

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Refer a family caregiver

When Robert Jensen was on the verge of breaking down, he talked to his boss, who advised him to get a doctor's note to take a stress leave. As a family caregiver for his aging parents, Robert was back and forth from Calgary to Saskatoon as often as four times a month – while working full time. His mom was in the hospital after an aortic aneurism tore, and the extent of his dad's dementia and cardiovascular issues were becoming painfully clear in her absence, requiring someone to be with him around the clock.

The problem with the stress leave, says Robert, is that you just go back after it's over – but nothing has changed.

By the time Robert was on his second stress leave, his father had passed away, and he was looking for a place near Calgary for his mom to live. This time, however, his doctor referred him for extra support from Caregivers Alberta. He participated in a workshop series where he met other caregivers who were facing challenges and looking for answers.

"Caregivers can feel very isolated and alone," says Darrel Gregory, executive director of Caregivers Alberta. "That doesn't have to be the case, though, given that one million Albertans report being family caregivers, dedicating an average of 14 hours a week to providing care for their family member or friend."

During his leave, Robert spoke with a caregiver coach, who helped him realize he couldn't successfully return to work without some accommodations and flexibility from his employer. As is often the case, his workplace had no formal policies for supporting its caregiving employees – even though research shows that one in three employees are also family caregivers for a child, spouse, sibling, aging parent, etc. who is dealing with issues due to illness, disability or aging.

A staff member at Caregivers Alberta was able to help Robert advocate for himself at work, demonstrate the extent of his caregiving responsibilities and share information on caregiver-friendly workplace policies. With this support, Robert was granted a hybrid work situation.

"It's only been a week since I was given this accommodation, and I've already had to run out during a work-from-home day to take my mom to the doctor," says Robert. "She was immediately sent for an emergency ultra-sound, so I was gone the whole afternoon." Being able to finish his work later that day made it possible for Robert to get his mom the help she needed and reduce his stress about being absent from his job.

"Right now, we're working hard to let people know that support for family caregivers is available," says Gregory. "We're trying to build referral pathways from doctors, social

workers, pharmacists, retirement residences – you name it – so that no caregiver goes it alone.”

Statistics show that about 80% of the caregiving taking place in the community is done by family caregivers. The cost to these individuals is huge in terms of limiting career opportunities, unexpected financial output, mental and physical health issues, stressful family relationships, and feelings of helplessness trying to navigate the system.

“With the right support, caregivers can take better care of themselves, so they can take better care of their loved ones,” says Gregory.

Robert agrees: “I felt like I was losing my mind and sort of paralyzed before I got the help and information I needed. It was impacting my ability to support my parents with a clear mind, and I had no energy to do all of the things that needed to get done.”

Robert says that during his time as a caregiver he’s had to work with a lawyer to enact his parents’ power of attorney document, fight the bank to be able to pay their bills from their accounts instead of his own, gotten them assessed so he could take care of their affairs for them, administered their medications, helped with basic hygiene, protected his parents from a sibling who was taking money, bought groceries, prepared meals, and beyond.

“Caregiving is not something people plan for; it just happens when a child is born with a disability, a spouse gets diagnosed with MS, or a parent develops dementia,” says Gregory. “But caregiving is like any new skill – once you do some learning, find some peers, discover resources that you need, you’re well on your way to at least having a sustainable experience. In the absence of those things, many caregivers burn out, end up battling anxiety or depression, struggle to cope, and aren’t well enough themselves to take care of their loved ones.”

Gregory adds that Caregivers Alberta has a “refer a caregiver” form [on its website](#) where doctors can refer patients or caregivers who are looking for support can refer themselves. The organization has an intake line that can be accessed at 1-877-453-5088 or support@caregiversalberta.ca.

Banner image credit: Sabine van Erp, Pixabay.com