

# **REPORT TO CONGRESS**

## **Support for Military Families with Special Needs**

### **Background**

Section 563 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, Pub. L No. 111-84, requires the Secretary of Defense to establish an Office of Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs (here after referred to as the Office), to enhance and improve Department of Defense (DoD) support for military families with special needs, through development of appropriate policies, enhancement and dissemination of appropriate information, support for such families in obtaining referrals and services, and oversight of the activities of the Military Departments in support of such families.

Subsection (h) of the legislation requires the Secretary of Defense to submit to the congressional defense committees a report on the Office not later than 180 days after the enactment (April 28, 2010) and then annually thereafter. The report is required to address:

- A description of any gaps in services available through the Department of Defense for military families with special needs.
- A description of the actions being taken, or planned, to address such gaps.
- Such recommendations for legislative action as the Secretary considers appropriate to provide for the continuous improvement of support for military families with special needs.

This first report is submitted to meet the initial requirement.

### **Introduction**

The Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) has historically addressed issues concerning military families with special needs. These issues traditionally included the policy for coordination of assignments for overseas travel; and the policy for and oversight of the DoD programs that provide early intervention and special education services.

DoD Instruction 1315.19, "Authorizing Special Needs Family Members Travel Overseas at Government Expense," December 20, 2005, requires the Military Services to establish a system to identify, document and consider a military family member's special needs when approving travel at government expense to an overseas location. The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) has been established by each of the Military Services to implement this policy and to provide family support services. DD Form 2792, EFMP Medical Summary and DD Form 2792-1, EFMP Special

Educational/Early Intervention Summary capture information about the exceptional family member's special medical and/or educational needs. When a service member is being considered for an assignment overseas, the family member's special medical requirements are submitted to the receiving military medical personnel, and/or, as applicable, the family member's special educational requirements are submitted to the DoD Education Activity. These two activities make recommendations to the military personnel system about whether overseas location has the services necessary to meet the family member's needs. Over 110,000 military family members are enrolled in the EFMP, and their needs are always considered when the military sponsor is considered for an overseas assignment. A member's career may not be prejudiced by this process.

## **Gaps and Actions**

In response to the requirements of the NDAA 2010, the Department is taking steps to establish an *Office of Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs*, with three existing staff members who have experience and training in special needs. Steps are underway to expand the staff and to provide a Director from the Senior Executive Service.

Although DoD policy does not require the Military Services to coordinate assignments to and within the United States for military personnel whose families have special needs, the Military Services, through Service-specific policies, coordinate with the gaining medical command on the basis of medical needs. The approach to considering educational needs varies greatly among the Military Services, both in how it is incorporated into policy and in how consistently it is considered in each case. One Service clears all families in all locations for both medical and educational needs. The other Services coordinate assignments to and within the United States for medical needs, and in some cases for educational needs.

Section 563 of NDAA 2010 requires support to military families with special needs without regard to their location. This will require the Department to expand assignment coordination to include assignments to and within the United States, as well as to overseas locations. Changes in DoD policy and the implementation guidance and programs of the Military Services are required to standardize assignment coordination so that it a) is provided in all locations; and b) considers both medical and educational needs. The Department has established a joint services working group to revise the DoD policy.

DoD maintains a directory of early intervention and special education services provided by the military treatment facilities and DoD schools overseas that is used when coordinating assignments when the family member is a child with a disability. The NDAA 2010 requires coordination with public schools nationwide. This coordination

will be a challenge, as there is no central directory of special education services for these schools, nor a standard mechanism for coordinating with the school systems.

DoD has contracted with Ohio State University to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the availability of federal, state, and local education and treatment services for children of members of the Armed Services who have been diagnosed with autism. This was a requirement of Section 587 of NDAA 2008, but was repealed by Section 563 of NDAA 2010. The original intent of the assessment was to identify the local availability of adequate educational, medical, and supplemental services for children with autism and assess the ease of access to adequate educational services. DoD believes that the results of this study will assist in developing a system to identify the availability of other educational services for children with disabilities and aid in the EFMP assignment coordination process within the United States. The final report of the study is due in October 2010, and will be forwarded to the congressional defense committees at that time.

DoD policy does not require a community support program for military families with special needs. The Military Services do not share a standardized approach to providing community support, although they all use the term “Exceptional Family Member Program” (EFMP) for both the assignment coordination activities and family support. DoD does not currently provide oversight of EFMP family support services. Availability of EFMP family support for families with special needs varies by Military Service and location, ranging from multiple full-time staff to personnel assigned the duty as a collateral assignment. The major focus of the EFMP has been on a) active duty members because of the assignment coordination process; and b) the difficulties faced by service members and their families as they access services during a permanent change of station move. EFMP family support services are available to Guard and Reserve members, but not normally coordination of assignments unless a reserve component member was relocating with the family.

A Joint Services EFMP working group hosted by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) has been meeting since April 2009 on how to better support military families with special needs, from both the Active and Reserve Components. This group has begun developing a DoD policy to guide the Services in meeting the community support requirements of NDAA 2010. The working group will also develop standards and metrics by which to measure the effectiveness of the support provided. A DoD policy will establish the standards of the program, but implementing the program will require resources for the Services to hire and train a sufficient number of EFMP support staff to provide a consistent program in all locations where we assign personnel with special needs family members. It is the intention of the working group to meet with military families with special needs, and consult military and civilian specialists who have experience supporting families with special needs. From these assessments, the working group will develop a standardized program that will identify the additional

resources necessary to provide a comprehensive and consistent level of support to all military families with special needs.

### **Legislative Action**

No recommended legislative action at this time.

### **Summary**

DoD is well aware that families with special needs require assistance, especially due to the frequency with which they relocate. DoD and the Military Services provide relief to these families through their respective EFM Programs. It is DoD's intention to establish DoD-level oversight and expand the Department-wide EFMP to provide a consistent level of support at all locations and to all members of the Armed Services. We anticipate that the 2011 report will provide more specifics about the success of these efforts.