

June 1, 2023

Ad Hoc Committee for Supporting Family Caregivers Working in Science, Engineering, and Medicine
National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
500 Fifth St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001

RE: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine Request for Input on Caregiving Study

The American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology is an international nonprofit scientific and educational organization that represents more than 11,000 students, researchers, educators and industry professionals. The ASBMB strongly advocates for strengthening the science, technology, engineering and mathematics workforce, supporting sustainable funding for the American research enterprise, and ensuring diversity, equity and inclusion in STEM.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine released a [call for information](#) seeking input on its current caregiving study to examine policies and practices to support the retention, re-entry, and advancement of caregivers in the STEM enterprise.

Below, the ASBMB is sharing its responses and recommendations to the questions posed in the call for information:

- 1. Please describe any policies or programs at your institution or that you or others have studied in other spaces that assist caregivers in managing competing demands of work and home, assisting re-entry after periods of absence from paid labor, reducing bias against caregivers, or providing supports for caregivers or work-life balance.**

The ASBMB has advocated for improved caregiving policies for caregivers of children, the elderly, and the disabled. We also have performed research on the available re-entry supplements at the National Institutes of Health and hosted a [community event](#), documented in this [article](#), to solicit advice and increase awareness of the challenges and support mechanisms associated with being a caregiver generally and [a caregiver of an elder specifically](#).

Informed by these efforts and our collaboration with organizations such as Mothers in Science and 500 Women Scientists, we offer the following recommendations to guide the committee's caregiving study.

Recommendation 1: Improve access to affordable child and elder care

Providing affordable child and elder care is essential to supporting the nation's STEM workforce. [A 2019 study](#) demonstrated that, after having their first child, more than 40% of women with full-time science jobs leave the sector or go part-time. To support caregivers in STEM, especially women, the ASBMB recommends that the committee investigate the efficacy of offering child and elder care subsidies, as well as strategies to make this support equitably available across the STEM fields. Some examples of current programs that offer subsidies include: the FASEB CARES award and the NIH's childcare support for Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Awards for [individual fellows](#) and [institutional research trainees](#).

Recommendation 2: Require gender equity plans

During the ASBMB's [community event](#) in December, it was clear that participants experienced very different responses to their caregiving responsibilities depending on the institutional, departmental and individual lab cultures. To create more gender equity across institutions, departments and labs, the ASBMB supports [Mothers in Science's recommendation](#) to require gender equality plans for all institutions as a condition of receiving federal support. This strategy was used by the European Commission with [Horizon Europe](#) in 2021.

Recommendation 3: Improve leave-of-absence policies

Most U.S. universities have leave-of-absence policies. However, the policies vary and may not apply to academic researchers of all career stages and situations, such as those on individual fellowships and under a contractual status (such as trainee, lab assistant, etc.) with the university. Often, the categorization of graduate or postdoctoral trainees as statuses other than “employee” can prevent these trainees from being eligible for leave-of-absence policies. Additionally, the policies are often not well publicized to students, faculty and staff. The ASBMB suggests the committee consider developing best practices on the language, implementation, and dissemination of leave-of-absence policies that best support caregivers across all career stages.

Recommendation 4: Assist re-entry after periods of absence from paid labor

Providing mechanisms for investigators to return to the scientific research enterprise is crucial; it allows scientists with extenuating circumstances a chance to continue a scientific career. Re-entry and re-integration programs and funding mechanisms within both the public and private sectors aid scientists who have left the scientific enterprise — due to childrearing, caring for an elderly parent or experiencing career disruption due to sexual harassment — to relaunch their scientific careers.

The ASBMB strongly suggests that the committee study methods to scale up current re-entry and reintegration programs at federal agencies, such as the [NIH re-entry and re-integration supplements](#), and provide recommendations for federal agencies to form public-private partnerships with nongovernmental re-entry programs, such as the [STEM re-entry taskforce](#) led by the [Society of Women Engineers](#) and [iRelaunch](#).

Recommendation 5: Bolster caregivers through support and/or affinity groups

The ASBMB's aforementioned [community event](#) highlighted the significant impact of having a support network and connecting with others who understand the unique challenges of being a caregiver. The committee can consider the use and efficacy of programs that connect these individuals for seeking advice, creating a safe space to air concerns or barriers, and creating community. Furthermore, it would be valuable if the committee were to consider strategies for make caregiving support and/or affinity groups more accessible.

- 2. Please detail any efforts by yourself or other researchers to evaluate the policies or programs you just described either formally or informally to assess their efficacy and the findings of these efforts.**

Last year, the ASBMB responded to the NIH request for information for its strategic plan for research on the health of women. In our [comments](#), we recommended that the NIH Office of Research for Women's Health streamline its re-entry and re-integration supplements.

3. Please provide links to any studies (published or unpublished) on the efficacy of these policies or programs.

The following are reports and articles with unpublished data on the effectiveness of re-entry and re-integration programs:

[Keeping Scientists in Science: NIH Re-Issues Re-Entry Supplements Funding Opportunity](#), [An Intervention Strategy to Re-engage Women Engineers in the Workforce](#), and [Research Supplements to Promote Re-entry and Re-integration into Health-Related Research Careers](#).

4. Would you be interested in being considered to speak at an upcoming on-the-record, open Committee meeting?

Yes, the society is interested in sending a member of staff from the public affairs department to speak at an upcoming committee meeting.

5. Is there anything else you would like to share or that we should know?

Recommendation 6: Consider the implementation and impact of backup care

The ASBMB applauds programs at multiple institutions that provide backup care for their employees with caregiving duties, such as the [National Institutes of Health](#), [University of Maryland](#), [Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory](#), and many others. Backup care provides child and elder care services when the primary caregiver or service is unavailable, allowing the employee to continue their work uninterrupted. As the committee considers additional ways to support caregivers, we hope backup care programs will be considered and possibly encouraged as a program offered by all employers of the STEM workforce.

Recommendation 8: Increase awareness support mechanisms

In recent years, the STEM enterprise has increased available support mechanisms for parents and caregivers. However, it's unclear how well these support mechanisms are known to the majority of the workforce. The committee should consider strategies to expand awareness of current and new programs assisting parents and caregivers.

Recommendation 9: Improved data on the efficacy of child and elder care programs

The committee should encourage federal agencies to provide data on the efficacy of their child and elder care programs. This data could include the rate of utilization, demographics of populations supported, the rate of retention of caregivers who used the program, testimonials on the impact made to individuals, and more. With better data, agencies and leaders can optimize or expand programs to better support caregivers.