

Compassionate Care Policy

Research by the Human Resources Professionals Association,
in partnership with the Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association

Executive Summary

HR leaders are facing myriad employee issues that are re-shaping attitudes and needs for compassionate care. There is recognition that employees are in greater need than ever before to take leave and care for loved ones yet at the same time maintain peace of mind knowing their jobs will remain when they return.

The Human Resources Professional Association (HRPA), in partnership with the Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association, set out to capture some of the attitudes and policies of HR leaders regarding compassionate care. After speaking with 692 members between June and July 2014 many divergent attitudes became clear.

For example, larger companies are more prone (82 per cent of organizations with 5,000+ employees) to offer compassionate care leave than smaller companies (46 per cent of organizations with between 50-199 employees).

Also, unionized organizations are more likely to have a more formal compassionate care policy (86 per cent) than a non-unionized environment (69 per cent).

And despite the moral need to provide such benefits to employees, HR and businesses are seeing other results as well, in the form of more engaged employees, who re-integrate better after returning to work, and are more likely to stay at their jobs.

What emerges is a business landscape where compassionate care does not just make sense on a personal level but on a business level as well. Overall, whether companies offer it in a formal manner or not, compassionate care leave is becoming part of the roster of benefits employees are growing accustomed to.

Compassionate Care: What's your policy?

Recognizing the moral and economic benefits of providing a compassionate care policy.

Employee benefits have evolved from the mid-20th century to today. Recognizing the changing demographics of the workplace, the amount of leave and health services available to employees, and health and wellness programs in general, have all changed and become more a part of workplace benefits than they used to be.

As the population ages and the “sandwich generation” finds itself caring both for their kids and elderly parents, the need for compassionate care benefits has grown. In a recent survey on compassionate care in the workplace conducted by the Human Resources Professional Association, 59 per cent of respondents said their organization has a compassionate care policy.

While it is encouraging that many Canadian companies offer such benefits to their employees, the survey numbers tell an interesting story. Benefits differ depending on organization size or if the organization is unionized or not. But before explaining those specifics, let's define what compassionate care means.

According to the Government of Canada, compassionate care benefits are: *“Employment Insurance (EI) benefits paid to people who have to be away from work temporarily to provide care or support to a family member who is gravely ill and who has a significant risk of death within 26 weeks (six months). A maximum of six weeks of compassionate care benefits may be paid to eligible people.”*

What is “care or support”? The government says:

“Care or support of a family member means providing psychological or emotional support; or arranging for care by a third party; or directly providing or participating in the care.”

The numbers

According to the survey, a majority of companies offer compassionate care benefits to their employees. But a general workplace trend is to allow employees to take leave whether there is a formal policy in place or not. According to the survey, 75 per cent of respondents said they offer a provision that would permit an employee to take a leave of absence to provide compassionate care to a family member.

Overall, the HR community sees these benefits as a necessity. Said one survey respondent, “I think they are important policies to have in place. This is an issue that continues to grow as more employees are taking care of children, grandchildren, spouses and aging parents. As their personal responsibilities and pressures grow, it could potentially have implications to the workplace (i.e. productivity, stress) and employers need to be cognizant and prepared for that.”

Interestingly, policies are still being created without the input of employees: 83 per cent of organizations surveyed said they did not consult their employees in the development of their compassionate care leave policy.

Part of this might stem from the diverse nature of cases that demand leave and the organization’s need to remain agile. “We have a general leave policy that covers for any leave under a provincial standard – that way if a new leave is developed, we don’t have to write a new policy,” explains a survey respondent. “With compassionate care, each case is so very different that we have to be really flexible, therefore a policy is too restrictive. We go with the motto of ‘how can we help you’ and work with the employee as needed.”

So while high-level consultations may not be taking place, they often do take place at the individual level and on an as needed basis.

The other side of that coin takes place in unionized environments. Unionized organizations are three times more likely to consult with employees than non-unionized organizations (31 per cent vs. 11 per cent). This is not surprising given the nature of contract negotiation and collective bargaining that takes place with unions and employers. Not consulting with a union, in some cases, could lead to collective agreement violations.

Employer rationale

There are obvious reasons to provide a compassionate care policy at work. Clearly, as an employer, you want your employees to know their company supports them in difficult situations and ensures they can take the time to care for a loved one if needed. But, as the survey shows, there are other benefits to employers.

For example, 49 per cent of survey respondents said having a policy makes it easier for employees to return to work and re-integrate in the work team after caring for a loved one. Fifty-six per cent said it increases employee retention. “I have seen first-hand that the compassionate care policy is a tool to retain employees who otherwise would feel as though they had to leave their job to care for an ill family member,” said a survey respondent. “Having used this program in the past myself I would consider a compassionate care top-up policy when searching for a new employer in the future.”

Engagement benefits

In terms of other benefits, 61 per cent of HR professionals said compassionate care policies increase employee engagement; as well as other benefits including preventing further leave caused by stress or mental anguish. As one HR leader emphasized, “This is an important leave to have, as when employees are struggling with a family illness and trying to maintain a ‘normal’ work life it can take its toll on an individual, and could potentially cause an employee to go off on a stress leave. The compassionate care leave allows an individual to take the needed time off work to care for their loved ones.”

Sometimes remaining engaged with one’s work can alleviate the stress of caring for a loved one. Eighty-eight per cent of employers surveyed said they allow employees to remain connected to the workplace during the leave, if they wish to do so.

Of course organizations that do not offer compassionate care policies still

recognize their importance and respect their employees' ability to have the flexibility to take leaves. "It's important to let employees know that they have support when they need it, going through a very difficult situation is bad enough without having to be concerned about your job."

Costs can play a factor in providing compassionate care leave. Obviously losing an employee for an extended period of time, especially someone with specialized knowledge and skills, can add up. But some companies are taking creative approaches when considering dollars and cents. "Our compassionate care leave is unusual in the fact that it is a vacation donation and matching program," noted a survey respondent. "If an employee requires an extended leave to care for a sick or dying family member and if they agree, an email is sent out asking employees to donate days of vacation to the person in need. The company then matches the donation up to six weeks."

In doing so, companies can truly maximize the amount of time someone can take leave, allow employees to get involved in a philanthropic way, and keep costs down all at the same time.

Who is doing what?

Perhaps it's purely dollars and cents or perhaps other employees can absorb work when a colleague is out for an extended period of time, but there is a difference where compassionate care policies exist depending on the size of an organization.

According to the survey, 82 per cent of organizations with 5,000+ employees offer compassionate care leave versus 46 per cent of organizations with between 50-199 employees. Also unions make a difference: 86 per cent of unionized organizations surveyed offer compassionate care policies versus 69 per cent in non union.

As one respondent noted, "Those working in union positions have the greatest access to compassionate care leave but also generally can least afford to take such leaves given the very restrictive EI guidelines and compensation compromising their financial situations. Those with non-union

positions who are able to better afford sustaining the cost implications of such leaves are often in positions not easily replaced and thus creating hardship and disruption for the employer.”

Many HR leaders also feel going beyond the minimum Employee Standards Act (ESA) requirement may not be necessary to meet the needs of their employees. The survey says 68 per cent provide a compassionate care policy that does not go beyond the ESA standard. Noted one survey respondent: “Our organization’s experience has been that between leave provisions in the Employment Standards Act, compassionate care EI policies and a blend of our own leave of absence policy, our employees have been able to manage through these challenging life scenarios.”

Sometimes the survey results don’t show the full picture. Even those that officially follow minimum standards still provide case-by-case leave and deal with the situations at hand. “Our policies don’t go beyond Employment Standards Act but our practices have. Staff that needed to utilize this were incredibly grateful and the goodwill spilled over to the workplace.”

Said another survey respondent: “We use the ESA as the minimum and consider every application on its merits, and on the relationship of the employee to the loved one. We give consideration to the individual’s needs rather than ‘going by the book.’”

This attitude towards the ability of the ESA and other policies to meet employee needs can be seen in the question pertaining to developing a policy. When asked if a compassionate care policy will be developed in the future, 56 per cent said they would versus 44 per cent that said they would not. But the majority is not overwhelming and paints a clear picture of the direction many organizations will be taking in the future.

Changing dynamics

Employers are obviously taking into account the many needs of their employees when considering a compassionate care policy. And, as discussed earlier, the demographics and dynamics of the workplace are changing—including the arrival and growth of new Canadians entering the workforce.

Compassionate care takes on a whole new level of disruption for employers if employees need to travel longer distances and/or take more time off to care for loved ones overseas. Some of those surveyed feel the current policies do not address the issues of new Canadians: “These policies work domestically but are not best used with out-of-country demands,” said one respondent.

Some also feel there can be abuse of the system especially when there are requests made to go out of town and monitoring becomes difficult.

“It appears that it can be easily abused if not closely monitored and as a result becomes another way for employees to find ways to be absent from work,” said a respondent. “Also, a lot of the compassionate care leaves that happen in my company involve employees taking a leave to provide care for family members that live outside of Canada. It makes it very difficult to validate the legitimacy of these leaves.”

Presumably, abuse of the system occurs infrequently and those requesting the time to go out of the country are likely making legitimate requests. However, employers should factor this into their policies and if they are meeting the needs of their specific workforce. Knowing your demographic, your multicultural makeup and overall picture of your employees can help create a robust compassionate care policy.

There is no doubt, based on survey respondents’ comments as well as the numbers, that HR leaders believe in some form of compassionate care policy. It may take the form of minimum ESA standards or it may take a more robust form including salary top-up measures, but most believe recognition on behalf of the employee is needed. And whether each case is considered on its own or as an organization-wide policy for everyone, the trend is moving towards greater acceptance of compassionate care policies with a move towards enhancement. Employees, (and ultimately the organizations affected by leaves of absence) it is felt, would only be better served in the long run.