USC Leonard Davis
School of Gerontology

USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology
California Task Force on Family Caregiving
Administrative & Research Team

Strategies to Create Policies that Support Family Caregivers:
A brief guide for the California Task Force on Family Caregiving

This brief describes barriers to creating policies that support family caregivers and strategies to overcome these. The USC Administrative and Research Team compiled this brief for the California Task Force on Family Caregiving to consider while generating recommendations to the California legislature. Many of the barriers and strategies discussed are based on existing models of policymaking.[1,2]

To advance a policy solution, a problem must be recognized. However, there are several challenges to defining "caregiving" as a policy problem.

- Family caregiving encompasses multiple policy problems. "Caregiving" per se is not a policy problem, but the current policy context—one with limited supports for those in this role—creates many different challenges related to caregiving activities (e.g., financial insecurity). Problems related to caregiving must be specifically defined to motivate decision makers to develop policy solutions.

Problems should fit with solutions like puzzle pieces. If a problem is not clearly defined, it cannot be attached to a solution.

- Caregiving policies are vulnerable to policy drift. Policy drift occurs when existing policies no longer meet societal needs.[3] The needs of caregivers continue to evolve, typically faster than policies have kept up. One reason policy drift occurs is because policy makers assume problems faced by caregivers are already addressed by existing policies, even though these are often inadequate.

- It is difficult to create a caregiver movement to demand policy change. Caregivers often "own" the challenges they encounter. This perspective prevents caregivers from demanding a public policy response, even when they face high risks to health and financial wellbeing. Moreover, "caregiver" is a term used by professionals. Many families do not use this term, and would not consider themselves part of a caregiver movement capable of making policy demands. Even when caregivers do act as policy advocates, their efforts may be limited by the time, costs, and emotional demands of this role.

- Existing data is inadequate for specifying policy problems related to caregiving. New information, such as a report on the impact of caregiving on financial wellbeing or health, can capture the attention of policymakers and present caregiving as a policy problem. However, current data sources have several weaknesses, such as limitations in the kinds of questions asked, inability to look at how outcomes change over time, and challenges drawing conclusions about subsets of caregivers (e.g., spousal caregivers).

[1] Levitsky, S. R. (2014). Caring for our own: Why there is no political demand for new American social welfare rights. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

[2] Kingdon, J. (2011). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies* (Updated 2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
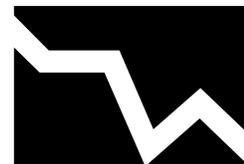
[3] Rocco, P. (2017). Informal caregiving and the politics of policy drift in the united states. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 29*(5).

Policy solutions must be ready when policymakers take interest in a problem. Solutions should be strategically crafted to enhance their chance of success.

- <u>Political interests shift quickly.</u> There may only be a brief time during which caregiving issues capture policymakers' attention. Solutions must be ready when policymakers take interest.

- <u>How policy solutions are designed should be carefully considered.</u> Policy solutions that demonstrate technical feasibility and are aligned with existing public values are more likely to succeed in the political arena and become law.

There are many opportunities to advance policies supporting caregivers in California. We suggest several considering the issues raised above.

- <u>Recognize caregivers in healthcare settings.</u> Although caregivers may not immediately identify as "caregivers," they frequent healthcare settings where the term is applied to them. If family and friends begin to recognize themselves as caregivers at hospitals and primary care offices, they will be better equipped to add their voices to a caregiver constituency/movement. Approaches to increase identification include expanding on the Caregiver Advise, Recognize, and Enable Act to allow multiple caregivers to be added to medical records, and identifying caregivers in primary care settings.

- <u>Use data to clearly define a policy problem.</u> Even if caregivers are unlikely to identify aspects of this role as policy problems, data can be utilized to shape a problem meriting a policy response. Current data sources on caregivers have many weaknesses. Addressing these weaknesses so there is high quality data on caregiving populations will facilitate more precise problem definition.

Information can help to clearly define problems.

- <u>Build on the success of other movements.</u> Caregivers to older adults experience many of the same challenges as caregivers to children and individuals with developmental disabilities. A benefit of building on existing policies from other movements is that they have already demonstrated technical feasibility and are likely aligned with social values, making them more likely to become policy. Sliding scale respite care, a benefit caregivers to persons with developmental disabilities have in California, is one example of a policy that can be built upon to support family caregivers to older adults.

- <u>Use policies that support caregivers to solve other problems.</u> Even though policymakers may not be focused on caregiving-related topics, they are likely interested in other issues related to caregiving. Advocates should look for opportunities to present policy solutions related to caregiving as solutions to the problems that policymakers are interested in. The high costs of healthcare, for example, consistently captures the attention of policymakers. Presenting caregiver supports, such as care transition programs and education on complex care, as ways to save healthcare costs could provide an opportunity to advance policies supporting caregivers. However, with this strategy, there is a risk that policy solutions will be re-shaped in unexpected ways.

There are many opportunities to advance policies to support family caregivers. Strategic approaches to designing and progressing policies can prevent policy drift and missed political opportunities.