

State offers employees with support system for caretaking duties Columbus Dispatch July 4, 2017

Only in her early 30s, Aimee Szczerbacki didn't know anything about being a family caregiver when her mother, Mary, fell ill with acute myeloid leukemia in the summer of 2015.

Tom Cruse, a 54-year-old state worker, on the other hand, is currently on his fourth tour of duty as a caretaker. Over the past 15 years, he's helped provide care for his father, mother-in-law and brother, and now his mother, JoAnne, whose health has significantly declined after a series of strokes and other medical problems.

Whether a state employee is new to caring for a loved one or a seasoned pro, Ohio hopes its new caregiver support initiative will help workers get the support they need to balance the demands of their lives inside and outside work.

"Caregivers who seek out appropriate supports and resources are not only better caregivers, but also better able to balance work and family life," said Stephanie M. Loucka, director of the Ohio Department of Aging. "With an aging population, it is increasingly important that employers do all they can to support working caregivers."

Nationwide, there are more than 40 million unpaid caregivers. And many of them are also caring for children, earning them the nickname "the sandwich generation."

Officials don't know how many of the roughly 52,000 state employees care for an aging or disabled adult, but they know the numbers are rising with the graying of the country.

"We recognize that life happens to people," said Marty Berkowitz, a spokesman for the Ohio Department of Administrative Services.

Family caregivers provide companionship, do housework and go to medical appointments. They also assist loved ones with such daily activities as bathing, dressing, cooking and shopping.

As people live longer with more chronic illnesses, caregivers also are doing more complex tasks, such as wound care, managing medications, giving injections and operating medical equipment, according to AARP, one of the largest senior advocacy groups.

And they do it out of love, saving the country an estimated \$470 billion a year, often at the expense of their own emotional, financial and physical health, advocates say.

The majority of family caregivers work full or part time, AARP said. And many of them will have to make some kind of workplace accommodations, such as cutting back on their hours or taking a leave of absence, to meet their obligations.

"For years, the state of Ohio has provided benefits related to caring for an older adult; this initiative represents a new partnership between agencies to better coordinate efforts and consolidate information and resources," said Robert Blair, director of the Department of Administrative Services, which is leading the effort.

The state is taking a four-pronged approach to better supporting its employees who are caregivers, Berkowitz said.

It created a one-stop website —

www.das.ohio.gov/forStateEmployees/TotalRewards/BenefitsOverview/CaregiverResources.as

[px](#) — with information about the benefits and resources available to state workers. For instance, they might want to ask about flexible scheduling, alternate work locations or paid-leave options such as sick, vacation or personal leave.

The state also is training supervisors and managers about how the demands of caregiving might affect their employees and what they can do to be supportive. “It starts with understanding,” said John Ratliff, a Department of Aging spokesman.

Ohio also has created a series of six, one-hour brown-bag sessions on such topics as basic dementia facts, caregiver coping skills and knowing when to ask for help for your aging parent. Other sessions include how to help your parents maintain their independence and plan for their futures.

State officials also hope to encourage more workers to use the state’s employee-assistance program. It helps employees with personal problems or work-related issues that might impact their job performance, health and mental or emotional well-being.

“Becoming a caregiver is life-altering, and I wish I’d had some of these resources while my mother was still alive,” said Szczerbacki, a policy administrator for the Department of Administrative Services’ office of collective bargaining.

During her mother’s nearly one-year battle with leukemia, Szczerbacki went to doctor’s and treatment appointments with her. She also helped her mother with housekeeping and personal care. And she was a support person to both her mom and dad.

Her mother died in May 2016.

Cruse, a deputy director in the Department of Administrative Service’s human-resources division, wishes the program had been created a year ago.

If it had been, “my brother, who is retired and does a lot of the heavy lifting with my mother, would have less gray hair,” he joked. “And we would both have gotten better sleep and more quality time with my mom.”

Though his mother is entering “the end of life” and was recently moved to a nursing home, he and his family are committed to spending as much quality time with her as possible.

“The good thing is it’s not too late.”