

New report urges congregations to aid family caregivers

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—A new report on family caregivers details how congregations can play a role in supporting the increasing number of members caring for elders.

“Whether their care journey feels like a roller coaster, the deep end, or a long marathon, family caregivers are at risk of emotional, financial, and spiritual exhaustion as they balance both work and care and are tempted, often by necessity, to journey alone,” writes the report’s author, Lutheran pastor Amy Ziettlow.

“Called to Care: Honoring Elders & the Family Care Journey,” released June 11 by the Center for Public Justice, a nonpartisan Christian organization focused on civic education and policy research, proposes ways houses of worship, employers and the government can assist caregivers.

“We need congregations, workplaces, and public policies that honor and support these superhero caregivers,” Ziettlow writes.

Ziettlow, a former hospice chaplain, says that the overall number of unpaid caregivers to the elderly—about 41.3 million—is expected to increase significantly as baby boomers age. Citing the Bureau of Labor Statistics and AARP, she said the average caregiver spends three hours a day aiding an elder and \$7,000 a year on out-of-pocket related costs.

Congregations encouraged to support

caregivers

The report, which quotes the biblical commandment to “honor your father and your mother,” offers examples of how congregations can stand by those whose loved ones suddenly or gradually can no longer live by themselves or handle day-to-day responsibilities.

It suggests that congregations can provide paid family leave to clergy and employees, noting such action is “honoring paid work and family work as equally dignified and holy.”

The report recommends that houses of worship provide volunteers to help care recipients navigate their health decisions or give respite to caregivers. And it urges congregations to offer a warm welcome back to elders who may return to a congregation after being away for a period of time.

“Congregational ministry creates an environment where the potential for companionship and mutual support thrives,” writes Zietlow, who now leads an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation in Decatur, Ill. “And it is a space to raise and grapple with existential questions regarding death and end-of-life wishes.”