



## Juggling act

When work and caregiving **both come first** By Claire Landes Altschuler

### HERE'S THE GOOD NEWS:

Americans are living longer than ever. Now the bad: Longer lives mean that more midlife working people find themselves caring for elderly parents or other aging family members for longer periods than previous generations. And, though most want to help, they are already overwhelmed with careers, children and other obligations.

It's a misconception that Americans shunt the elderly off to nursing homes, says Elinor Ginzler, director for livable communities for AARP. Most seniors remain in their own homes or move in with their adult children. "We are a nation of caregivers," says Ginzler, co-author of "Caring for Your Parents: The Complete AARP Guide." An AARP/National

Alliance for Caregiving survey found that 44 million Americans (most of them women with a full-time job and children) are caring for someone over age 50.

"The portrait that we get," says Ginzler, "is what I call the juggling act." According to the survey, 57 percent of caregivers say they have had to go in late to work, leave early or take days off to care for a loved one. And nearly 10 percent have either quit their jobs or taken early retirement because of care responsibilities.

When Mary Poland's mother became ill, the director of special events at the Greater Chicago Chapter of the Arthritis Foundation says she did her best to balance caregiving with her full-time job. "There were times that I took vacation days" to care for her, says Poland, whose

mother died last year. She says the situation was especially difficult when she had to work late—occasions when she "had to try to find somebody" to make dinner and stay with her mother.

Fortunately, government and businesses are becoming more responsive to caregivers' needs. The Family Medical Leave Act of 1993 allows workers at companies with 50 or more employees to take up to 12 weeks unpaid leave each year to care for a family member. Some states offer additional benefits, and more businesses are trying to help. From 1992 to 2002, the percentage of U.S. employees with job-related access to elder care resources and referral benefits rose from 11 percent to 24 percent, according to a 2002 Family and Work Institute study.

What makes the caregiving juggling act even harder is the fact that most caregivers have children. Marianne King, a mother of three, took care of her own parents as well as her husband's over a period of several years. For a while, both her mother and mother-in-law lived with the family, and this took a toll on her teenage daughter, says King. "She'd act out more because she wasn't getting the attention she needed."

That's why help managing family matters is important. Among the resources available are geriatric care managers—health and human services professionals who specialize in elder care. They make assessments, help locate housing and caregivers, design and implement care plans and assist with ongoing monitoring.

Lino Darchun, a real estate broker in Chicago, has been caring for his wife, Sydnee Conway, for the last four years while he continues to work. Conway was diagnosed with dementia in her late 50s. "The stress of caring for someone who is mentally impaired is awesome," Darchun says, adding that a support group has helped him cope. "Invariably," he says, advice that an experienced member of the group offers "is going to help a newcomer survive that day, survive that week."

Most caregivers don't regret the experience. Poland says helping her mother in her last years "is probably the best thing I ever did, and the thing I'm most proud of