Support for New Jersey’s Unpaid Caregivers

Blog Post

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Jane Fearn-Zimmer

Caregiving, done well, can be the ultimate act of service and potentially a game-changer, enabling an elderly or functionally disabled individual to remain at home surrounded by their family, friends and happy memories.

However noble and important, caregiving often imposes a heavy financial, physical and emotional toll on unpaid caregivers, who statistically face a higher incidence of missed time from work, loss of employment, and of developing adverse emotional conditions such as anxiety, depression, and burn out, adverse health conditions and even physical injury.

The value of self-care on the part of the caregiver is essential. At a minimum, caregivers should take regular breaks, get physical exercise, maintain good nutrition and get plenty of rest, which is often easier said than done. With the number of elderly and disabled individuals reliant on care from unpaid caregivers projected to double by 2020, unpaid caregivers will face unprecedented challenges.

The state of New Jersey has taken up the challenge of supporting caregivers with recently enacted Public Law 2018, c166. Passed by the New Jersey legislature and signed by Acting Governor Sheila Oliver on December 28, 2018, the new law establishes the New Jersey Caregiver Task Force. The purpose of the task force is to evaluate existing supports for New Jersey caregivers and to develop recommendations for the improvement and expansion of caregiver support services within our state. The task force will take testimony from caregivers regarding the care duties performed, the sufficiency of caregiver training programs, the costs which caregivers face and their own personal caregiving experiences. The task force will prepare a report with recommendations for new laws and regulatory or program changes to improve, expand and supplement existing caregiver support programs and systems within the state.

New Jersey’s new focus on caregivers is not unprecedented. In 2017, the state of Hawaii passed the Kapuna Care Act, which established the Kapuna Caregivers Assistance program to provide family caregivers who work with resources to help pay for care services for elderly individuals over age sixty residing in the community and requiring assistance with at least two activities of daily living or having substantial cognitive impairment. Under the Hawaiian model, cash payments are available to help working caregivers defray some care-related costs.
At the federal level, the RAISE Family Caregivers Act was signed into law on January 8, 2018, and directs the Department of Health and Human Services to develop, maintain and update a National Family Caregiving Strategy and to convene a Family Caregiving Advisory Council. The Act defines family caregivers as adult family members or other individual having a “... significant relationship with” and providing “a broad range of assistance to an individual with a chronic or other health condition, disability or functional limitation.” The bill is designed to specify recommended actions which can be undertaken by federal, state, and local governments, communities, health care providers, and long term services and supports to assist family caregivers.

For over 13 years, Jane Fearn-Zimmer has helped countless families and individuals navigate through the ever-changing, and often challenging, elder and disability law process. For more information, subscribe to Jane's blog or follow her on Twitter at @JaneFearnZimmer.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

Jane Zimmer