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Current Policy Regarding Caregiving and Policy Implications

Abstract: Discusses current policy regarding caregiving and policy implications. Although little federal and state legislation directly address familial provision of care, several policies affect people’s ability and willingness to provide assistance. Programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, which are aimed at care recipients, indirectly impact the family members who take care of them. Social Security and pension regulations have consequences for people who leave the paid labor force to provide unpaid care work.

Keywords: aging; aging policy; caregiving; employment policy; health policy; retirement policy

As the previous chapters have shown, family members provide a lot of assistance to elderly relatives. Informal caregivers provide over 75% of care worth an estimated $450 billion yearly (Feinberg et al. 2011; Levine, Halper, Peist, and Gould 2010). As discussed in Chapter 1, the likelihood of any one individual providing care to an older family member is increasing. Also, as an aging society, America is facing rising numbers and percentages of people who will need care. Health care costs are increasing as well. Health care policy tends to be focused on formal, paid care. Few policies directly address unpaid, informal assistance. This combination of circumstances calls for a broad look at legislation addressing health care and caregiving.

Although few US policies focus on informal caregiving, a wide range affect it. For example, Medicaid and Medicare are health care policies, but are about care recipients rather than caregivers. Nevertheless, their existence has undoubtedly affected the need for family care provision. In addition, policies that are about caregiving quite often are not used by people assisting older relatives, either because they are not aware of the program or they do not know the policy applies to them. As a case in point, the Family and Medical Leave Act is specifically aimed at caregivers, but tends to be viewed as legislation that benefits new parents rather than helping people who are caring for elderly family members (Wisen sale 2008). This chapter first covers policies that directly target caregivers. Then it describes policies that affect people's ability and/or willingness to provide care. Third, policies that impact both care recipients and their caregivers are reviewed. Policy implications are discussed as well. The chapter ends with an overall review and conclusion to the book.

Policies specifically about caregiving

The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) gives workers time off to care for an ill parent, spouse, or child, a newly born or adopted child, or their own serious health problem. The person is allowed up to 12 weeks off in any one year, and the leave is not paid (Wisen sale 2008). Friends, cohabiting or same sex partners providing care are not eligible for these benefits as the caregiver must be related by blood, marriage, or adoption to the care recipient. Because the FMLA legislation applies only to people with at least 1,250 hours or a year of service to companies