

## The New Juggling Act: Baby boomers caring for aging parents

By Judy Castleberry

When Merrion Oil & Gas Co. revised its employee handbook, Betty Ward, accounting clerk, suggested that the company consider including care for older family members under the sick leave benefit. The company already allowed employees to use sick leave to care for sick children and this seemed a natural extension of the benefit.

“After all, most of us are of the age where care for our parents is becoming more of a concern than childcare,” Ward, 52, pointed out.

Ward is typical of the graying baby boomer: Adult children, a grandchild, a full-time job, and aging parents.

While Ward’s parents are still healthy and independent, many in her age group are not so lucky.

Baby boomers are rapidly moving into the role of caregivers for their parents, but with a few extra challenges due to the changing face of our workforce. According to The Family Caregiver Alliance, 25 percent of working Americans provide care for a family member over the age of 65. This is only going to increase through the next generation: the fastest growing age group in our country is the group over 85.



*Judy Castleberry is the client services director for Partners Assisted Living Services, Inc.*

*She can be reached at 505/566-3747*

or [judy@partnersassistedliving.com](mailto:judy@partnersassistedliving.com)

The workforce is also aging with more people moving toward retirement age and fewer young people filling the ranks. In fact, the median age of workers has risen by five years since 1986 when the average worker was 35 years old. Middle aged women, once the primary source of informal or family caregivers are continuing to work full time in order to support their family, pay college tuition for children, or save for their own retirement.

Baby boomers who have followed job opportunities across the country are less likely to live in the same community as their parents. The rising cost of health care may cause sticker shock for many baby boomers as they are faced with paying for items (such as prescription drugs) that are not covered by Medicare. This will contribute to the need for

continued employment as well as finding non-medical resources for care.

It also means that many baby boomers who thought the family juggling act was over when their children grew up, will now be faced with the new juggling act of caring for elderly parents, demanding professions, and helping adult children and grandchildren. As baby boomers face this new challenge, these are a few suggestions for new caregivers:

**1. Talk to your parents before there is a crisis to understand their concerns regarding healthcare and aging issues.** In addition, discuss the pragmatic issues of Medicare, insurance, and legal documents (living will, durable medical power of attorney, etc.). When your parent is in ICU is not the time to find out this vital information.

**2. Learn about community resources so that you know what is (and is not) available.** The Four Corners has a variety of elder care services ranging from Meals on Wheels to skilled nursing facilities. If you don’t know where to start, contact senior citizen centers, Adult Protective Services, or discharge planners at any of the local

hospitals or skilled facilities. These individuals are usually familiar with other resources in the area and can help get you on the right path.

**3. Ask your employer if they can help.** Like Merrion, many employers are willing to help employee caregivers in order to retain valuable workers. Find out if your employer offers paid leave benefits for flex hours. Some employees are even beginning to include long-term care insurance or caregiver respite programs in their benefit package.

**4. Ask family and friends for help.** Share the responsibilities with siblings or adult children. Friends often want to help, but do not know what is needed. Be specific when you ask for help.

Caring for aging parents may be the greatest challenge that baby boomers will ever face. Planning ahead, exploring community resources, and knowing when to ask for help can give baby boomers a head start as they face their new role. By utilizing these resources, care giving can become a way to strengthen family bonds rather than a frustrating juggling act for the baby boomer caregiver.

