

CAREGIVING DURING THE PANDEMIC

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INTRODUCTION

As veterinary schools and colleges prepare for the fall one of the additional complexities of restarting operations is that the caregiving services utilized by staff, faculty and students may not be restarting in sync with the veterinary schools and teaching hospitals.

- The availability, accessibility and safety of elder care is unclear.
- Many daycare and early childhood providers are continuing to limit enrollment.
- The public K-12 system in many locations across the United States are considering only offering limited in-person instruction for the fall.
- Individuals caregiving for someone who is particularly high risk may not be able to utilize previously available caregiving support.

It is critical to note that these systems were in place for working caregivers and students prior to the pandemic and now those individuals may be asked to return to in-person work and school without the support network that had been previously available.

This reality will likely have a disproportionate impact on specific communities. Addressing the challenges facing caregivers therefore falls within our principles of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The stresses of caregiving have already been noted during the first several months of the pandemic and therefore is a part of our work in wellbeing. And with the potential that institutions may lose valuable talented individuals who are struggling with caregiving, supporting these individuals should be considered an important retention strategy. However it is framed, it is an issue that needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

PAID LEAVE:

- Consult with your HR team about what benefits are available. Within the US there are specific COVID-19 related employee benefits programs that may be available to your faculty and staff.
 - [U.S. Department of Labor:](#)
 - Two weeks (up to 80 hours) of **paid sick leave** at two-thirds the employee's regular rate of pay because the employee is unable to work because of a bona fide need to care for an individual subject to quarantine (pursuant to Federal, State, or local government order or advice of a health care provider), or to care for a child (under 18 years of age) whose school or child care provider is closed or unavailable for reasons related to COVID-19, and/or the employee is experiencing a substantially similar condition as specified by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Secretaries of the Treasury and Labor;
 - Up to an additional 10 weeks of **paid expanded family and medical leave** at two-thirds the employee's regular rate of pay where an employee, who has been employed for at least 30 calendar days, is unable to work due to a bona fide need for leave to care for a child whose school or child care provider is closed or unavailable for reasons related to COVID-19.
- Over-communicate available benefits and policies.
- Actively encourage use of benefits and policies.
- Be proactive in communicating the availability of specific benefits or policies designed to support individuals who are particularly vulnerable.

POLICY VS. REALITY:

Consider your institutional culture around leave and whether your team will feel truly able to utilize these benefit programs. Providing a point-of-contact outside of the regular reporting structure for questions around benefits can help as can strong, frequent messaging from leadership encouraging use of available benefits.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER:

- Conduct brief “check-in” polls, surveys, and host open forum opportunities for your staff, faculty, and students to gauge their needs, challenges, stress level related to caregiving and balancing work and personal needs during the pandemic. In addition to the data received, the act of asking for feedback or providing space for conversation can be helpful.
- Offer a single point of contact for caregivers outside of the regular reporting structure for assistance and mediation.
- Offer a space (i.e. online chat room, open forums) for caregivers to share experiences, challenges and strategies.
- Review any telework and remote employee policies: are they inclusive and do they reflect your institution’s current needs and realities?
- Continue to leverage telehealth for greater flexibility.
- Encourage a shift in mindset around work to an outcomes-based working environment rather than a time-based one.

- Continue to provide the flexibility in roles and responsibilities that was afforded at the beginning of the pandemic.
- Interns, residents, graduate students: Be familiar with how these roles are characterized in terms of employment at your institution and be prepared to extend benefits and support as much as possible.
- For tenure-track faculty, consider a comprehensive review of the impact of COVID-19 on tenure clocks and expectations, particularly regarding research and publication timelines.
- For students, offer a point-of-contact for students with caregiving responsibilities to help mediate between students and faculty if needed.

Anecdotal stories indicate that faculty, staff and students are invested in working towards solutions, including reports of shared childcare between faculty who are on the same service together. These arrangements require teamwork from everyone on the service as well as support from Department Chairs. Acknowledging the challenges is a critical aspect of providing support. If your university has provided a comprehensive return-to-work plan, does it include addressing caregiving needs? If not there is an opportunity to provide feedback and input on behalf of your faculty and staff.

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