

Projecting the Availability of Informal Support and its Impact on Chronic Home Care Services: Policy Implications and Alternatives



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Researchers

Janice Keefe, PhD
Mount Saint Vincent University
(902) 457-6466
janice.keefe@msvu.ca

Jacques Légaré, PhD
Université de Montréal
(514) 343-7228
jacques.legare@umontreal.ca

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Please note: The opinions expressed in this document are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of Health Canada.

Background

The objective of this document is to propose alternative policies and directions to respond to the changing demand for assistance for the elderly population with disabilities between 2001 and 2031. These policy implications and alternatives should be reviewed in tandem with the results of the analysis “*Projecting the Availability of Informal Support and its Impact on Chronic Home Care Services*” (Keefe, Carrière & Légaré, 2004).

Considering present patterns of disability, it is estimated that the number of elderly persons needing assistance could double in the next thirty years and this need, combined with a relative decrease in the use of informal support, could result in a relative and absolute increase in the use of formal support.

We address two essential human resource components involved in support of the population aged 65+ in need of assistance:

- *informal support* provided by family and friend caregivers.
- *formal support* provided by paid caregivers, specifically personal care and home support.

For family/friend caregivers, our strategy is twofold: to reduce burden and sustain existing caregiving relationships and to increase the supply of informal support by recruiting/supporting assistance outside the immediate family. For paid caregivers, the strategy is to increase the supply and retain these workers.

Health Promotion

Disability has a significant impact on the need and use of home care services in the future. Improvement in the health of the population (e.g. lower levels of disability) would have a major effect on the need and use of services.

Consequently, while this policy discussion focuses on human resources in the delivery of care, there is a need to support population health strategies, policies and initiatives aimed at decreasing disability and/or their consequences on daily living.

Policy Context

Continuing care policies in Canada are the responsibility of Provinces and Territories and comprise non-insured services within the Canada Health Act. Consequently, eligibility criteria, service components, models of service delivery and funding policies vary significantly across jurisdictions.

Other policy domains have caregiver-related policies. These include employment insurance (federal level) and tax credits (both federal and provincial levels).

Current Issues

Family/Friend Caregivers Key Issues

Profile of Canadian Caregivers:¹

- More than 2 million family and friends aged 45+ provide unpaid assistance to persons 65+.
- The majority of women provide assistance with tasks inside the home and men, outside the home.
- 63% of caregiving women and 77% of caregiving men, aged 45-64, are employed.
- More than one-third of caregivers incur extra expenses.
- One in ten caregivers report health problems stemming from caregiving work.

Service/Support:²

- Inflexible delivery of respite services.
- Caregivers are not formally recognized as critical component in health care system.
- Reduced hospital stays increase complexity of care and expectations/burden on family/friend caregivers.

Current Policy Context:

Recent proposals by the F/P/T Ministers, for acute home care, mental health, and end-of-life care are admirable in their goal to reduce hospital-based care, but may be detrimental because of their continued reliance on the informal support network.

Paid Caregivers* Key Issues for Home Support Workers^{2,3}

Wages & Benefits:

- Canadian home support workers earn on average \$12.31 per hour – but range from \$14.90 in BC to \$7.90 in Atlantic Canada¹.
- Many employers only hire on casual or short-term basis.

Working Conditions:

- Home support workers often carry out duties in unsafe and high risk environments.
- They perform “hidden work”, which includes additional physical tasks and emotional support.

Training & Education:

- Education requirements differ across jurisdictions.

Quality Assurance:

- They work in isolation of peers and supervisors, having to make decisions without consultation.
- Increased supervisor workloads lead to reduced time spent with workers.

* Since assistance in our analysis was confined to housework, personal care, etc., our focus is on home support workers

Policy Strategies

Policy Strategies for Improving Support to Family/Friend Caregivers⁴

Continuing Care:

- Assess caregiver needs.
- Provide direct support (e.g. respite, counselling).
- Reimburse care expenses (e.g. supplies, transport).
- Provide educational opportunities to assist with responsibility and complexity of care.
- Provide information resources (e.g. centres for caregiver support; advocate/guide to accessing services).
- Expand program/service eligibility criteria to include friends and neighbours.

Labour/Workplace:

- Expand Compassionate Care Benefit (Employment Insurance) to include caregivers of individuals with chronic care needs.
- Include elder care responsibilities in workplace family leave policies.

Income:

- Compensate caregivers financially through a stipend or an allowance.
- Implement a refundable tax credit for caregivers.
- Expand Canada Pension Plan to include drop-out clause for elder care and pension credits for cumulative caregiving work.

Policy Strategies for Improving Recruitment and Retention of Home Support Workers^{2,3}

- Promote profile of home and continuing care sector and the contributions of the front line workers.
- Improve wages and benefits, including pensions.
- Improve payment for travel costs associated with work.
- Ensure wage parity of home support workers with similar positions in long term care and hospitals.
- Improve working conditions by taking action to reduce job-related risks and increase supervision and support.
- Increase continuing education and training opportunities.
- Develop minimal standardization of program training across jurisdictions to enable job mobility.
- Offer opportunities for career enhancement.
- Develop mentorship opportunities.

References

¹ Statistics Canada, (2003), General Social Survey Cycle 16: Caring for an aging society (Cat. no. 89-582-XIE).

² Canadian Home Care Human Resource Study (2003).

³ Keefe, (1999), Human Resource Issues in Home Care. Prepared for Health Canada.

⁴ Keefe, (2003), Care of Elderly Persons in Canada: Key Issues and Policies. Prepared for Canadian Association for Community Living.