

# Paid-leave aid for care givers important start



Ellen Roseman

Imagine getting up to six weeks off from work to care for a seriously ill family member — a parent, spouse or child — and having your job protected while you're away.

At the same time, you'll be receiving up to \$413 a week in employment insurance benefits.

This innovative proposal was part of Finance Minister John Manley's budget announced last week. Unfortunately, it was overshadowed by all the other budget news.

To make up the gap, I've provided some information and expert reaction so you'll know what to expect if the plan is passed into law.

This leave can be shared with other family members. For example, three siblings can each take two weeks off from work to spend time with a dying parent.

The federal government will pass new laws to protect employees' jobs under the Canada Labour Code. But most employees are covered by provincial labour codes, so the provinces have to follow suit.

Some provinces already provide unpaid family care leave (up to 10 days in Ontario). They will have to integrate their benefits with the new EI-paid family care leave.

Judith Maxwell, president, Canadian Policy Research Networks, Ottawa: "This is an important first step. We've known for years that we need to find a way to value care-giving.

"Care-giving benefits are groundbreaking in North America, but fairly standard in Europe. Quite a few countries have allowances that go directly to the care giver or to the person requiring care, who then can reimburse a family member or hire someone.

"I'm concerned that six weeks may not be a long enough period of time. What if you use up your leave and the family member pulls through the health challenge? Can you use it again?"

Andrew Jackson, economist, Canadian Labour Congress, Ottawa: "It's important we don't see this compassionate family

care leave as a substitute for a proper home care program. But as a complement, it's a good way to go.

"Where we have concerns is the short length of the leave and the eligibility requirements. There's an issue of access for women working part-time. Care giving responsibilities do fall disproportionately on women.

"The real priority is to ease up on EI eligibility requirements, so that precariously employed workers can get access to benefits. It seems almost perverse to have an employment insurance system only for people with a very low risk of unemployment."

Sharon Sholzberg-Gray, president, Canadian Health Care Association, Ottawa: "A six-week paid leave for care givers is welcome. It's a recognition of the stresses that families face in these situations.

"But we still need a properly designed home care and palliative care program. This can't be a reason to offload everything on to the family 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"Is six weeks long enough? It doesn't help people taking care of a chronically ill relative, nor does it help care givers looking after close friends.

"Why make family members split the benefits? Why not let each of them get six weeks simultaneously?"

"And what about the self-employed who can't get access to EI? Not only rich people are in business for themselves. A lot of women working in consulting won't be eligible."

Dennis Raphael, associate professor, school of health policy, Atkinson College, York University, Toronto: "This is certainly a good deal, but Canada has a long way to go to catch up with other countries. We spend less on long-term care than does the United States, the United Kingdom, Denmark or Sweden.

"In Sweden, the government provides cash benefits to family care givers for up to 60 days in case of serious illness. In Canada, we have provided only a very small income tax credit for care givers in the home.

"The overwhelming majority of home-care providers are women and the informal care that is given in the home — especially when formal care is not available — is primarily provided by women.

"The care-giving role that society thrusts upon Canadian women makes access to home care especially important. Equality of opportunity is an empty phrase unless society — and the government it elects — is willing to make the policy decisions that support women in their lives."

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