Brain Health Is Business Health

Caregiving and Dementia Strategies at Work

By Symone C. Skrzycki

How can businesses create brain-healthy workplaces that cultivate employee well-being and performance? The Alzheimer's Association's new Brain Health At Work™ program offers no-cost, evidence-informed tools to help employers strengthen cognitive health and workforce performance.

"It's rooted in the evidence that there are things we can do to improve our brain health," emphasizes Natalie Sutton, executive director of the Greater Indiana Chapter. "It's also based on philosophy and (scientific understanding) that we need to build those healthy habits earlier or in midlife. And, of course, where are people? They're at work."

The Alzheimer's Association is the largest organization dedicated to Alzheimer's and dementia care, support, research and advocacy.

"My role in the chapter and the role of our local team is to bring everything the Alzheimer's Association has to offer to Indiana communities and to the people who need our support, services and information," Sutton comments. "Really that translation piece."

Alzheimer's caregiving reality:

- Over 11 million Americans provide unpaid care for people living with Alzheimer's or other dementias
- Currently 121,300 Hoosiers age 65 and older are living with Alzheimer's or dementia
- Approximately 221,000 Hoosiers are serving as unpaid family caregivers
- About one-quarter of caregivers are in the "sandwich generation" – meaning they care for an aging parent and children under 18
- Approximately two-thirds of dementia caregivers are women, a role which often competes with employment and other responsibilities
- Alzheimer's kills more people than breast cancer and prostate cancer combined

Brain Health At Work was launched in late April. This summer, the Alzheimer's Association partnered with the Wellness Council of Indiana to offer a free webinar.

The first step in the Brain Health At Work program involves the employer completing an online assessment, which takes approximately 15 minutes. Next, the Alzheimer's Association provides an action plan based on the results. Employers receive a tailored resource toolkit and earn a variety of badges to measure and celebrate their progress.

"Part of the action plan includes some of our other programs," Sutton observes. "Maybe our team could come in and offer an awareness presentation or an education program for a lunch-and-learn session, which also is at no cost. So, part of Brain Health at Work is bringing resources that already exist from the Alzheimer's Association for caregivers – and raising awareness and visibility of those resources.

"Do they know about our 24/7 helpline, (for example), which is (800) 272-3900? If you can provide that care, employees (can feel) less frustration and more ease (versus) feeling like you're going at it entirely alone."

Caregiving responsibilities often peak during prime working years.

"What we see is that a lot of employees in the most productive phase of their careers may be impacted by this topic," Sutton stresses. "So, there's a huge risk – and a huge cost to employers there. But certainly there are policy interventions. I think employers having policies like paid family leave or paid caregiver leave (is helpful).

"(It could lead to) needing to come in late or leave early, taking time off for appointments, reducing hours or changing schedules. And sometimes, of course, stepping away from the workplace altogether or a change in job status, like a move to part time or something like that," she continues. "Those are some of the impacts we see. But we also see when employers or supervisors can provide flexibility. If you need to leave to go support your loved one, you can make up that work in the evening."

Open dialogue between workers and their managers or supervisors is critical.

"The (employee assistance program) is certainly an important resource to support someone in the throes of caregiving," Sutton points out. "Those policies, those resources, those benefit packages can support your employees during this time. But I also just think leadership and flexibility and how your supervisor is supporting you through this stage or experience of caregiving (can make a significant difference).

"Making people aware in the workplace of resources available (through their employers and the Alzheimer's Association) is a great way to let people know they don't have to do this alone."



Walk to End Alzheimer's is the world's largest event to raise awareness and funds for Alzheimer's care, support and research.

RESOURCE: Natalie Sutton, Alzheimer's Association Greater Indiana Chapter, at www.alz.org/indiana