

Hardship for UK carers worsens during coronavirus pandemic

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A carer of an elderly family member wrote to the WSWs about the problems faced by carers during the pandemic.

In Europe as a whole, 80 percent of long-term care is provided by informal carers—family members, friends or neighbours. In the UK alone, data from Carers UK revealed last year that one in eight adults (6.5 million people) provide informal care to either elderly or disabled relatives. In the United States, figures from the National Alliance for Care Giving show 65.7 million people (29 percent of the adult population and 31 percent of all households) serve or have served as carers for disabled or elderly relatives.

In 2019, the saving to the UK government was £132 billion per year—the equivalent wages of an otherwise necessary workforce of carers on £19,336 per annum. This is around the same level as the entire NHS budget (£140.4 billion in 2019/20).

With the decimation of urgently needed services imposed by successive Conservative/Labour governments over the last decade, as a response to the emerging debt crisis that escalated following the 2008 financial crash, many family members were utilised as a “low wage” carer labour force

Data from Carers UK shows that in 2019 the ranks of adult carers were increasing in number at a rate of 600 people per day. An estimated 1.3 million people provide over 50 hours of care per week, one million people care for more than one person, and five million combine caring responsibilities with work (one in seven of the workforce). They are among the worst paid in society, receiving just £66.15 for a minimum of 35 hours, which itself fails to reflect the actual number of hours worked.

Over 110,000 parents are cared for by children in the UK. They are forced to juggle school and their social

life with the needs of their parents. This is an extremely stressful experience that has a detrimental effect not only on their schooling but on their mental health and social development, often leaving them isolated from their peer group.

The documentary “Through a Child’s Eye”, made for Channel 5, gave a harrowing insight into the lives of children in this position between the ages of 11 and 13, who recorded their day-to-day existence as carers for their mothers. The emotional strain on these children is telling. They are tied and confined to duties most children do not have to face and that society should never be demanding of them.

A documentary made by actor Ross Kemp in 2019, “Ross Kemp Living with Young Carers”, suggests the real figure of child carers could well be 800,000, and that children even as young as five are now in need of psychological support due to caring for relatives.

The informal care sector was already under strain well before the coronavirus pandemic. The State of Caring Report 2019 surveyed 8,000 carers. Almost two in five (39 percent) said they were “struggling to make ends meet” and 68 percent stated they had to use their own income or savings to pay for care or support services and equipment. One in eight (12 percent) had experienced a drop-off in support due to cuts in social services and 53 percent of carers could not save for their own retirement, with 63 percent stating they focus only on the needs of those they care for.

On top of this, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has taken to prosecuting carers for continuing to receive mis-allocated benefits, which the DWP itself has a responsibility to monitor but frequently fails to do so because of government cutbacks.

A case in point was reported in 2018 when George Henderson—who cared for his 37 year old son with

mental health problems and a heroin addiction—was prosecuted by the DWP and put in the position of having to sell his home or face jail because of the government’s failure to inform him of his obligations. Earning even one penny more than £120 meant he was not entitled to the then £64.60 a week allowance.

For more than six years the DWP failed to notice that George was paying tax on his earnings and had received £19,500 carer’s allowance, but it still went ahead and prosecuted him for fraud over a mistake that cost the DWP just 30 pence a week. Some 70,000 cases have been filed by the DWP against unpaid carers under the Proceeds of Crime Act.

The obscenity of criminalising a section of working people who have been used by governments to save hundreds of billions in wages must be put in the context of the trillions of pounds of public money that have been handed to the banks and corporations—whose activities were instrumental in bringing about the 2008 crash. These colossal sums will be paid for by workers through austerity cuts to their jobs, terms, and conditions and the loss of vital public services.

The COVID-19 crisis has accentuated all of the pressures on the caring community, as it has on all households. At the end of last month, Carers UK documented the intolerable situation facing carers in a press release, “The forgotten families in lockdown: unpaid carers close to burnout during Covid-19 crisis.”

It pointed out that “Reduced or closed care services mean family members are picking up even more care for older, sick or disabled relatives”.

The charity reported that over half (55 percent) of carers felt “overwhelmed” by the crisis. It called on the government to recognise the efforts of unpaid carers during the pandemic and for an increase to miserly Carer’s Allowance payments.

Carers UK said, “A staggering 70% of unpaid carers in the UK are having to provide more care for their loved ones during the coronavirus outbreak. A third (35 percent) of them are providing more care because their local care and support services have been reduced or closed.”

Citing a survey it had conducted of nearly 5,000 unpaid carers, the charity found that during the pandemic “on average, carers are picking up an additional 10 hours of unpaid care per week, helping loved ones with personal care, practical tasks and

emotional support.”

It noted, “Reduced care and support services, and paid care workers isolating or without personal protective equipment (PPE), mean many carers have no choice but to care round the clock for loved ones with complex health conditions and disabilities—without any hope of a break.”

Carers UK found that 81 percent of carers were spending more money during the pandemic. “The top increases in expenditure include spending more on food (72 percent)—due to lack of supermarket delivery slots and need for specialist food—and household bills (50 percent). 1 in 10 are spending more on equipment for the person they care for.”

As a carer, I have found during this pandemic that I am far more stressed because the person I am caring for has mental and emotional problems. So the normal problems are being magnified tenfold. There are problems with medication in terms of juggling the daily routine to get hold of medication. This is because the doctors are no longer taking patients’ appointments in person. It is all done online and is very inefficient and very inadequate. There is the added fear that if their condition worsens in some way, how would you be able to get appropriate services and an appropriate response?

From access to adequate nutrition, supply of necessary drugs and equipment, to accessing vital respite care from outside agencies, all the routines of an already precarious situation have been challenged like never before. The universal scarcity of personal protection equipment (PPE) leaves the informal caring community in the same situation as carers in residential care homes for the elderly—where those they care for are at heightened risk of dying from the virus due to existing health complications.



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