

Call to make eldercare leave compulsory

Halimah: Growing need to support those caring for sick and frail amid ageing population

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Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob yesterday urged the Government to legislate family care or eldercare leave. This, she said, will send a strong signal to employers about the growing need to support workers who have to take care of sick and frail family members.

"It would be really helpful for families if family care leave or eldercare leave is also legislated as, increasingly, caregiving of the frail elderly has become one big strain on work-life balance," she said.

During the keynote address on work-life balance at the 7th Singapore Children's Society Lecture at Singapore Management University, Madam Halimah pointed out to the audience of 200 how parents are already given childcare leave.

Since May, the childcare leave scheme was enhanced to give two days of paid leave annually to parents with Singaporean children aged between seven and 12. Those with younger children were already receiving six days of paid leave a year.

Saying that the childcare leave is given in the context of efforts to promote procreation, the Speaker called for a "more encompassing message that stresses support for all workers with family obligations".

The issue is even more important with the greying population, which has increased demand for care of parents and older relatives.

More than one in nine people in Singapore are aged 65 and above, from around one in 13 in 2002. A

Health Ministry survey in 2010 showed that 8.1 per cent of Singapore residents aged between 18 and 69, or about 210,000 people, were providing regular care to sick or frail family members.

Yet family or eldercare leave – sometimes referred to as caregiver leave – has yet to be truly embraced in Singapore, with employers seeing it as more of an option than a growing necessity, said Madam Halimah.

This is reflected in a recent NTUC survey, the findings of which were released yesterday at a separate event. The survey showed that 77 per cent of working caregivers do not have eldercare leave, and 62 per cent do not have flexi-work arrangements.

NTUC assistant secretary-general Cham Hui Fong said the labour movement aims to get half of its unionised companies to provide flexible work arrangements or leave structures by 2015.

This could include expanding existing leave categories, such as compassionate leave or critical illness leave, to cover looking after family members who require medical attention.

Association of Small and Medium Enterprises president Chan Chong Beng, however, is concerned that any move to make caregiver leave compulsory could be difficult to implement and subject to abuse.

"There will be problems verifying the amount of time an employee needs to look after his family," he said.

"Parental care should come from the individual and not be government-mandated. Ultimately, it's going to add a lot of costs to the employers who have to give more leave."