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Single ... With Children

Recognizing the unique challenges faced by single-parent transferees, employers seek to ease their worries.

BY JULIE COOK RAMIREZ

Moving from Chicago to Atlanta with her 13-year-old son, Barbe Ratcliffe had the typical parental concerns—finding a suitable house in a kid-friendly neighborhood, enrolling her son in a good school, and getting him involved in the same kinds of activities he had enjoyed in the Windy City. Nothing surprising there. After all, moving with children is pretty much standard fare.

However, for Ratcliffe, who currently serves as regional vice president in the Denver office of Weichert Relocation Resources Inc., there was one catch—she was a single mother. Consequently, she didn't have a spouse who could help her make key decisions or keep her son busy while one of them looked at real estate, unpacked boxes or handled such mundane matters as arranging for utilities, cable television and the like.

Ratcliffe may be in the minority, but she's certainly not an anomaly, as the number of single parents moving at the request of their employers has been steadily rising over the last two decades. According to Suzanne Murdoch, consultant manager in charge of the domestic consulting group at The IMPACT Group, a global relocation company in St. Louis, single parents now make up roughly 13 percent of the transferees her firm assists, up from 8 percent less than 20 years ago.

At New York-based Pfizer Inc., the increase is even more dramatic, with the number of single-parent relocations tripling over the last six years, says Michael Washbourn, senior manager of Pfizer's global relocation. He estimates the number of single-parent transferees has increased from 2 percent to 6 percent during that relatively short time.

That's not surprising, considering the Census Bureau reports the number of single-parent households reached nearly 17 million in the United States in 2003.

Along with the usual parental concerns about such matters as schools, soccer leagues and piano lessons, single parents face a plethora of unique challenges, not the least of which is replicating the trusted support networks they had cultivated in the locations they used to call home.

First and foremost, however, is the question of whether a single parent will even be allowed to move his or her child(ren). Unless the other parent is deceased, incarcerated, or has chosen to opt out of parenthood altogether, a single-parent transferee is saddled with whatever custody arrangement has been decreed by a court of law. Depending on the level of involvement and the disposition of the other parent, a potential transferee could end up with quite a fight on his or her hands.

That raises the question of how much responsibility employers should bear in assisting would-be transferees with legal expenses associated with relocation-related custody matters. After all, the employees would not incur such costs were it not for the employer asking them to make a move in the first place.

At Pfizer, employees who find themselves in that situation may avail themselves of the legal benefit offered as part of their overall benefits package—assuming they had opted for that benefit during enrollment, that is.

According to Washbourn, the benefit entitles employees to a certain number of hours of discounted legal assistance from a select group of attorneys. As Washbourn concedes, however, “I don’t know that it’s enough hours to wage the type of legal custody battle they may have to.” In those instances, Washbourn says, Pfizer still shies away from extending specific assistance. Instead, he says, transferees are told to dip into their \$7,000 incidental-move allowance to help cover such costs.

While the majority of companies avoid formally earmarking relocation monies to fund custody disputes, Cahill says, companies often will find a way to float the transferees a little extra money to help pay such expenses, if they want them to make the move badly enough.

“What people generally will do is just up the signing bonus—they’ll just keep ratcheting it up until they find the magic number,” says Cahill. “When you have a high performer who you need to get there, oftentimes nothing’s off the table.”

Juggling Act

Resolving custody issues often entails rearranging visitation schedules. Obviously, it’s impractical for parents who are moving 1,000 miles away to attempt to maintain every-other-weekend visitations. Therefore, they may agree to an arrangement wherein they have their child(ren) for several weeks during the summer. That has a direct impact on their housing requirements.

Unfortunately, says Laura Herring, president and CEO of The IMPACT Group, realtors are more often than not merely told they are going to be moving a single person. Therefore, they fail to direct the transferee to appropriate housing. In all the stress of a relocation, the transferees themselves may neglect to keep in mind that they need to look for housing that not only affords enough living space for visiting children, but is located in a kid-friendly neighborhood.

“If they are going to have their kids for the whole summer, they can’t be living in a one-bedroom apartment,” says Herring. “They’re going to need at least a two-bedroom or a nice sofa bed in a private area, and they’re going to have to be looking at neighborhoods that will allow them to recreate a lifestyle for the children while they are there.”

The latter often requires planning months in advance and possibly even flying the kids out well before the actual visitation for such things as baseball tryouts or music auditions. Herring also points out that such transferees may need to make special arrangements for child-care agencies that will be willing to accept their children just during the summer months.

Single parents are also likely to need “sick-child day care” because they may not have the flexibility to take care of an ill child, and they don’t have a spouse who can pick up the slack, says Murdoch.

The child-care issue is a particularly heart-wrenching one for single parents, as they are leaving behind a network of people who just may be the only other individuals to whom they entrust their child.

“They’ve got child care established, they’ve got who’s going to pick them up at day care, they’ve got babysitters, they’ve got all the support issues lined up, and it’s overwhelming for single parents to think they have to start all over again from scratch, particularly 1,800 miles away,” says Herring.

Rebuilding that support system as quickly as possible is crucial, she points out. Among the services her company offers transferees is to provide them with a list of licensed child-care providers in the new location. A license does not immediately ensure trust, however, and Herring understands that building trust with a new child-care provider may take months, if not years. Therefore, many single-parent transferees are likely to be distracted at work, wondering how their children are doing.

“This is, by far, a parent’s most critical worry when he or she moves,” says Beverly Roman, relocation expert, author and publisher of BR Anchor Publishing in Wilmington, N.C. “I always suggest that parents stay very close to the situation and make frequent visits during the first couple weeks or months to see how their child is adjusting.”

For Ratcliffe, child care was not a concern, as she already had a nanny who was willing to make the move with her.

From the very day she arrived in Atlanta, when her attendance was required at a business dinner, she didn’t need to worry about who was tending to her son, as she enjoyed true continuance of care. Because the nanny was part of Ratcliffe’s household, her employer picked up the tab for the related expenses.

“I asked for it and there was no negotiation,” recalls Ratcliffe. “It was like, ‘That makes sense.’”

Likewise, Washbourn says, Pfizer will cover expenses related to moving “qualified adults”—that is, an in-law or grandparent who is cohabiting with the transferee and consequently would be moving with him or her in order to assist with child care, either on a temporary or permanent basis.

Unlike Ratcliffe, most single-parent transferees don't have the luxury of a nanny, of course. What is typical about her relocation, however, was the expectation that she be running on all four-cylinders as soon as the plane touched down in the new location.

For transferees with a spouse or significant other, that is not usually much of a concern because one partner can handle relocation- or child-related duties, while the other focuses on his or her job.

Without a spouse—and particularly when there are children in the picture—it becomes a totally different picture. And a much more stressful situation.

“When a colleague has a partner or a spouse, one person will focus on the job, while the other focuses on the relo,” says Washbourn. “When you're talking about a single colleague, they have to do both. When you mix in children, it really becomes a juggling act, and it's very difficult for them to keep all the balls in the air at the same time.”

To help its single-parent transferees perform this “juggling act,” Pfizer encourages them to take advantage of weekend appointments when it comes to handling move-related household-goods damage claims. Washbourn feels it is less of an inconvenience for single parents to handle such matters on a weekend because “they are home anyway,” playing with their kids, working in the yard or otherwise getting acclimated in their new surroundings. At any rate, he says, it's better than having to take time off.

“You want to save those vacation days to spend with your child,” he says. “The last thing you want to do is burn those days waiting for a repair guy to come and fix the furniture.”

While Washbourn admits that “theoretically” Pfizer would extend such latitude to any transferee, he says the greatest usage takes place among single parents. In fact, he says, it was a single mother who brought the need for such flexibility to his attention, telling him, “I don't have a wife at home waiting to do all this stuff.” Now, whenever a single parent has a scheduling conflict, Pfizer's insurance contractor is instructed to make him or her aware of the option.

“When we set up a relocation, we know up front if it's a single parent, so it's pretty transparent to everybody and we try to go out of our way to offer it,” he explains. “They are so grateful for that flexibility.”

Flexibility is also at the heart of matters when it comes to assisting transferees at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. According to Julia Abell, senior director of employment, single-parent transferees—as well as employees dealing with other family issues, such as elder care—are allowed to take some extra time off during the days and weeks surrounding a move in order to get everyone involved over the hump and comfortable in their new surroundings. The important thing, according to Abell, is that everyone be treated the same and that specific groups, such as single parents, not be granted any special privileges.

“We're frequently making accommodations because it's never a neatly tied-up scenario where you just leave everything behind and start all over,” says Abell. “Everybody's unique and everybody has a story to tell. That's why we try to be as flexible as possible about how we design and administer our benefits.”

The Center allows transferees flexibility with regard to start dates, for example, so they can wrap up “loose ends” in either the old or new location. In addition, Abell says, transferees are given a generous lump sum which can be used for a multitude of relocation-related expenses, such as transporting an additional family member to the new location temporarily to assist them during those first critical days and weeks.

For Ratcliffe, her employer's flexibility involved letting her son accompany her on house-hunting trips, in lieu of a spouse. Such flexibility is easy to grant, she explains, because it is technically not an exception to policy, but rather a “different utilization of the dollar.”

For most single parents, adds Murdoch, all it takes is a little flexibility on the part of the employer. After all, these are people who are accustomed to accomplishing a great deal with little outside help. If a relocation is in the cards, therefore, an employer should put forth the opportunities and let the employees decide if it's for them.

“Single parents are very much ‘get it done’ people,” says Murdoch. “Just by virtue of being a single parent, that's a challenge every day. They are a very capable group that doesn't let things get in their way. I certainly wouldn't count them out.”

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