

Many caregivers spend years balancing demanding responsibilities at home while continuing to perform at work. The author explores the gaps in the current total rewards strategies and offers practical considerations for supporting employees through caregiving, loss and the complex process of rebuilding afterward.

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Still Standing:

A Perspective on Mental Health, Caregiving and What Comes After Loss

by | **Colleen Baker**



Across every industry and every level of an organization, employees quietly manage one of the most demanding roles outside their job description: caregiver. Many still arrive at meetings prepared and composed, meet deadlines and lead teams. Outside of work, however, they may face caregiving demands that existing organizational benefit structures were never designed to address fully.

What makes this reality difficult to see is not that caregivers are struggling, but that they continue to manage competing responsibilities with a level of discipline and grace that often go entirely unrecognized. They show up. They perform. They bring their best, even on the hardest day, and their employers often never know.

Mental health and caregiver support are increasingly important components of a comprehensive total rewards strategy. Organizations are paying closer attention to how these benefits support employee well-being, workforce sustainability and the overall employee experience. The conversation often focuses on the demands of caregiving itself. Less attention is paid to what happens when a long-term caregiving role ends. For some employees, that transition may involve not only the loss of a loved one but also significant changes to routines, responsibilities and sources of purpose that have shaped daily life for many years. Understanding that transition may help employers better assess how caregiving and related life events affect employees at different stages of life.

The caregiving journey does not end when the loved one passes. For many employees, the deepest disruption to identity, purpose and productivity begins in the aftermath. Organizations that fail to recognize this leave their people without solid ground when they need it most.

Takeaways

- Roughly one in four Canadian adults provides care to a family member or friend while balancing work responsibilities. Caregivers are present at every level of an organization, making caregiving an important workforce and benefits consideration rather than an isolated personal challenge.
- The employees who need support most may be the least likely to ask for it. Many caregivers continue to perform at a high level while managing significant responsibilities outside of work. Their reliability can make caregiving pressures less visible, underscoring the importance of cultures that encourage support-seeking and flexibility.
- Benefits often address caregiving demands but overlook what comes after. Organizations have expanded mental health, flexibility and caregiver supports, yet many benefit programs provide limited guidance for employees navigating the loss of a loved one and the transition out of a long-term caregiving role.
- The end of caregiving can be a major life transition. For some employees, the loss of a loved one is accompanied by the loss of routines, responsibilities and a sense of purpose built over many years. Recognizing this transition can help employers better understand the broader impact of caregiving across an employee's life course.
- Effective caregiver support requires more than benefits alone. Policies matter, but so do workplace culture, manager awareness and psychological safety. Organizations that take a more comprehensive approach to caregiver support may be better positioned to sustain employee well-being, trust and long-term workforce engagement.

The Scale of the Caregiver Workforce in Canada

Caregiving is a common experience in the Canadian workforce. According to Statistics Canada, approximately 7.8 million Canadians provided care to a family member or friend with a long-term health condition, disability or aging-related need in a given year, representing roughly one in four adults in this country. Most of those caregivers are employed full- or part-time, quietly balancing the weight of two full-time responsibilities.

The Conference Board of Canada estimates that caregiver absenteeism costs Canadian employers about $1.3 billion annually in lost productivity. That figure does not account for presenteeism—the cost of employees who are physically present but mentally and emotionally depleted—nor does it capture turnover, disengagement or the long-term erosion of talent that results when caregivers feel unsupported and ultimately leave.

The Canadian Human Rights Act and provincial human rights codes increasingly recognize family status as a protected ground, reinforcing that caregiving responsibilities are not a personal inconvenience but a legitimate reality of an employee's life that employers have a responsibility to accommodate. Yet policy and practice remain far apart for most organizations.

The Silence of the High-Performing Caregiver

Organizations rarely worry about a particular kind of employee: the one who always delivers. The one with a strong

track record, consistent performance reviews, and a reputation for showing up and getting it done. In some cases, that employee is also a caregiver. The very qualities that make them exceptional at their job—their discipline, capacity to manage complexity and refusal to let others down—can also make their caregiving experience less visible to those around them.

Caregiving is often managed privately. Many caregivers do not discuss the medical appointments they coordinated, the emergency oxygen they arranged in the middle of the night, the late-night call they fielded about a care plan, the end-of-life decisions they are quietly navigating or the legal and financial responsibilities they are managing on behalf of someone who depends entirely on them. They handle it. They adapt. They find a way. They walk through the door each morning ready to perform, because that is what they have always done.

For many caregivers, this lack of visibility reflects a preference for privacy. Others may worry that disclosing their situation will affect how they are perceived professionally, reduce opportunities or invite a kind of sympathy that feels more isolating than supportive. They carry the weight quietly, for years, sometimes for the entirety of their careers.

> The most at-risk caregiver in your organization may be your most reliable performer. Their excellence is real—so is the cost of sustaining it without acknowledgement or support. The two are not mutually exclusive, and organizations that see only the output miss everything happening underneath it.

This is the reality of the caregiving experience that organizational benefit design has not yet caught up with. A caregiver policy is not enough if the culture does not create space for caregivers to use it. Offering an employee and family assistance program (EFAP) is not enough if the people who need it most never feel safe accessing it. Genuine support requires both the infrastructure and the environment in which people feel seen.

Gaps in Existing Support Models

The conversation around mental health in Canadian workplaces has matured considerably, driven in part by the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, introduced in 2013 and since adopted as a framework by hundreds of organizations. Awareness is higher than ever. But awareness and meaningful action are not the same thing and, for caregiver employees in particular, the gap remains significant.

Where Current Benefits Fall Short

- EFAPs typically offer six to eight sessions of short-term counseling support. For an employee managing a decade or more of caregiving responsibilities, this is not a solution. It is a starting point that runs out before the need does.
- Flexible work arrangements exist in policy but are frequently constrained by managerial culture, role expectations or an unspoken assumption that flexibility is earned rather than available. Caregivers in demanding roles often do not feel they can access what is nominally available.
- Mental health days are offered, but psychological safety to use them without professional consequence remains inconsistent across organizations and industries.
- Caregiver-specific resources, including legal guidance for guardianship and power of attorney, care coordination support and access to respite care, are largely absent from benefit programs despite being among the most pressing practical needs of this population.
- Bereavement leave policies in Canada are improving but still inadequate for long-term caregivers. The federal Canada Labour Code amendments have extended some protections. Yet, most provincially regulated employers offer three to five days for the loss of an immediate family member. This provision does not begin to account for the scope of what a long-term caregiver faces when that loss occurs.

That last point deserves particular attention, because what follows the loss of a caregiving dependant is not simply grief. It is something more complex, more disorienting and far less recognized.

The Question No One Is Asking: What Happens After?

Consider what it means to build your life, for years or decades, around caring for another person. The structure of your days; the allocation of your time and financial resources; the constant state of readiness and vigilance; the legal and administrative responsibilities; and, in many ways, your

sense of identity and purpose—all of it organized around someone who needs you. Then, one day, they are gone.

The grief is expected. What is less expected, and rarely discussed in organizational contexts, is the profound disorientation that follows. Not just from the loss of the person, but also from the loss of the role. The structure that gave your life so much of its shape ceases to exist. The caregiving responsibilities that demanded your attention, your energy and your problem-solving capacity every single day are replaced, almost immediately, by a different and equally overwhelming set of tasks: managing an estate, coordinating with financial and legal advisors, handling government notifications, closing accounts, navigating benefit claims and making decisions that no one prepares you to make, all while grieving.

> When a long-term caregiver loses their loved one, they do not simply lose a person. They lose a role, a structure, a purpose and an identity they have carried, often in silence, for most of their adult lives. Then, almost immediately, they are expected to manage an entirely new set of complex responsibilities before they have had a single moment to breathe.

In most cases, the employer is unaware of the depth of this, because the caregiver may never have said anything. They came to work. They delivered. They gave their best even on unimaginable days. When a loved one passes away, the organization extends condolences, offers a few days of bereavement leave and anticipates a return to normal. Or perhaps they do nothing, maybe because they didn't know.

For many caregivers, there is no simple return to what was once considered normal. What exists on the other side of that loss is a period of reconstruction, of figuring out who they are and what their days look like when the responsibility that defined them is gone. That process takes time. It takes support. It takes an organization willing to recognize it as the significant human event that it is.

A Framework for Meaningful Support

Closing this gap does not require a complete overhaul of an organization's total rewards philosophy. It requires intention, specificity and a willingness to design for the full caregiving journey rather than isolated moments.

1. Recognize Caregivers as a Distinct Workforce Segment

Include caregiver identity in workforce listening strategies, benefits surveys and employee resource group structures. Train managers to recognize the signals of caregiver stress and respond with empathy and practical support rather than assumption or judgment. Many caregivers may be reluctant to self-identify if the culture does not make it safe.

2. Move Beyond Short-Term Mental Health Support

Partner with providers who specialize in caregiver burnout, anticipatory grief and long-term adjustment. Offer sustained mental health support that reflects the reality of a years-long caregiving commitment rather than an acute episode. Consider dedicated counselling streams for caregiving employees within your EFAP structure.

3. Make Flexibility Real, Not Just Stated

Audit the gap between your flexible work policy and its actual uptake among caregiving employees. Work with leaders to create an environment where flexibility is genuinely accessible, not dependent on individual managerial discretion or an employee's willingness to disclose a personal situation to receive basic accommodation.

4. Formalize a Postcaregiving Transition Benefit

This is the frontier of caregiver support in total rewards, and Canadian employers have an opportunity to lead. Consider developing a specific benefit for employees navigating the loss of a long-term caregiving dependant. This might include extended paid leave beyond standard bereavement provisions, access to grief and life transition coaching, a dedicated HR partnership to navigate the practical and emotional complexity of the postloss period, and a formal reentry conversation to support the employee in returning to full capacity at a realistic and humane pace.

5. Build Leader Literacy Around the Full Caregiving Arc

Executives and managers who understand what caregiving looks like, and what follows it, are better positioned to support their teams in ways that no benefits document can replicate. Invest in leadership development that builds this literacy and model the organizational culture you want to see by talking openly about it at the senior level.

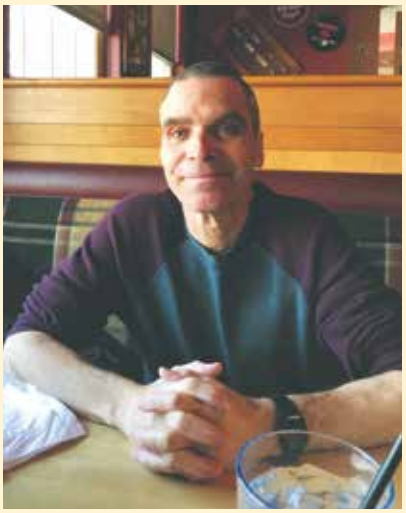
The Business Case and the Human Case Are the Same

Senior leaders are accustomed to evaluating benefits through a lens of cost, utilization and return on investment.

A Personal Note

This article was written not only as a professional perspective on a gap in total rewards strategy, but as a reflection on a lived experience that shaped everything in it. For the better part of a lifetime, I served as my brother's primary caregiver and guardian in trust. I managed that responsibility alongside a full-time career, showing up every day, performing at a high level and doing what caregivers do: handling what needed to be handled, in silence, without calling attention to the weight of it. My employers, across the years, largely did not know. Not because I hid it, but because that is what caregivers do. They manage. They excel. They carry it quietly, because the alternative feels like a vulnerability in the workplace that they can't afford.

It began on October 10, 2001. My brother was already living with special needs, but on that date, he was struck in a car accident that resulted in a traumatic brain injury. In a single moment, our family's lives changed permanently. At the time, I was deep in a demanding career and raising two children. There was no pause button. There was no roadmap. What followed was a road that is difficult to put into words, one that only those who lived it could truly understand: the medical uncertainty, the legal battles, the endless navigation of a system that was never designed to account for the full impact it has on an individual and their family unit. Six years after the accident, following a lengthy court process, my brother was formally designated catastrophically injured. Six years of fighting for a designation that reflected what our family already knew. Through it all, life continued. The career continued. The children grew. The caregiving became more demanding. There was simply the reality of what needed to be done, and the quiet decision to do it.



Michael Christopher Clayton Robins

My brother passed away on November 6, 2025.

What followed was not simply grief, though grief was very much present. What followed was an immediate and overwhelming shift from caregiver to executor: managing an estate, navigating legal and financial processes, coordinating the many practical responsibilities that accompany the end of a life, all while processing a loss that was unlike any I had anticipated. Because when you have been someone's caregiver for most of your life, you do not just lose them. You lose the role. You lose the structure. You lose the version of yourself that existed in relation to that responsibility.

No one really prepares you for that, and very few organizations ask how you're coping.

I hope that this article contributes to changing that and invites leaders to ask better questions, design more thoughtful benefits, and build organizations where the full humanity of their people, including the parts that are never mentioned in a performance review, is genuinely recognized and supported.

To the broader community, this article carries a quieter message. You rarely know what someone is carrying outside of work. The colleague who seems composed, delivers consistently and shows up may be standing in silence under a weight you cannot see. In busy, successful workplaces, it is easy to move fast and forget that the person beside you may be navigating something profound beyond those walls. Paying it forward feels meaningful. A moment of patience, a word of encouragement or simply choosing to lead with kindness rather than judgment can have an impact far greater than you realize. We do not always know what someone is holding, but we can always choose how we show up for them.

I was blessed to know my brother, Michael Christopher Clayton Robins. Blessed to have shared my life with someone whose kindness was effortless and whose love for his family was without condition. He gave everything he had to the people around him, quietly and without expectation. In many ways, he taught me more about showing up for others than any career ever could. This paper is, in part, for him.

That lens has its place. At the same time, organizations that achieve the highest levels of employee trust, engagement and retention understand something more fundamental: The human case and the business case are not in tension. They are the same case.

Employees who feel supported through a decades-long caregiving journey, and through everything that follows, often do not forget that support.

The reverse is just as powerful. The employee who spends a career excelling quietly while carrying a weight their employer never acknowledged; loses their loved one and is expected back at full performance within days; and faces the complexity of estate administration, grief and identity reconstruction without any organizational support . . . that employee reaches a limit. Sometimes it looks like turnover. Sometimes it looks like disengagement. Sometimes it looks like a high-performing, deeply experienced professional whose connection to the organization changes over time, shaped in part by how supported they feel during periods of significant personal challenge. Colleagues who see how that employee was treated may draw their own conclusions about whether this organization deserves their full commitment.

BIO



Colleen Baker is a nationally recognized leader shaping the future of enterprise benefits strategy in Canada. As partner and vice president of National Enterprise Group Solutions at People Corporation, she works with executive teams across complex, multi-jurisdictional organizations to align benefits strategy with business priorities, resilience and workforce expectations.

The cost of ignoring the caregiver experience is not captured in a single line of the benefits budget. It is measured in the quiet erosion of trust, purpose and human potential that accumulates when an organization consistently fails to see its people whole.

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