

Rural residents lack workplace supports to juggle work and caregiving

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In the U.S., more than 43 million family members or friends provide unpaid care to an ailing adult or child. A new University of Minnesota School of Public Health study shows the situation could be particularly difficult for informal caregivers in rural areas, who often lack the workplace flexibility and support they need to juggle their many responsibilities.

The study, led by Assistant Professor Carrie Henning-Smith, was recently published in the *Journal of Rural Health*.

"The U.S. population is getting older and care needs are increasing, especially in rural areas," said Henning-Smith. "Meanwhile, lower birth rates, higher divorce rates, lower marriage rates and greater workforce participation all lead to fewer available caregivers. In rural areas, where resources are more scarce, the challenge of balancing work and caregiving is heightened, making it important to look at rural-urban differences in [caregiver](#) support."

To learn more about those differences, Henning-

Smith analyzed survey responses from 635 people living in rural and urban communities across the country who both work and care for a loved one.

The study showed that:

- 15 percent of employed rural caregivers have access to supportive programs, such as [employee assistance programs](#), through their workplace, compared with 26 percent of employed urban caregivers.
- Less than 10 percent of rural caregivers are able to work from home or telecommute, compared with 25 percent of urban caregivers.
- 18 percent of rural caregivers have access to paid leave, compared with 34 percent of urban caregivers.

"These findings should raise concern about the well-being of employed rural caregivers who are juggling multiple roles with less support from their workplaces," said Henning-Smith. "As caregiving needs rise—especially in [rural areas](#)—it will become increasingly urgent to find ways to support all caregivers."

Henning-Smith suggests that employers who create more supportive work environments for employed caregivers will help a large number of people, and could see greater workplace satisfaction and less turnover from employees. Strategies employers can use to increase the level of support in their work environment could include flexible work hours, telecommuting/working from home, supportive programs, paid leave and paid sick leave.

Policymakers can also help ease the strain on caregivers by mandating [workplace](#) protections, such as expanding access to family leave, and by addressing systemic issues, such as access to broadband Internet, that would make it easier for employers to give rural caregivers flexibility. Health care providers can play a role as well by being

aware of a caregivers' multiple roles and ensuring that they have the support they need to provide high-quality care while taking care of their own health.

Henning-Smith is continuing her research by looking at rural-urban differences in support programs that caregivers prefer and use.

More information: Carrie Henning-Smith et al. Rural-Urban Difference in Workplace Supports and Impacts for Employed Caregivers, *The Journal of Rural Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jrh.12309](https://doi.org/10.1111/jrh.12309)

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