



Throne Speech Signals on Caregiving

The Speech from the Throne comes with pomp, pageantry and platitudes. It is big on ideas (at least it is supposed to be) and short on details. It is intended to set out a general road map with the specifics of the route to be determined along the way. There is a small window of opportunity to try to influence the actual content.

Caledon was pleased to see reference to caregivers in the 2013 Speech from the Throne. More specifically, the federal government made a commitment to:

- build on our caregiver tax credit by working with employers to better accommodate Canadians caring for older family members
- help seniors quickly access information about programs and services they need and use in their communities.

In 2012, about 8.1 million individuals, or 28 percent of Canadians ages 15 years and older, provided care to a family member or friend with a long-term health condition, disability or aging needs [Statistics Canada 2013].

Caregivers deliver more than 80 percent of care needed by individuals with long-term health or disability-related conditions. They do so at no pay and are therefore deemed to contribute more than \$5 billion of unpaid labour a year to the health care system. Some estimates peg this contribution at more than an annual \$25 billion when the broad spectrum of caregiving tasks is included in the calculations.

The uncounted contribution is equally valuable. The health care system could not perform as well as it does without informal caregivers. Paying attention to their health and well-being bolsters immeasurably the effectiveness and capacity of formal care providers.

There are various ways in which the federal government can respond to the needs of caregivers. It can offer direct support through cash assistance or tax relief. Ottawa can also deliver services, particularly in relation to the armed forces, veterans and First Nations on reserve. It can make available funding to voluntary organizations or provinces and territories to deliver a range of services that help all caregivers. It can engage in conversation with employers to raise awareness about caregiver needs and enable a better work/life balance.

Ottawa's plan to discuss accommodation with employers is welcome news – though we would not restrict these discussions only to caregivers of the elderly. Many caregivers report that they must leave their job or reduce their number of hours of paid work in order to make time for their caregiving responsibilities. The insecurity may hinder their ability to contribute to a pension plan or to save for the future. Both current and future financial security may be jeopardized.

Holding a job and providing care at the same time frequently cause stress, depression and burnout that can lead to absenteeism and turnover. A supportive workplace and community, more generally, are essential for working caregivers. Workplace initiatives, including family leave policies, modified work week policies and employment assistance programs, would enable a healthy caregiver/receiver relationship.

As noted in the Throne Speech, flexible working time is especially important. The needs of the elderly as well as individuals with episodic conditions are often unpredictable. Companies are beginning to recognize that certain employees may need more than personal or vacation time to deal with family-related care responsibilities.

There are policy precedents at the international level regarding flexibility at work. Wide-ranging employment measures have been introduced as part of the Carer Strategy in the UK. In 2007, the *Work and Families Act* was amended to allow caregivers the right to request flexible work.

In New Zealand, caregivers who have worked with their employer for at least six months have the right to request flexible arrangements, such as compressed work weeks, flex-time and work from home. These

rights do not guarantee that the employer will agree. But at least they protect the security of employees who ask for flexibility. The legislative provisions also help raise employer awareness about this vital need.

At the municipal level, the City of San Francisco has just passed a Family Friendly Workplace Ordinance. It gives workers with personal caregiving responsibilities the right to request changes to their working conditions in order to meet these obligations. This announcement follows on the heels of a similar state provision introduced this past year in Vermont [ben-Ishal 2013].

The federal government can consider striking an advisory group modelled on the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities to enable a national conversation with employers. This group can examine the wide range of issues linked to workplace security. Businesses can also be encouraged to incorporate policies related to caregiving within their respective Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives.

Paid leave is another core working condition around which the federal government can take direct action. The Compassionate Care Leave provisions within Employment Insurance allow up to six weeks' paid leave to care for a gravely ill relative who is likely to die within 26 weeks. Unfortunately, the eligibility criteria are too stringent to represent meaningful help to most caregivers. *Ottawa can expand these provisions to permit leave for other caregiving circumstances, not just terminal illness, and extend the duration of the caregiving period.*

Future security can also be affected when caregivers drop out of the workforce due to their caregiving responsibilities. It is essential to find ways to protect the value of pensions in

future. *Ottawa can explore the possibility of expanding the general drop-out or the child care drop-out provisions of our national pension program – the Canada Pension Plan.* It can study models of caregiver pension provision in other countries to assess various practices throughout the world.

The Throne Speech also signalled Ottawa's intent to help seniors access information they require in their communities. We were pleased to see this announcement but would extend these provisions to all caregivers and not just to individuals caring for the elderly.

Caregivers face unique physical and emotional demands. Many care receivers gradually lose functioning and become partially or totally dependent for all aspects of care. Perhaps even more difficult are the emotional dimensions of caregiving – the shock and fear upon initial diagnosis, lack of social interaction and loss of a close relationship. Preventive interventions that assist caregivers are important investments in their physical health and emotional well-being.

While friends play a crucial supportive role, many caregivers do not want to alienate them by talking about illness all the time. Because of the lack of respite options in the evening and on weekends, it is difficult to participate in events held after dinner or even to see friends at a time other than when respite is offered. Not surprisingly, many caregivers feel isolated through geography, transportation and communication barriers.

A significant development in caregiving involves the use of new social technologies, such as *Tyze Personal Networks*, which create networks among caregivers, care receivers and formal services. These networks make available information, emergency interventions and

day-to-day assistance with caregiving tasks. *Ottawa can provide support for the development of crucial social networks.*

Like any essential service, the caregiving workforce must learn the skills to administer certain treatments or deal with complex medical or degenerative health conditions. Despite some good models, there is insufficient training – especially for caregivers looking after someone with a mental health problem, degenerative disorder or dementia.

Some organizations have established online support on their websites where questions are responded to by other caregivers. *Ottawa can offer financial assistance to help voluntary organizations deliver training, emergency advice and support for caregivers.*

The presence of respite enables primary caregivers to take a few hours to carry out essential household tasks or to look after their own health and personal needs.

While formal respite services comprise an essential component of the respite package, they are by no means the only form of support that creates relief for caregivers. *Ottawa can invest in diverse programs and services, such as temporary relief through weekend accommodation, which make available respite for caregivers.*

The fact that the federal government has pledged to take action beyond its current caregiver tax credit is a positive development. There is a significant agenda on the caregiver front and Ottawa can assume the essential leadership required to make progress in this important area.

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References

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