

SUPPORTING CAREGIVERS IN THE LABOUR FORCE

Exploring the policy options



January 2026

About this report

This report was prepared by **Kelly Pasolli** on behalf of the Ontario Caregiver Coalition (OCC). Kelly is an independent policy & research consultant and member of the OCC Research & Advocacy Committee. Hayley Munro copy-edited and proofread the report.

Acknowledgements

The members of an OCC working group on caregiving and employment provided invaluable input to this report at multiple stages of its development: **Lauren Bates, Rebecca Cheff, Cindy Diogo, Dr. Matthias Hoben, Jessica Hogle, Kayla Lauzon, Kinga Pozniak, and Bernard Savage**. A special thanks to Cindy Diogo for her support with the key informant interviews and Lauren Bates for detailed comments and feedback on the draft report. Thank you also to attendees of the OCC General Members Meeting in June 2025 who provided feedback on scope and approach at the early stages of this project.

I'm grateful to the key informant interviewees who took the time to speak with me about the challenges and opportunities for supporting working caregivers: **Grant Burns, Pratik Bhalerao, Susy Martin, Christine Vigna, and Dr. Allison Williams**. Finally, thank you to the caregivers from the OCC Caregiver Collective who took the time to share their lived experience with employment and caregiving.

Table of Contents

A. Introduction	4
The issue.....	4
The need for change.....	5
Pathways to change	6
B. Scope and approach.....	7
Scope.....	7
Approach	8
C. Current state.....	10
Caregiving leaves.....	10
Employment standards	13
Occupational health and safety	14
Human rights protections	15
Employment/career services	16
Voluntary workplace policies and programs	17
D. Pathways to change.....	19
1. Improve caregiving leaves.....	19
2. Strengthen employee rights to flexibility	22
3. Support caregiver-friendly workplace policies.....	24
4. Help caregivers navigate career transitions.....	26
E. Conclusion	28

A. Introduction

This report explores **options for policy change to better support caregivers in the labour force in Ontario.**

Caregivers are family, friends, and neighbours who provide essential personal, financial, social, psychological, emotional, and physical support for those living with disability, frailty, or acute illness. Most caregivers who support friends and loved ones are also engaged in the labour force. In Ontario alone, there are approximately 2.5 million working caregivers.¹

About one third of workers in Canada are caregivers,² and given aging demographics this number is likely to grow. In the Ontario Caregiver Coalition's (OCC) 2024 Caregiver Survey, more support balancing caregiving and employment was one of the key policy priorities identified by respondents.³

The issue

Balancing work and caregiving can be complicated, challenging, and isolating. Caregivers involved in the OCC have highlighted the mental and physical fatigue that comes from trying to balance the dual priorities of care and work. The Ontario Caregiver Organization (OCO) reports that **45%** of caregivers feel that balancing work and caregiving is stressful.⁴ The demands of caregiving, without the right supports, can lead to high levels of absenteeism and presenteeism at work. Research has also shown that emotions and behaviours spill over between care and work, with negative impacts on caregivers' health and well-being.⁵

Many caregivers also face real or perceived stigma in the workplace. Employers may lack awareness of the demands of caregiving and the impact on caregiver-employees. Some caregivers prefer to hide their caregiving responsibilities and fear that asking for accommodations could result in judgement from peers and reprisal from employers.⁶

¹ The Ontario Caregiver Organization (n.d.) [Guidance for Supporting Caregiving Employees](#).

² Carers Canada (n.d.) [Caregiver-Friendly Workplaces: Inclusive and Accommodating Employment Practices](#).

³ Ontario Caregiver Coalition (2024) [Building a Better Ontario for Caregivers by Listening to the Voices of Caregivers](#)

⁴ The Ontario Caregiver Organization (2024) [Work and Caregiving: A Balancing Act: Toolkit for Working Caregivers](#)

⁵ Lam WWY., Nielsen K., Sprigg ,CA., & Kelly, CM. (2022). "The demands and resources of working informal caregivers of older people: A systematic review." *Work & Stress* 36 (1)

⁶ Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (2024) [Working Caregivers Project: Phase 1](#)

Because of these challenges, many working caregivers end up modifying their employment or leaving the workforce altogether. In the OCC's 2024 survey of caregivers, **23.2%** reported that they have reduced their number of hours worked due to caregiving and **14.5%** have stopped working altogether. For many caregivers, leaving work means not only foregone income and career prospects but also the loss of social networks and a sense of belonging.

The need for change

Some organizations are taking action on this issue. Many employers have implemented caregiver-friendly workplace policies such as flexible leave and alternative working arrangements. Some unions have also negotiated for these types of supports on behalf of their members. Researchers and experts are working to build evidence about the positive impacts of supporting working caregivers and mobilize knowledge about the steps employers can take to support the carers in their workforce.⁷

These efforts are important, but without policy intervention they are unlikely to have impact at scale. Many caregivers continue to lack the support they need to balance work and care; **30.3%** of respondents to the OCC survey have not accessed any employment-related supports. Many of the policy supports that do exist are fragmented, administratively complex, and difficult to access.

The impact of these challenges stretches far beyond individual caregivers. When caregivers leave the workforce, employers lose access to qualified workers. Researchers have estimated that Canadian employers lose **\$1.3B** in productivity annually due to the demands of caregiving.⁸ The negative impacts on caregivers' health and well-being create long-term costs to our social and health systems.

It's clear that more needs to be done to support working caregivers. This report reviews the current state of policy supports for working caregivers, identifies gaps and challenges, and considers options for policy change to address these gaps. The options align with three overarching policy goals, developed in collaboration with the OCC:

- 1. Maintain labour force attachment for caregivers**
- 2. Support the well-being of working caregivers**
- 3. Make it easy for working caregivers to get support**

⁷ McMaster University (n.d.) [Gender Health & Caregiver Friendly Workplaces](#)

⁸ Stonebridge, C., Bounajim, F., Hermus, G. & Theriault, L. (2012). [Home and Community Care in Canada: An Economic Footprint](#). Conference Board of Canada

Pathways to change

Achieving these policy goals will require policy change in multiple areas. The options reviewed in this report focus on four key pathways for change to meet the needs of working caregivers in a diversity of employment and caregiving situations:

- 1. Improve caregiving leaves**
- 2. Strengthen employee rights to flexibility**
- 3. Support caregiver-friendly workplace policies**
- 4. Help caregivers navigate career transitions**

Taking action to address needs and gaps in each of these four areas will ensure that working caregivers receive the support and recognition they need to effectively balance their roles as workers and carers.

B. Scope and approach

Scope

This report focuses specifically on Ontario policies to support working caregivers.⁹ It does **not** cover:

- *Policies for caregivers who are self-employed or independent contractors.* Better supports for these caregivers is a critical issue, especially as many caregivers may seek out self-employment and contract work as a route to greater flexibility. This topic connects to a much broader set of important policy issues (both provincial and federal) about the rights of self-employed and gig workers and the fair application of employment standards for everyone in the labour force.¹⁰ Given this, we believe that exploring policy options to support caregivers who are self-employed or independent contractors is worthy of a separate and more in-depth inquiry.
- *Policies for those not in the labour force.* This report focuses specifically on individuals who are in the labour force (either employed, or looking for work). It does not consider policy supports for those who are not in the labour force (e.g. students, retirees, or those who are unable to or are not actively seeking work).
- *Federal policies.* Federal policy options for supporting working caregivers have been thoroughly analyzed by the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence.¹¹ This report seeks to address a gap in the analysis of policy options at the Ontario level, while acknowledging areas where federal and provincial policies for working caregivers intersect, most notably the provision of Employment Insurance (EI) compassionate care benefits for caregivers taking job-protected leaves under provincial legislation.

This report also focuses specifically on employment-focused policies while recognizing that changes in other policy areas (including health and community care, respite care, and financial support for caregiving) are needed to ensure that working caregivers can effectively balance work and care. Caregivers involved in the OCC have shared how

⁹ While the policy landscape for working caregivers varies across provinces and territories, the challenges are similar. The overall insights and policy directions in this report may therefore also be relevant to other jurisdictions across Canada.

¹⁰ Worker's Action Centre (2022) [From the Frontlines: An Urgent Agenda for Decent Work](#); Feldmann, G. (2023) [Filling the Gap in Employment Insurance for Self-employed and Gig Workers](#), Policy Options

¹¹ Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (2022) [Giving Care: An Approach to a Better Caregiving Landscape in Canada](#); Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (2025) [A National Caregiving Strategy for Canada](#)

challenging it is to prioritize both care and work given gaps in the availability and reliability of home care and respite services, as well as the financial costs of caregiving. The OCC is conducting additional research and advocacy in these related areas.¹²

While this report focuses specifically on changes to government policies, it's important to recognize that solving this issue will require a coordinated response from government, employers, labour market organizations, and caregivers. In this sense, the options reviewed in this report should be considered a starting point for a broader cultural shift to recognize and address the needs of working caregivers.

Approach

The identification and analysis of policy options in this report is informed by:

- A review of academic and grey literature on the challenges and support needs of working caregivers
- Key informant interviews with experts from relevant sectors (research, HR, business, and organized labour)
- Input from members of the OCC Caregiver Collective

An OCC working group focused on employment and caregiving supported the literature review and provided input on the scope, policy options, and analysis.

The analysis of policy options in this report starts from the recognition that there is no one-size-fits-all policy solution for working caregivers. The duration, intensity, and predictability of caregiving demands are diverse, as are the employment contexts that caregivers work in (see **Table 1**). Given this, working caregivers need different types of supports (and the supports an individual caregiver needs may vary over time). For example, caregivers dealing with a sudden change in their caregiving situation may need extended time away from work, while those with less intense but sometimes unpredictable caregiving demands could benefit from flexible working hours.

¹² Ontario Caregiver Coalition (n.d.) [Policy Briefs Series – 2024 Caregiver Survey](#)

Table 1: Diversity in Caregiver-Employee Circumstances

Employment context Different employment circumstances create unique constraints and opportunities for caregivers	Caregiving demands Diversity in caregiving situations impacts the ability to balance work and care	Identity Caregivers with different identities and backgrounds have distinct needs related to balancing work and care
<p>Hours – Full-time vs. part-time vs. variable</p> <p>Location – Working from home vs. hybrid vs. on-site</p> <p>Scheduling – Rigid vs. flexible</p> <p>Security – Temporary work vs. permanent</p> <p>Access to benefits</p> <p>Risk of exploitation</p>	<p>Duration – Temporary or long-term (in relation to caregiver's life course)</p> <p>Intensity – Time requirements, level of demand/complexity</p> <p>Predictability – Consistency in when/how caregiving responsibilities show up</p> <p>Level of support – Availability of formal and informal community supports for caregiving</p>	<p>Individuals from equity-deserving groups might face challenges related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systemic barriers to service/support access • Lack of recognition/visibility • Different norms around caregiving <p>Young caregivers may face distinct challenges balancing care with early-career decisions and transitions</p>

C. Current state

Publicly funded and/or delivered supports for working caregivers in Ontario fall into five broad categories: **caregiving leaves, employment standards, occupational health and safety, human rights protections, and employment/career services**. Many employers have also implemented **voluntary workplace policies and programs** to support caregiver-employees.

Caregiving leaves

The Ontario Employment Standards Act (ESA) provides multiple job-protected leaves for employees with caregiving responsibilities. **Table 2** summarizes these leaves. Employees have the option to combine these leaves (the right to each is independent of any right an employee may have to the other leaves). The ESA prohibits employers from penalizing employees for exercising their right to take these leaves, and employees can file a claim with the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development if they feel they have been penalized.

While all caregiving leaves provided under the ESA are unpaid, many caregivers taking leave would also be eligible to receive compassionate care benefits under the federal EI program.

Table 2: Caregiving Leaves under the Employment Standards Act (ESA)

	Eligible caregiving scenarios	Eligible relationships	Length	Paid/ unpaid	Verification requirements
Family Caregiver Leave	Provide care or support someone with a serious medical condition	Spouse, parent, child, grandparent, grandchild, sibling, child's spouse, other dependents	Up to 8 weeks	Unpaid	Requires a medical certificate from a qualified health practitioner, but leave can begin before the certificate is obtained
Family Medical Leave	Provide care or support to someone with a serious medical condition and a significant risk of death occurring within a period of 26 weeks	Same categories as Family Caregiver leave plus uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces, and those considered "like a family member" as verified through the EI compassionate care benefits attestation form	Up to 28 weeks in a 52-week period	Unpaid	Requires a medical certificate from a qualified health practitioner, but leave can begin before the certificate is obtained
Critical Illness Leave	Provide care or support to someone with a critical illness (excluding chronic conditions)	Same as Family Medical Leave	Up to 27 weeks for a minor child or 17 weeks for an adult within a 52-week period	Unpaid	Requires a medical certificate from a qualified health practitioner, but leave can begin before the certificate is obtained
Family Responsibility Leave	Illness, injury, medical emergencies or urgent matters related to family members	Same as Family Caregiver Leave	Up to 3 days	Unpaid	Employer may request evidence of eligibility that is "reasonable in the circumstances," but cannot require a medical note

Gaps and challenges

The multiple caregiving leaves included in the ESA demonstrate the government's recognition and acknowledgement of caregivers' needs, and provide an important foundation to build on. At the same time, the current leave system has some important gaps and challenges.

Financial challenges – Because all of the caregiving leaves provided through the ESA are unpaid, caregivers will suffer financially as a result of focusing on their caregiving responsibilities. While some caregivers will also be eligible for compassionate care benefits under the EI system, these benefits cover only a fraction of their regular income. This disproportionately impacts family members with lower incomes who are more likely to take a leave (including women who earn less than their spouses).¹³

Length and eligibility restrictions – The existing leaves fail to account for the long-term, episodic, and unpredictable nature of many caregiving situations. Restrictive eligibility requirements, like the requirement that the care recipient be at "significant risk of death within 26 weeks," are difficult for medical professionals to confirm and leave many caregivers without options to support longer-term caregiving needs. For many caregivers, three days of Family Responsibility Leave is also likely to be inadequate for dealing with unexpected, short-term caregiving needs, such as medical appointments or cancelled home care visits.

Piecemeal approach – Having multiple leaves to address caregiving needs reflects the government's efforts over time to provide more job protection for caregivers in different situations. However, the result is a confusing array of different leaves that is difficult to understand and navigate.

Reach and access barriers – The piecemeal approach to caregiver leaves is likely one of the contributors to low uptake. In the OCC's 2024 Caregiver Survey, only 3.7% of employed respondents had taken a paid leave of absence from work and only 1.9% had taken an unpaid leave. Employers, especially small businesses, may lack the knowledge or will to educate employees about leave options, and over-stretched health practitioners are also unlikely be able to provide support and advice to all caregivers about leaves. This places the impetus for learning about and navigating the administrative requirements for leave-taking (such as obtaining a medical certificate) on caregivers, who are often short on time and resources. Caregivers may also fear retaliation from employers for taking leaves. While there are protections against reprisal in the ESA, they rely on the employee having the time, knowledge, and wherewithal to file a complaint.¹⁴

¹³ Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (2025) [A National Caregiving Strategy for Canada](#)

¹⁴ Worker's Action Centre (2022) [From the Frontlines: An Urgent Agenda for Decent Work](#)

Narrow definition of caring relationships – Family Caregiver Leave and Family Responsibility Leave, in particular, have restrictive specifications on the type of family member that an employee can take leave to provide care for. This negatively impacts individuals who provide care for friends, neighbours, or other chosen family members.

Employment standards

In addition to caregiving leaves, the ESA includes several provisions that are relevant to caregivers' ability to balance work with caregiving responsibilities. These include:

- **Sick leave** – Most employees have the right to take up to three days of unpaid leave due to personal illness, injury, or medical emergency. In practice, caregivers may end up using this leave for caregiving.
- **Bereavement leave** – Most employees have the right to take up to two days of unpaid job-protected leave because of the death of certain family members.
- **Disconnecting from work** – Employers with 25+ employees are required to have a written policy with respect to disconnecting from work (defined as not engaging in work-related communications). This clause can help give caregivers clarity on when they are expected to be engaged in work-related communications and when they are not, easing some of the mental burden of balancing work and care (though it is important to note that this clause does not establish an employee's right to disconnect from work).
- **Vacation** – Employees with less than five years of employment are entitled to two weeks of vacation time after each 12-month vacation entitlement year. Employees with five or more years of employment are entitled to three weeks of vacation time. In practice, caregivers may end up using vacation time to deal with caregiving responsibilities.

Gaps and challenges

Existing employment standards provide an important baseline of protection for working caregivers. However, more could be done to account for the needs of the growing number of working caregivers in Ontario.

Flexible working arrangements (such as flexible or reduced work hours, working remotely, or job sharing) are a critical need for many working caregivers, and for many the only option that allows them to manage care responsibilities while staying in the workforce. While some employers proactively offer flexible options to employees, many do not. Employees may lack awareness of the options available or be reluctant to ask their employer about options for fear of judgement or reprisal.

While there are no provisions in the ESA related to flexibility, employers do have a duty to accommodate based on family status under the Ontario Human Rights Code (discussed in more detail below).

Other gaps in current employment standards that could impact caregivers include:

- **No right to advance notice for work schedule** – Employees who are balancing work and care need predictability in knowing when they will be required to work.
- **No paid sick days** – Under the ESA, employees have access to only three unpaid sick days. Adequate paid sick leave is important for caregivers who may rely on sick days to deal with unexpected caregiving emergencies, not to mention taking time off to tend to their own physical and mental health.
- **Limited bereavement leave** – For many caregivers, the period after a care recipient dies is not only emotionally difficult but comes with additional administrative burdens. Two days of bereavement leave is not adequate for these needs.

Caregivers may also be impacted by inconsistencies in how current ESA standards are applied and enforced — particularly those who are working in low-income, insecure, or exploitative workplace environments. The ESA contains many exemptions and special rules for workers in specific industries, meaning that not all caregivers are covered by existing protections.

As with caregiving leaves, caregivers may fear retaliation from employers for asserting their other rights under the ESA. While employees are protected against reprisal, the onus is on them to file a claim if their rights have been violated.¹⁵

Occupational health and safety

The Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) provides basic protections to employees in Ontario, including the right to refuse or stop work where their health or safety is in danger. The Act's general duty clause requires that employers take every precaution reasonable under the circumstances for the protection of workers, which may be interpreted to extend to the protection of mental health and psychological safety, which are key issues for caregivers.¹⁶ The importance of mental health and psychological safety in the workplace is

¹⁵ Worker's Action Centre (2022) [From the Frontlines: An Urgent Agenda for Decent Work](#)

¹⁶ Public Services Health and Safety Association (2022) [Workplace Psychological Health and Safety: A Guide to Support Worker Well-being](#)

increasingly on the public radar with new resources and voluntary standards being developed by health agencies and other organizations.¹⁷

Gaps and challenges

The increased focus on mental health and psychological safety as part of occupational health and safety, and the increasing number of tools and resources to support workplaces in addressing these issues, are highly promising developments for caregivers. However, more could be done to explicitly recognize caregiving as a workplace safety issue, raise awareness, and provide strategies to address the specific needs and barriers of caregivers.

Human rights protections

Under the Ontario Human Rights Code, employers have a duty to accommodate on the basis of family and marital status (defined as spousal or parent-child relationships). This means that employers are obligated to modify or adjust an employee's duties or conditions of work according to their individual needs up to the point of undue hardship. Examples of undue hardship include accommodations that are too costly to implement or that cause a health and safety risk.

The Human Rights Code also includes protections from discrimination and harassment on other grounds that can help protect working caregivers including disability, age, and gender identity.

Gaps and challenges

While the Human Rights Code provides important protections for employees based on their family and marital status, its interpretation is highly specific to each caregiving and employment situation. This means that in many circumstances it is difficult to know what accommodations an employee might be entitled to. The flexibility of the protections under the Code, while designed to encompass a wide range of needs, can contribute to a lack of certainty and clarity.

A lack of awareness and understanding of the protections under the Code also means that many employers do not take proactive steps to better meet the needs of caregivers.¹⁸ Filing

¹⁷ Mental Health Commission of Canada (n.d.) [National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#); Public Services Health & Safety Association (n.d.) [Mental Health](#)

¹⁸ Ontario Human Rights Commission (2006) [The Cost of Caring: Report on the Consultation on Discrimination on the Basis of Family Status](#)

a human rights application is a complicated and burdensome process, with backlogs and understaffing contributing to delays in hearing cases.

The narrow definition of relationships included in family status protections also excludes important familial and non-familiar relationships that characterize many caregiving situations.¹⁹

Employment services

Caregivers, like all Ontarians, have access to publicly funded employment services through Employment Ontario. These services can help them understand their career and employment options and support job search activities. Those who are unemployed may have access to additional services and supports including skills development opportunities.

Caregiving organizations also provide some resources and tools (such as the Ontario Caregiver Organization's Toolkit for Working Caregivers²⁰) designed specifically to help caregivers navigate and understand the workforce as caregivers.

Gaps and challenges

Working caregivers face distinct challenges navigating career transitions and finding work that meets their needs. These challenges are particularly acute for young caregivers, many of whom struggle to gain momentum early in their career while balancing their caregiving responsibilities.²¹ Existing employment services are largely focused on helping people quickly find work and may lack the specialized expertise needed to steer caregivers through a complex labour market and find a career path that aligns with their dual role as workers and carers. Employment services are also designed based on the assumption that clients will come to them, with fixed hours and limited mobility that could make it difficult for those with caregiving duties to access services.²²

Employment services that validate the needs of caregivers and help them plan and target their job search based on their caregiving responsibilities could help more caregivers successfully balance work and care.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ The Ontario Caregiver Organization (2024) [Work and Caregiving: A Balancing Act](#)

²¹ Social Care Institute for Excellence (2023) [Carer's breaks for Young Carers and Young Adult Carers: Guidance for Commissioners and Providers](#)

²² FutureFit AI (n.d.) [The Future of Employment Services: What Canada Can Learn from Global Leaders](#)

Voluntary workplace policies and programs

Many employers offer workplace policies and programs to support caregivers that go beyond what is required by employment standards legislation. In many workplaces, unions also negotiate additional supports for caregivers as part of their collective bargaining agreements with employers. Examples of workplace policies and programs that support caregivers include:

- Flexible/alternative working arrangements
- Leave top-ups and/or extended leaves for caregivers
- Flexible wellness benefits and Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs)
- Peer support groups for caregivers
- Training for managers and supervisors on how to support caregivers
- Culture change initiatives that seek to remove stigma around caregiving and foster psychological safety and support

Researchers and experts have developed many tools and resources to support employers who are looking for ways to better support caregiving employees.²³ The Canadian Standard Association's *Caregiver Inclusive and Accommodating Organizations* Standard (B701-17), developed together with McMaster University and a committee of experts, is a voluntary standard that provides guidelines on developing and implementing caregiver-friendly workplace policies.²⁴ An emerging body of research is also providing evidence of the positive cost-benefit of investing in caregiver-friendly workplace policies.²⁵

Gaps and challenges

There is a growing awareness and willingness among employers to talk about the challenges of caregiving, and many have stepped up to offer more support for caregivers in their workforce. However, many still lack a basic awareness of the scope and impact of these challenges, including how many caregivers are in their workforce and what their needs are. Culture changes to address the stigma of caregiving and ensure caregivers feel safe to self-identify is a critical first step in creating more caregiver-friendly workplaces.

²³ McMaster University (n.d.) [Gender Health & Caregiver Friendly Workplaces](#); The Ontario Caregiver Organization (2021) [Caregivers in the Workplace: A Guide for Employers](#); Carers Canada (n.d.) [Caregiver-Friendly Workplaces: Inclusive and Accommodating Employment Practices](#)

²⁴ McMaster University (2020) [Quick Start Implementation Guide: Carer-Friendly Workplace Standard](#)

²⁵ Mofildi, A., Tompa, E., Williams, A.M., Yazdani, A. (2019) "Impact of a Caregiver-Friendly Workplace Policies Intervention: A Prospective Economic Evaluation" *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 61(6); Williams, A.W., Tompa, E., Lero, D.S., Fast, J., Yazdani, A. & Zeytinoglu, I.U. (2017) "Evaluation of Caregiver-Friendly Workplace Policy Interventions on the Health of Full-Time Caregiver Employees: Implementation and Cost-Benefit Analysis" *BMC Public Health* 17

Small businesses face specific challenges in addressing caregiver needs. They may lack the resources to introduce caregiver support programs as part of broader recruitment, retention, EDI, and workplace wellness initiatives that are pursued by larger employers. At the same time, small businesses are often highly motivated to keep productive and experienced employees and may be better positioned to offer flexibility in leaves or working arrangements to retain these employees. Employers located in small communities with a smaller and less mobile labour pool may also be more motivated to offer flexibility and support for caregivers.

Employers in industries that require in-person work and specified hours of work may find it more difficult to accommodate caregivers' need for flexibility. For many of these employers, investments in adequate social infrastructure (transportation, childcare, and health care services) are seen as critical for ensuring that caregivers in their workforce are able to effectively balance work and care.

Finding the right level of flexibility to accommodate different caregiving situations is another challenge in the workplace. Where managers and supervisors have discretion to approve flexible working arrangements for employees, for example, there is a risk that flexibility will not be applied consistently, especially if frontline leaders have not received training on recognizing and responding to caregiver strain.

D. Pathways to change

The gaps and challenges in the current state highlight where policy change is needed to better support working caregivers.

This section presents options for policy change informed by these gaps and challenges as well as input from the OCC working group on caregiving and employment, key informant interviewees and the OCC Caregiver Collective. The options focus on four key pathways to change:

- 1. Improve caregiving leaves**
- 2. Strengthen employee rights to flexibility**
- 3. Support caregiver-friendly workplace policies**
- 4. Help caregivers navigate career transitions**

Each of the options discussed within these four pathways to change is analyzed according to the criteria outlined in **Box 1**.

Box 1: Criteria for policy options to support working caregivers

- **Effectiveness for caregivers** – Helps caregivers to stay in the workforce (if they wish), and balance work and care while maintaining their well-being
- **Equity** – Addresses the needs of vulnerable and equity-deserving caregivers
- **Accessibility** – Easy for caregivers to learn about, understand, and access
- **System impact** – Potential impact on employers and other system actors
- **Feasibility** – Alignment with existing policy and administrative frameworks
- **Economic considerations** – Anticipated short- and long-term costs and benefits

1. Improve caregiving leaves

Many working caregivers face periods where their caregiving responsibilities are so demanding that it is impossible or unsustainable for them to both work and provide care. This is particularly true in environments where caregivers have less autonomy over their working location and hours (such as manufacturing and healthcare). Caregivers involved in the OCC have emphasized that even in cases where employers are supportive and provide accommodations, taking leave is sometimes inevitable. Currently, job-protected leaves for caregivers are restrictive, inadequate and difficult to navigate.

Create a harmonized Caregiver Leave that covers a range of caregiving scenarios – A simplified and streamlined Caregiver Leave that combines Family Caregiver Leave, Family Medical Leave, and Critical Illness Leave would make it easier for caregivers to understand and access leave when they are unable to work due to the demands of caregiving. This harmonized leave could be designed without overly specific medical criteria (such as a risk of death within 26 weeks) and instead designed to cover a range of different caregiving scenarios that might require time away from work, including changes in the availability of home and community care services or a shift in the intensity of caregiving responsibilities. To validate the need for leave, caregivers could be asked to obtain a simple form from any medical or other service provider verifying their care responsibilities.

Expand leave length – The harmonized Caregiver Leave could provide a job-protected leave of up to 50 weeks, with an additional six weeks of leave for caregivers after a care recipient dies. This aligns with the proposal by the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence that the federal government also expand EI caregiver benefits to 50 weeks, and include an additional six weeks of benefits to support the grieving process and administrative duties that come after the death of a care recipient.²⁶ This approach would ensure that caregivers with longer-term and intensive caregiving responsibilities are able to take the time they need away from work.

Expand Family Responsibility Leave and Bereavement Leave – Family Responsibility Leave could be expanded from three days to 10 days to support additional unexpected, short-term caregiving demands for caregivers who are balancing work and care, such as accompanying care recipients to medical appointments. This change would make it easier for caregivers to use sick days and vacation leave for the purposes they are actually intended — to support their own health and well-being — rather than using these days for caregiving. Bereavement leave rights could also be expanded from two days to 10 days to ensure that working caregivers (including those who have not accessed other caregiving leaves) can take needed time away from work after a care recipient dies.

Ensure adequate financial support for caregivers on leave – It's important that caregivers who take job-protected leaves have adequate financial supports to support themselves and those they are providing care for. The Ontario government could work with the federal government to advocate for enhanced EI benefits that cover a range of different caregiving scenarios, in line with the recommendations offered by the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence.²⁷ The OCC's proposed Ontario Caregiver Support Benefit²⁸ would also provide needed financial support to working caregivers taking leave.

²⁶ Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (2025) [A National Caregiving Strategy for Canada](#)

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ontario Caregiver Coalition (2024) [Building a Better Ontario for Caregivers by Alleviating the Financial Hardships of Caregiving](#)

Ensure all caregiving relationships are eligible – Caregiver leaves could be provided to anyone who is providing care for someone in their lives — family members, friends, and neighbors.

Build awareness of leaves – The government could conduct an awareness campaign to ensure that employees and their employers are aware of caregiving leaves and the situations that they cover. The creation of a harmonized Caregiver Leave would make it significantly easier to build this awareness and communicate to caregivers, employers and other interest holders about job-protected leaves, how they work, and why they matter.

Analysis

Effectiveness and equity

A streamlined and expanded Caregiver Leave that covers a broader range of caregiving situations and relationships, along with the flexibility to take more occasional days off through an expanded Family Responsibility Leave, would help relieve caregiver stress and ensure that more caregivers can stay attached to the labour force. Ensuring that caregivers who take leave receive adequate financial support is an important equity consideration. Caregivers working in low-income and more precarious work may not be able to afford to take unpaid leaves.

Accessibility

Combining existing leaves into a single, more flexible Caregiver Leave would make it much easier for caregivers (as well as employers, health care providers, and other system actors) to understand what leave they are eligible for. It would also ensure that more caregivers whose current caregiving situations fall outside the narrow eligibility criteria and relationship definitions of Family Caregiver, Family Medical, and Critical Illness Leaves have access to leave when they need it.

Feasibility

Most of the proposed options for strengthening caregiving leaves could be achieved through the framework of the ESA, which in recent months has been frequently amended by the provincial government. Under the ESA, the onus is on employees to file a complaint if they experience reprisal as a result of taking leaves. Building more awareness among both employees and employers about caregiver leaves will be an important way to mitigate the risk of reprisal. Decent work advocates have also called for more proactive enforcement of ESA standards and better compensation for workers whose employers violate ESA standards.²⁹

²⁹ Worker's Action Centre (2022) [From the Frontlines: An Urgent Agenda for Decent Work](#)

Ensuring adequate financial support for caregivers on leave would require pursuing different policy avenues, such as advocating for federal changes to EI benefits or introducing the OCC's proposed Ontario Caregiver Support Benefit. Given the complexity of this topic and its intersections with other levels of government and policy areas, the provincial government could consider conducting additional research and consultation to explore the effectiveness and efficiency of different strategies for ensuring the financial well-being of caregivers taking job-protected leaves.

System impact

These proposed changes to caregiver leaves could create challenges for employers, who would likely have to deal with employees taking longer and more frequent leaves. A possible mitigation strategy could be to provide additional recruitment and hiring support for employers who are dealing with workforce disruptions caused by caregiver leaves. Building awareness among employers about the challenges faced by working caregivers and the emerging evidence of the positive cost-impact of caregiver-friendly workplaces could also help build more support and buy-in.

Economic considerations

While strengthening caregiver leaves would come with short-terms costs (like increased labour costs for employers and decreased taxable earnings), in the long run these proposed changes could generate benefits to society and the economy as more caregivers stay attached to the labour force, experience better physical and mental health, and provide better care to their loved ones.

2. Strengthen employee rights to flexibility

Not all caregivers want or need to take leave from their job. They simply need flexibility in working arrangements to be able to balance work and care.

Amend the definition of family status within the Human Rights Code to include a broader range of relationships – Currently, the Human Rights Code includes a duty for employers to accommodate employee needs related to family and spousal status. Family status is defined as “the status of being in a parent and child situation.” Expanding the definition of family status to include other relationships that characterize many caregiving situations would strengthen protections for working caregivers. The Ontario Human Rights Commission has identified many concerns with the current narrow definition and interpretation given the diversity of family forms and caregiving relationships and has recommended that the Human Rights Code be amended to include a broader range of relationships.³⁰

³⁰ Ontario Human Rights Commission (2006) [The Cost of Caring: Report on the Consultation on Discrimination on the Basis of Family Status](#)

Create a regulation to increase clarity on the duty to accommodate on the basis of family and marital status – Given widespread issues with awareness and understanding of employers' duty to accommodate based on the grounds of family and spousal status,³¹ the Ontario government could provide additional clarity by creating a regulation under the Code. This regulation could enshrine the right to request accommodation and include principles and guidance for accommodation processes.

Analysis

Effectiveness and equity

Developing a regulation that increases clarity and awareness on employers' duty to accommodate would increase the likelihood that employees can access flexible working arrangements — improving their well-being and ability to stay attached to the labour force. Broadening these rights to incorporate all caregiving relationships by amending the definition of family status is important for ensuring equity for many groups who are disproportionately affected by the current narrow definition in the Code, including older persons, newcomer and racialized families, and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals.³²

Accessibility

Enforcing protections under the Human Rights Code can be difficult for caregivers given the significant time and resources required to launch a human rights challenge. Ensuring more effective and accessible human rights complaints processes is one of the priorities identified by decent work advocates in Ontario.³³ Creating a regulation under the Human Rights Code could make it easier for working caregivers to access their rights by providing more clarity and certainty on employers' duty to accommodate.

Feasibility

There is precedent for creating regulations under the Human Rights Code to clarify specific protections. Regulation 290/98 establishes specific business practices landlords can use to select tenants. This provides a useful template for a regulation that would provide additional clarity to employers on the duty to accommodate based on family and spousal status. Protected grounds in the Human Rights Code are also periodically updated to reflect societal shifts and increasing recognition of different identities and experiences. Organizations like the Vanier Institute of the Family have offered important input on how governments can define families and relationships in ways that are more inclusive and reflect the increasing diversity of close relationships that fulfill the same functions as traditional families (including caregiving).³⁴

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Worker's Action Centre (2022) [From the Frontlines: An Urgent Agenda for Decent Work](#)

³⁴ Sakaluk, L. (2024) [Overview of Families in Canada](#), Vanier Institute of the Family

System impact

Strengthening rights to flexibility for caregivers under the Human Rights Code could generate pushback from employers who see the provision of additional accommodations as a burden. A possible mitigation strategy could be to build employer awareness of the need and demand for flexible working arrangements and highlight successful cases of flexible workplace policies that have already been adopted by leading workplaces.

While the proposed changes would likely generate support from many workers in particular sectors and industries, they are less likely to receive strong backing from workers and organized labour in sectors where accommodations around remote working and flexible scheduling are not feasible.

Economic considerations

Strengthened rights to flexibility under the Human Rights Code could generate short-term costs for employers, but in the long-term create savings through reduced turnover, increased labour market attachment, and the improved well-being of both caregivers and care recipients.

3. Support caregiver-friendly workplace policies

Every workplace is different. It's important that job-protected leaves and baseline rights to flexibility are complemented by government action that promotes the adoption of caregiver-friendly workplace policies. Intervening directly in the workplace is also important for addressing outdated cultural barriers and stigma around caregiving. Government intervention could include *requirements* for the development of caregiver-friendly workplace policies, *incentives* to adopt these policies, or a mix.

Include caregiver-friendly workplace policies in occupational health and safety

requirements – Many issues faced by working caregivers fit neatly into a workplace health and safety framework, including stigma, stress, and mental health considerations.³⁵ Under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA), workplaces are required to develop health & safety plans and programs for specific health and safety issues such as violence and harassment and return to work. Support for working caregivers could be added to this list, with clear requirements for employers on how to ensure the safety and well-being of caregivers. The Canadian Standard Association (CSA) *Caregiver Inclusive and Accommodating Organizations Standard* (B701-17) provides a useful framework to guide employers in developing workplace policies and programs to support caregivers.

³⁵ Huckle, J. from RE/Ignite and Thrive Coaching (2025) [Occupational Health & Safety: The Next Frontier in Caregiver-Friendly Workplaces?](#) Medium

Provide incentives to adopt specific caregiver-friendly workplace policies – In addition to embedding caregiver-friendly workplace policies and programs in the OHSA, the government could incentivize employers to voluntarily implement specific workplace policies that support caregivers, such as paid caregiver leave days and flexible working arrangements. Incentives could include tax credits, rebates, preferential access to public procurement opportunities, and/or recognition programs.

Analysis

Effectiveness and equity

Intervening to ensure that workplaces are adopting more caregiver-friendly workplace policies is important for ensuring the well-being and labour force attachment of caregivers in a range of different employment situations. While incentives could encourage more employers to voluntarily take action on this challenge, it's possible that those who would take advantage of incentives would be those who already have greater capacity and willingness to accommodate caregiving needs. This concern could be mitigated by targeting incentives to businesses, sectors, and/or specific workplace policy changes where additional support is needed to drive change in workplace practices.

Accessibility

Importantly, requiring caregiver-friendly workplace policies puts the responsibility on employers to develop and offer supports to caregivers. This removes some of the burden for learning about, navigating, and accessing supports from overstretched caregivers.

Feasibility

An advantage of embedding caregiver-friendly workplace policies in the framework of occupational health and safety is the established infrastructure that is already in place for employer awareness, training and support, and accountability.³⁶ Many OHSA regulations already require compliance with CSA standards, providing a useful template for embedding the *Caregiver Inclusive and Accommodating Organizations Standard* (B701-17) in occupational health and safety requirements.

There is also precedent for providing incentives to employers to achieve specific policy priorities around employment supports for target groups, such as grants to support the hiring and training of apprentices.

System impact

It's likely that the introduction of new health and safety requirements would result in pushback from some employers, particularly small businesses. Given this, the government

³⁶ Ibid

could consider a phased implementation approach with tailored incentives, training, and supports for businesses with fewer resources to devote to meeting new requirements.

Economic considerations

While changes to support caregiver-friendly workplace policies could generate additional short-term costs for government, in the long-term they are likely to pay off through enhanced caregiver well-being and attachment to the labour force.

4. Help caregivers navigate career transitions

Caregivers who are seeking out new career opportunities — whether because of a break from the workforce to take care of caregiving responsibilities, or the need to find employment that better accommodates their dual role — could benefit from tailored services and supports that help them navigate an increasingly complex labour market.

Co-design and test a targeted career services program for caregivers – The Ontario government could bring together employment service providers and caregivers with lived experience to co-design a career services program that is explicitly aligned with the needs and constraints of caregivers in the labour force. The program could incorporate awareness-building of caregiver rights in the workplace, exploration of career paths that offer greater flexibility in working arrangements and coaching to caregivers to communicate the strengths and skills that they have to offer in the workplace.

Analysis

Effectiveness and equity

A caregiver-focused career services program would fill an important gap in services and supports for caregivers who have left employment to address caregiving responsibilities, or those who need to change career paths. A growing body of evidence has demonstrated the positive impacts of high-quality career development services for individuals' employment outcomes and overall well-being.³⁷ Tailoring these services to the unique needs of caregivers could ensure that they have equal opportunities to benefit from the positive impact of career services.

Accessibility

While all caregivers currently have access to publicly funded employment services offered through Employment Ontario, these services often require in-person visits during set business hours. A program targeted to caregivers could ensure accessibility by offering

³⁷ OECD (2004) [Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap](#); Hooley, T. & Dodd, V. (2015) ["The Economic Benefits of Career Guidance"](#) Careers England

services that are easy to access remotely and offer flexibility in time commitment and participation.

Feasibility

The Ontario government regularly invests in new employment and training supports and services through vehicles such as the Skills Development Fund. Investing in the development and testing of a career services program for caregivers aligns with the government's focus on investing in workers and supporting them to obtain rewarding employment.

System impact

The development of a career services program for caregivers aligns with the priorities of many employers, unions, and other organizations that are working to provide additional education and support to working caregivers. This program could help reduce the burden many of these organizations take on in order to help caregivers navigate the labour market.

Economic considerations

The cost of developing and testing a career services program for caregivers would be small relative to other government investments. The government could place an emphasis on designing a program approach that is scalable and easy to integrate within the framework of existing publicly funded employment and career services.

E. Conclusion

It's clear that more needs to be done to support working caregivers. Without more policy intervention, working caregivers will continue to experience stress and burnout, and many will be forced to leave the workforce altogether. This has negative impacts not only for caregivers, but for employers, care recipients, and the overall health of Ontario's communities and the economy.

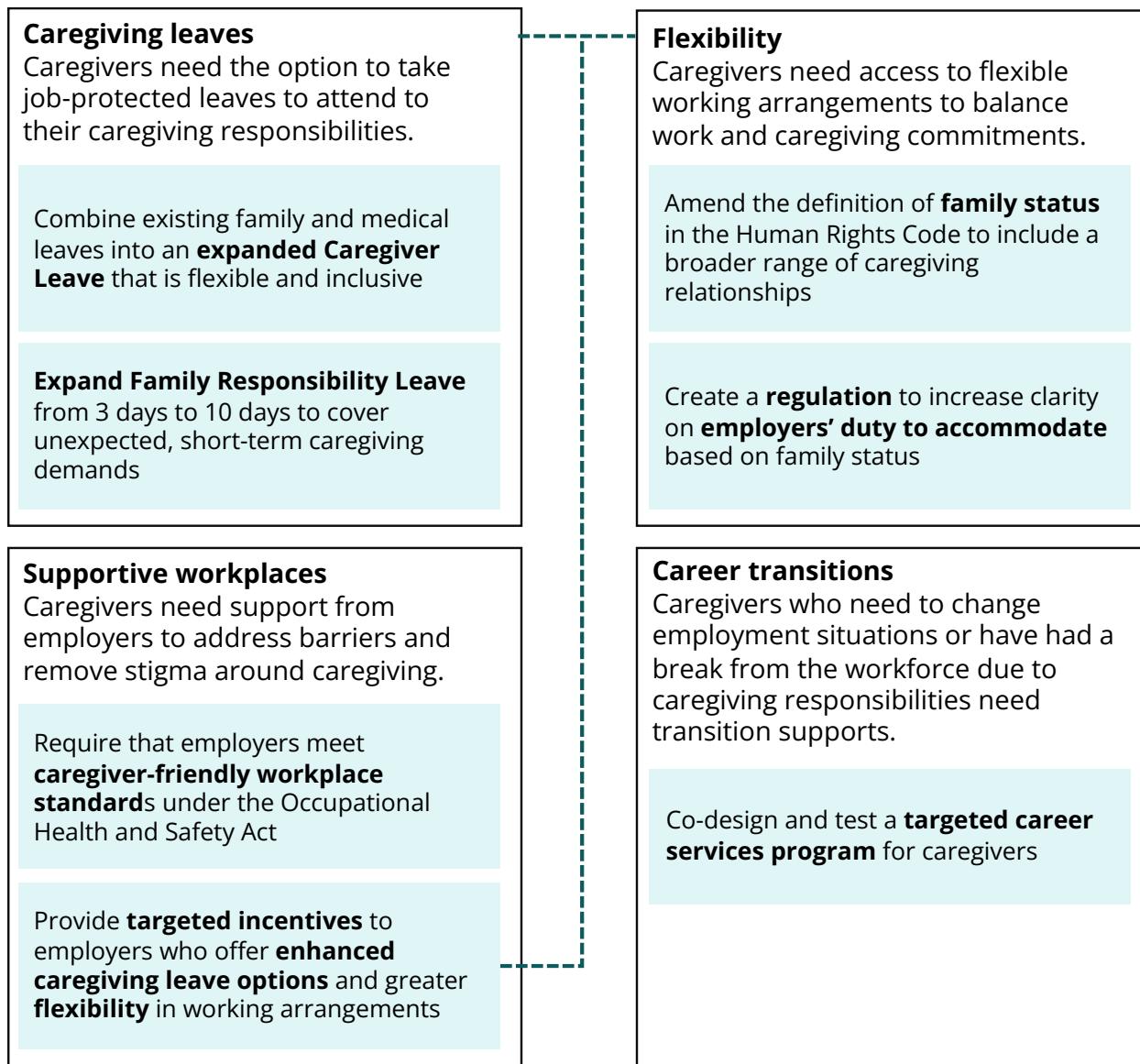
The good news is that there are many elements of Ontario's current policy infrastructure — employment standards, occupational health and safety requirements, human rights protections, and publicly funded employment services — that together form an important foundation for addressing the needs of working caregivers. This report has identified multiple options for changes to this existing policy infrastructure that would support caregivers in the labour force to more effectively balance the dual demands of work and care.

It's also clear that no single policy change will fully address the needs of working caregivers, given the diversity of caregiving responsibilities and employment arrangements. Figure 1 summarizes how several of the key policy options identified in this report could together address the priority areas of need for caregivers in the labour force: **caregiving leaves, flexibility, supportive workplaces, and career transition support.**

This paper has identified some important considerations about the feasibility and potential system impacts of some of these options, including potential pushback from employers. Recognizing this, the government could consider a staged approach to implementation that incorporates proactive communication and support to employers. What's clear is that without change in each of these areas of need, many working caregivers will continue to struggle to maintain their labour force attachment without sacrificing their own health and well-being.

By implementing these changes, the Ontario government can ensure that working caregivers are recognized, acknowledged, and supported in the critical contributions they make to both our workforce and our care systems.

Figure 1: Framework of Policy Options for Supporting Working Caregivers





kelly pasolli policy
research insights

kellypasolli.ca