

Family carers: Looking after our hidden workforce

Over a quarter of a million people in Ireland care for loved ones at home. These carers often have to look after relatives with complex needs with little support or respite. *Be the Change* spoke to Liam O'Sullivan of Care Alliance, a national federation of 100 organisations who support family carers

▼ What are the key challenges facing family carers?

Continuing to care for loved ones in the face of reduced levels of supports and recent tax changes, which impacts more acutely on many older family carers, is a key challenge. Recent bed closures in the acute and eldercare sectors, reductions in day-care services and cuts to home-help hours have had a negative impact on family carers. Income supports have been reduced; access to flexible and responsive respite care is not always assured; and a higher threshold appears to be in use in assessing eligibility for home-care support.

Maintaining their own health and wellbeing is also a challenge for carers. Over time, caring can impact on family carers' health and wellbeing and they can often experience high levels of isolation, anxiety, depression and back pain. The news is not all bad, however, and many family carers report how their relationships have been enriched through their caring role.

Caring for a family member with complex care needs at home is a major challenge. As there is a greater move towards care in the community, sometimes the expectations made by the health and social care system on family carers is unrealistic. Bringing care out of institutions and into the community requires high levels of responsiveness, communication and collaboration. Sometimes this does

not happen resulting in unnecessary admission to institutional care, contrary to the wishes of so many people and, indeed, contrary to Government policy.

▼ What can the Government do to better support family carers?

Government should implement the 2012 National Carers Strategy. Published in July 2012, we are unhappy with the speed of progress in this (see <http://tinyurl.com/l6uk4a9>).

We also need buy-in from health and social care professionals regarding the development of Carer Assessment tools, as part of the roll-out of a new assessment tool within the HSE. Thanks to effective lobbying and committed drivers of this within the HSE, this new assessment tool (InterRAI) will be rolled out nationally. However, sometimes professional resistance to change can impede progress that will ultimately support quality and consistency of services.

We need to address, through legislation, the anomaly whereby Government policy to care for older people at home for as long as possible is directly contradicted by the statutory entitlement to nursing home care through the mechanism of Fair Deal, without any equivalent entitlement to home care. In the interim, we propose an amendment to Fair Deal legislation to offer people, approved for Fair Deal, an alternative package of home-care supports.

Government must address current deficits in the areas that have significant impacts on family carers. For example, in the area of end-of-life-care, training to help family members provide care at home, support after caring has ended, and resourcing each HSE region with a dedicated Carer Support Officer.

Finally, Government should continue to support infrastructure

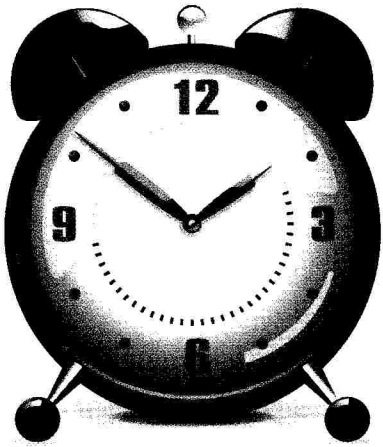
organisations such as Care Alliance Ireland, The Neurological Alliance of Ireland and The Disability Federation of Ireland. We believe passionately that for minimal investment, such organisations make a real contribution to enhancing the capacity of their members' organisations to make a difference to the lives of so many people with disabling conditions and their family carers.

▼ What can community and voluntary organisations do to support carers?

They are doing great work already and have been quite successful in protecting the quantum of services they deliver in spite of what is now five years of reduced funding from the State. Organisations should ask the following question: 'Do we engage sufficiently with family carers and treat them as 'partners in care'? They should also collaborate with each other on initiatives and supports they deliver for family carers (see The Wheel's resource on collaboration: www.wheel.ie/about/publications)

Lastly, they should join Care Alliance Ireland. With reduced income, collaboration among voluntary groups is more important than ever. Care Alliance Ireland provides its members with opportunities to influence policy and to collaborate on family carer issues and on joint initiatives such as National Carers Week, as well as joint submissions. Applications for membership of Care Alliance Ireland are open to any NGO currently supporting family carers or with an interest in supporting family carers.

Membership application forms can be downloaded at:
www.carealliance.ie/membership.
See www.carealliance.ie for more.

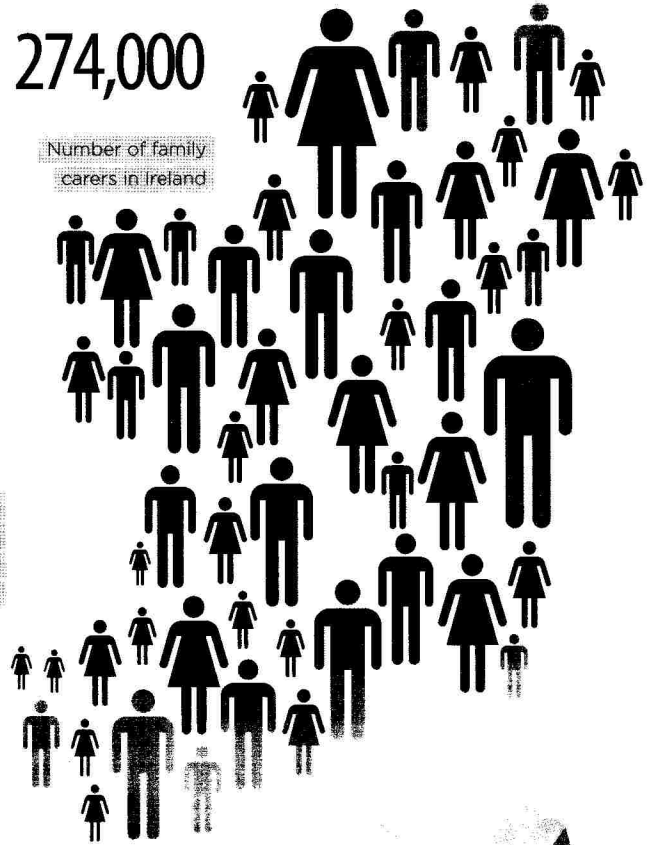


6,287,510

Total hours of care provided by family carers every week

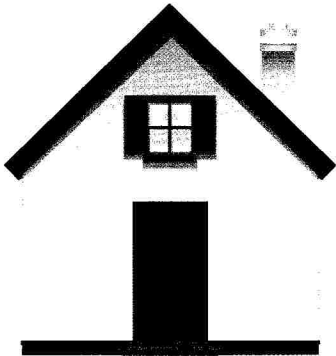
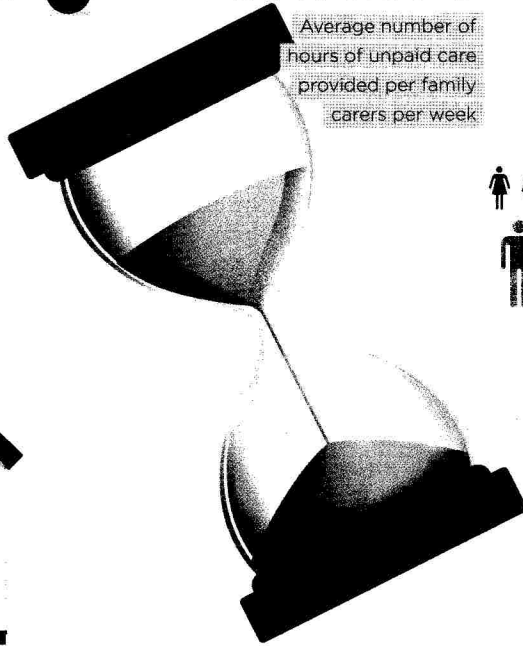
274,000

Number of family carers in Ireland



33.6 hours

Average number of hours of unpaid care provided per family carers per week

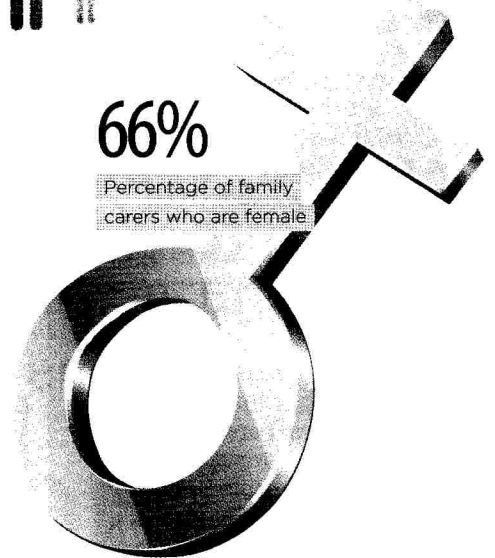


€5 Billion

Estimated annual contribution provided by family carers to our economy

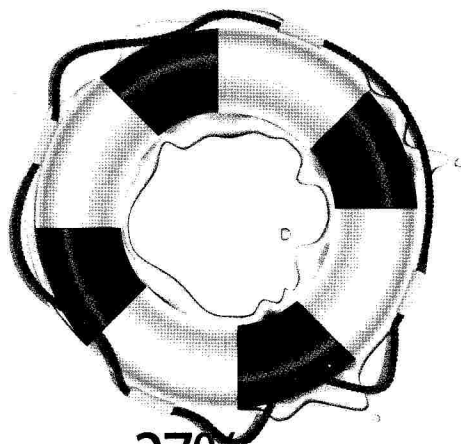
66%

Percentage of family carers who are female



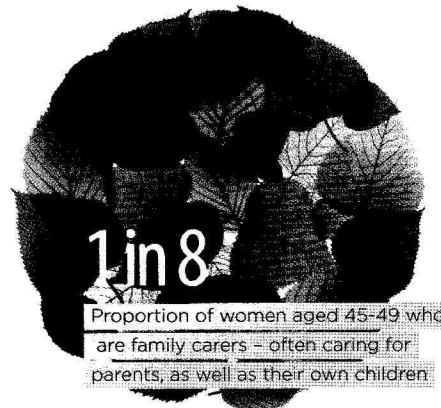
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Proportion of family carers in full-time employment



27%

Percentage of carers in receipt of the Carers Allowance



1 in 8

Proportion of women aged 45-49 who are family carers – often caring for parents, as well as their own children

Source: Carers Alliance Ireland