



# Balancing the Scales

## How Law Firms Can Support Attorney-Caregivers



BY AMY  
DILCHER, ESQ.,  
THOMAS ADRIAN,  
BLAIR WHITMAN,  
AND ALI HABASHI

Many professionals, including attorneys, face the dual responsibility of managing their careers while serving as caregivers. This additional role can be challenging and may significantly impact physical and mental well-being, productivity, career progression, client relationships, and potentially the ability to continue working.

Caregiving is a widespread experience. Research from Harvard Business School indicates that 73% of employees across various sectors, including law firms, have caregiving responsibilities in some capacity.<sup>1</sup> Whether caring for children, elderly parents, or loved ones with chronic health conditions, attorneys often require additional support and resources.

Law firms can implement a variety of practical strategies to address the challenges faced by attorney-caregivers. These measures benefit not only the caregivers and their families but also the firms themselves by helping to retain talented professionals. By fostering a supportive environment, law firms can demonstrate a commitment to valuing both personal well-being and professional growth. This approach not only enhances job satisfaction and loyalty but also cultivates a workplace culture that supports a healthy work-life balance.

<sup>1</sup> Cascio, Elizabeth, et al. The Caring Company: How Employers Can Help Employees Manage Their Caregiving Responsibilities—While Reducing Costs and Increasing Productivity. Harvard Business School, Managing the Future of Work, January 2019. [https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/The\\_Caring\\_Company.pdf](https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/The_Caring_Company.pdf).



## How Caregiving Affects Attorneys

Attorney-caregivers frequently find themselves caught between competing priorities: the demanding hours required by their legal careers and the needs of the individuals who depend upon them for their care and well-being. This dual responsibility places them in a perpetual state of being pulled in two directions at once. As a result, attorney-caregivers encounter numerous daily challenges that can accelerate burnout and increase the risk of attrition within the profession.

### Increased Stress

When stress becomes unmanageable, both professional and personal lives can suffer significantly. Attorney-caregivers often find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle; they are too exhausted or pressed for time to complete their work tasks effectively, and simultaneously, they are too overwhelmed by work pressures to manage family dynamics that require patience and understanding.

The severity of stress faced by this group prompted the U.S. Surgeon General to issue an advisory in August 2024, “highlighting the urgent need to better support parents, caregivers, and families.” According to the Surgeon General’s report, more than 40% of parents reported that they are so stressed on most days that they cannot function effectively, describing their stress as completely overwhelming.<sup>2</sup> This illustrates the critical need for interventions to alleviate the stress burden on attorney-caregivers.

### Career Stagnation

While caregiving can be a deeply rewarding role, it often demands personal sacrifices. Women, in particular, encounter barriers in their professional lives due to their caregiving responsibilities, especially those with families. Despite women surpassing men in law school enrollment, evidence of a “motherhood penalty” remains prevalent. This phenomenon suggests that women who decide to have children frequently experience setbacks in their career progression or face diminished opportunities as a consequence of their caregiving commitments.<sup>3</sup> Addressing these systematic challenges is essential to ensuring equitable career advancement for all professionals.

<sup>2</sup> Homethrive. “How to Support Working Parents.” Accessed December 20, 2024. <https://homethrive.com/how-to-support-working-parents/>.

<sup>3</sup> American Bar Association. “Lawyers Report Feeling Penalized for Being Mothers, Especially Women of Color, New Report Finds.” Last modified October 2023. <https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2023/10/lawyers-report-feeling-penalized-mothers/>.



## Physical Neglect

The demanding nature of both legal work and caregiving responsibilities often leads to attorney-caregivers experiencing physical neglect. This dual burden can result in insufficient sleep, unhealthy eating habits, and a lack of regular exercise. Consequently, these lifestyle challenges can give rise to various health issues, which may lead to increased absenteeism or diminished productivity. Attorney-caregivers may find it difficult to sustain the fast-paced demands of their dual roles, ultimately impacting their overall well-being and professional performance.

## Burnout

Given the extensive challenges outlined above, attorney-caregivers are frequently at risk of experiencing burnout. The continuous struggle to balance professional obligations with caregiving duties can significantly impact both their work and home lives. As feelings of inadequacy in managing these dual roles intensify, some may consider leaving their careers entirely to prioritize caregiving and the self-care they urgently require.

It is important to understand that the consequences of burnout extend well beyond the individual attorney-caregiver. The added responsibilities they shoulder affect not only their own well-being and that of their loved ones but also have a significant impact on their firms and clients. Addressing these challenges is essential to creating a supportive environment that benefits all stakeholders. By proactively tackling burnout, firms can enhance overall productivity, maintain client satisfaction, and support the long-term success and well-being of their workforce.

Caregiving is a widespread experience. Research from Harvard Business School indicates that 73% of employees across various sectors, including law firms, have caregiving responsibilities in some capacity.

## How Caregiving Affects Law Firms

Law firms inevitably experience the ripple effects of the challenges faced by attorney-caregivers, particularly when attorneys leave their profession to focus on caregiving responsibilities. These impacts manifest in several ways:



**Reduced Productivity:** Research from the Rosalynn Carter Institute indicates that “caregiver employees provide an average of 20 unpaid caregiving hours per week.”<sup>4</sup> This significant time commitment often encroaches on work hours, requiring caregivers to make calls, provide transportation, or be on-call for emergencies. As a result, reduced billable hours affect both attorneys and their clients.



**Increased Turnover:** Nearly one-third of caregivers voluntarily exit the workforce to attend to their loved ones. This trend contributes to high attrition rates within the legal profession, particularly where caregiver support is lacking.<sup>5</sup>

4 Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers. “New White Paper Reveals Why One in Five Employees Are at Risk of Leaving the Workforce and What Employers Can Do to Help.” Accessed December 20, 2024. <https://rosalynncarter.org/new-white-paper-reveals-why-one-in-five-employees-are-at-risk-of-leaving-the-workforce-and-what-employers-can-do-to-help/>.

5 Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers, “New White Paper Reveals Why One in Five Employees.”



**Client Dissatisfaction:** When an attorney departs to focus on caregiving, the consequences extend beyond the costs of hiring a replacement. The transition can disrupt client relationships, leading to dissatisfaction as clients navigate changes in their legal team.<sup>6</sup>



**Equity in the Workplace:** The level of support provided to attorney-caregivers influences the demographics of those who work or advance within a firm. Significant gender disparities remain, with women disproportionately shouldering caregiving duties. This disparity is evident in tasks such as arranging childcare (65% of mothers compared to 7% of fathers), scheduling doctor appointments (71% of mothers compared to 9% of fathers) and assisting with homework (41% of mothers compared to 12% of fathers).<sup>7</sup> These added responsibilities have numerous potential impacts, including driving women out of the workforce and hindering career advancement. As of 2023, women account for 27.76% of all law firm partners.

Addressing these issues is vital for fostering a more equitable and supportive work environment that acknowledges the contributions and challenges of attorney-caregivers.

**To create a truly supportive environment, law firms should first delve deeper into understanding the specific caregiving challenges faced by their attorneys, then implement support solutions based on findings.**

## Practical Strategies for Integrating Caregiving Support

To create a truly supportive environment, law firms should first delve deeper into understanding the specific caregiving challenges faced by their attorneys, then implement support solutions based on findings. By gaining insights into these needs, firms can develop comprehensive strategies that not only incorporate digital solutions but also adapt workplace policies to better accommodate the needs of their employees. Below please find several practical strategies to consider:

### Understanding Caregiving Needs

Many individuals may be hesitant to disclose personal challenges such as caregiving responsibilities. To gain insights while preserving confidentiality, implement anonymous surveys to gauge how many employees are caring for a loved one at home. This data can help identify the scale of caregiving responsibilities within the firm. In addition, leave and stay interviews may be used to explore caregiving challenges that might contribute to higher attrition rates. These conversations can reveal valuable insights into employee needs and concerns.

### Implementing Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexibility in work schedules can significantly benefit attorney-caregivers. Allowing employees to adjust their work hours can help them manage their caregiving responsibilities alongside their professional obligations. An adjustment of hours can make a significant difference in employee satisfaction and productivity.

### Offering Support Solutions

Providing effective support for attorney-caregivers requires an investment in benefits that are specifically tailored to their unique needs. One impactful approach is the implementation of support solutions into benefits packages that assist attorney-caregivers with various tasks. Such resources offer live support from social work professionals who offer caregiving assistance, answer questions, provide navigation, deliver emotional support or assist with essential tasks such as scheduling healthcare appointments and researching local care assistance, ensuring caregiving duties are managed efficiently. Together, these resources help caregivers save time and reduce stress and empowers them to balance their professional and caregiver responsibilities.

<sup>6</sup> Law.com. "The Caregiver Challenge in Law Firms and How to Address It." Last modified October 28, 2024. <https://www.law.com/2024/10/28/the-caregiver-challenge-in-law-firms-and-how-to-address-it/?sreturn=20241217164006>.

<sup>7</sup> American Bar Association, "Lawyers Report Feeling Penalized for Being Mothers."

## Establishing Caregiver Resource Groups

Creating an employee-led group offers caregivers access to resources, advice and emotional support from peers who understand their challenges. Establishing such a group also signals the firm's recognition and support of caregivers, fostering an inclusive and supportive workplace culture.

## Promoting Stress Management and Mental Health Support

Recognizing the high levels of stress and mental health challenges faced by attorney-caregivers, law firms can play a pivotal role by integrating stress management and mental health support initiatives into the workday. Offering educational programs and opportunities for activities such as chair yoga, meditation, and mental health and wellness sessions can greatly

benefit employees. These practices not only help in reducing stress but also enhance focus, resilience and overall well-being. By providing dedicated time and resources for such activities, firms demonstrate a commitment to the holistic health of their employees, fostering a supportive work environment that values mental health as much as professional success. This proactive approach can lead to improved morale, increased productivity, and a more engaged and satisfied workforce.

By implementing these strategies, law firms can create a work environment that not only supports the caregiving responsibilities of their employees but also values their overall well-being and professional growth.

*Amy Dilcher is Special Counsel in Sheppard Mullin's Corporate practice based in Washington, D.C. Thomas Adrian is the Senior Director of Human Resources at Sheppard Mullin. Blair Whitman is the Vice President of Client Success, and Ali Habashi is the Senior Content Manager at Homethrive, a caregiving benefit offered by many leading employers that includes 24/7 access to AI-driven care tools and 1-on-1 live support from experienced Care Guides to support unpaid family caregivers.*



**MINNESOTA LAWYERS MUTUAL**  
INSURANCE COMPANY

Created by lawyers, for lawyers.



## Lawyers seek advice from lawyers.

## Why wouldn't you buy your insurance from lawyers as well?

Proudly Insuring Maryland Firms Since 2002

- Works exclusively with lawyers professional liability insurance
- **Defense Program** offering a policy with preferred pricing and enhanced coverage for defense firms
- **ADR Policy** for professionals exclusively engaged in mediation, arbitration, or related ADR services
- **Judicial Disciplinary Insurance Policy** for state judges
- **First Dollar Defense** - a loss only deductible can produce a substantial savings for firms facing nuisance type claims
- Returned over **\$80 million** in dividends to policyholders since 1988



**Get a quote today!**  
Kiernan Waters, Esq.  
443-293-6038  
kwaters@mlmins.com  
[www.mlmins.com](http://www.mlmins.com)

Protecting Your Practice is Our Policy.®