elderly parents by accommodating their need for assurance, support and flexibility while also protecting the business's bottom line.

Bailey Schiermeyer, JD, is an attorney at Elder Law of East Tennessee. She assists elders, individuals with disabilities, and their families with planning for the legal and financial challenges of aging. Her legal practice areas include life care planning, special needs planning, estate planning, and helping Veterans receive benefits. This column is provided through the Knoxville Bar Association, your trusted source for lawyer referrals. The KBA is a nonprofit corporation that offers community service programs such as the Lawyer Referral & Information Service, speakers' bureau and public education programs.

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