

**ANNUAL REPORT TO THE CONGRESSIONAL DEFENSE COMMITTEES**

**on the**

**Activities of the Office of Special Needs – 2016**

**as required by**

**Section 1781c(g) of Title 10, U.S. Code**



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## **Executive Summary**

The Office of Special Needs (OSN) was established by enactment of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010, Public Law 111-84, October 28, 2009, which added new section 1781c to title 10, U.S. Code. The purpose of the OSN is to “enhance and improve Department of Defense (DoD) support around the world for military families with special needs (whether medical or educational needs) through the development of appropriate policies, enhancement and dissemination of appropriate information throughout the DoD, support for such families in obtaining referrals for services and in obtaining service, and oversight of the activities of the military departments in support of such families.” To effect these purposes, the OSN operates in and oversees three primary program areas: the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), the provision of services pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the sponsorship and facilitation of the DoD Advisory Panel on Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs. Over the last year, the OSN has continued to make significant progress in all three program areas.

### **EFMP**

The OSN and the Military Services have standardized EFMP program knowledge and program tools and materials across all Services. This standardization effort affects each of the three EFMP component areas: Identification/Enrollment, Assignment Coordination, and Family Support. Key EFMP achievements in the last year include:

- Coordination and approval of standardized Family Member Travel Screening (FMTS) forms for use in an FMTS Pilot in which all Services are participating. Eight Pilot locations will test five new standard forms for use in screening the travel of ALL families serviced at a location, regardless of Service affiliation, and regardless of whether a family has previously been identified as having special needs.
- Development and delivery of a comprehensive training program, including a 3-day training conference for all CONUS and OCONUS staff of all Services participating in the FMTS Pilot.
- Validation of the standard Family Needs Assessment (FNA) form and submission of the form into the DoD form approval and publication process.
- Development, delivery and briefing on EFMP family support standardization efforts, upon request.

### **IDEA Services**

The OSN has oversight of policies and programs executed in accordance with Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI)/ Department of Defense Manual (DoDM) 1342.12, “Provision of Early Intervention and Special Education Services to Eligible DoD Dependents,” which implements the non-funding provisions of the IDEA for the DoD. Actions taken in the last year include:

- Compliance monitoring of Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) special education and related services.
- Compliance monitoring of Early Intervention Services (EIS) provided by the Army’s Educational and Developmental Intervention Services (EDIS) programs.

### **DoD Advisory Panel on Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs**

OSN formally established the Advisory Panel on Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs and developed the Advisory Panel's quarterly meeting schedule. The Advisory Panel met to receive from its members their first-hand accounts of the services that military families with special needs receive and the challenges they encounter in navigating support programs. Key Advisory Panel actions taken in the last year include:

- Establishing a meeting structure based on feedback from Panel members regarding issues of import based on the challenges facing military families with special needs.
- Using Advisory Council meetings to address topics such as the EFMP identification and enrollment process, health benefits, assignment coordination procedures, and family support.
- Developing a virtual collaboration tool using the All Partners Access Network (APAN), facilitating efficient and effective Panel member communication on issues as they arise, in real time.

Following last year's successful efforts, the OSN and the Military Services will continue to take action to address the evolving needs of DoD and military families by enhancing the delivery of services to, and improving the experiences of, military families with special needs.

### **Background**

The OSN was established pursuant to section 563(a) of the NDAA for FY 2010, Pub. L. 111-84, which added new section 1781c to title 10, U.S. Code. The purpose of the Office is to "enhance and improve DoD support around the world for military families with special needs (whether medical or educational needs) through the development of appropriate policies, enhancement and dissemination of appropriate information throughout the DoD, support for such families in obtaining referrals for services and in obtaining service, and oversight of the activities of the Military Departments in support of such families." Subsection (g) of section 1781c of title 10, U.S. Code, requires the Secretary of Defense to submit to the congressional defense committees an annual report on the activities of the OSN, not later than April 30<sup>th</sup> each year.

The report is required to provide:

- A description of any gaps in services available through the Department 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 is the eighth annual report submitted since the enactment of section 1781c of title 10, U.S. Code. At Figure 1, please find a list of statutory requirements that drive the mission of the OSN and the 2016 key accomplishments associated with each one.

*Figure 1: Title 10, U.S. Code Requirements and Accomplishments*

Requirement	Accomplishments
Section 1781c(d)(1): Develop and implement a comprehensive policy on support for military families with special needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overseeing the implementation of DoDI 1315.19. The issuance was published on April 19, 2017. The rule is awaiting final publication in the Federal Register, pending review by the Regulatory Task Force, established IAW Executive Order 13777, which will provide a recommendation to the Secretary of Defense as to whether he should approve the rule and forward it for publication.</li> <li>• Overseeing the implementation of DoDI/DoDM 1342.12, which is published at 32 CFR Part 57 and implements IDEA for eligible DoD dependents.</li> <li>• Establishment and operation of the DoD Overarching Committee on Military Families with Special Needs under the auspices of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness as chair. The next meeting of the Overarching Committee is planned for later in 2017.</li> </ul>
Section 1781c(d)(2): Establish and oversee the programs that provide information and referral services on special needs matters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued development and publication of the online “The Exceptional Advocate” newsletter, which has over 8,000 subscribers and addresses issues for both families with special needs and special needs service providers.</li> <li>• Updated the Educational Directory for Children with Special Needs, a tool that provides families with contact and program information on early intervention and special education for school districts in the United States.</li> <li>• Establishment and facilitation of the Subcommittee on Inter-Component Coordination (SICC), which brings together program managers from all the Services and DoDEA to address concerns with the IDEA services provided by DoD.</li> </ul>
Section 1781c(d)(3): Identify gaps in services available through DoD for military families with special needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted analysis of Service-specific EFMP processes for identification/enrollment, assignment coordination, and provision of family support.</li> <li>• Development of EFMP process maps and EFMP Information Technology (IT) system mapping.</li> <li>• Conducted Process and Outcomes Metrics (POM) study to measure family satisfaction with special needs family support services.</li> </ul>

<p>Section 1781c(d)(4): Develop plans to address gaps in services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed and verified the standard FNA / Inter-Service Transfer Summary (ISTS) to be used by EFMP family support providers in facilitating a “warm hand over” when special needs families move from one military installation to another.</li> <li>• Developed and piloted the EFMP Data Repository, which will centrally manage and store EFMP data, including identification/enrollment data related to the sponsor and his or her family member dependents enrolled in EFMP, assignment coordination data to track the number of coordinated CONUS and OCONUS assignments, and family support data to track the number of family support staff available for each Service.</li> <li>• Developed five standardized FMTS forms to replace nine Service-unique screening forms. These five forms are currently being piloted at eight installations across the Services for use in screening ALL families for travel.</li> <li>• Conducting FMTS Pilot to test and validate standardized FMTS forms.</li> <li>• Developed initial design of the Future State Technology Roadmap to plan the way ahead for synchronizing EFMP technologies among the Services so that IT technologies in existence can communicate with one another and so that standardized new IT systems for use across all Services can be developed for the future.</li> </ul>
<p>Section 1781c(d)(5): Monitor the programs of the Military Departments for the assignment of members of the armed forces who are members of military families with special needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed toolkits, reference guides, brochures, trainings, and other resources for families, service providers, and military leaders.</li> <li>• Conducted webinars tailored to Service and Family Support Providers, covering such topics as how to address sensitive topics with families, working with families in crisis, dealing with interpersonal relationships, empowering caregivers, Medicare, and the Autism Care Demonstration Project.</li> </ul>
<p>Section 1781c(d)(6): Monitor the availability and accessibility of programs provided by other Federal, State, local, and non-governmental agencies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinated with other Federal, State, local, and non-governmental agencies (e.g., TRICARE ECHO and Respite Care, School Liaison Offices, State Liaison Offices, disability advocacy groups).</li> </ul>
<p>Section 563(d) of Public Law 111-84, as amended by section 582 of Public Law 111-383: Establish an advisory panel on community support for military families with special needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established and facilitated the operation of the Advisory Panel on Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs, comprised of seven individual members, each of whom is a member of a military family with special needs, to assess, advise, and provide information to the OSN.</li> </ul>

## **Introduction**

The OSN operates in and oversees three primary program areas: the oversight of EFMP policy across the Military Services; responsibility for DoD policy and compliance oversight regarding DoD's provision of IDEA services to eligible DoD dependents with disabilities in accordance with 32 CFR Part 57; and the administration and facilitation of the DoD Advisory Panel on Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs.

## **EFMP**

An integral responsibility of the OSN is the establishment of policy governing the EFMP and the exercise of oversight of the Services' execution of their EFMP programs. The EFMP serves more than 120,000 enrolled military family members with special medical and/or educational needs. Each of the Military Services operates its EFMP independently, leading to challenges in cross-Service coordination and, at times, gaps in support. To address these challenges and to prevent and close gaps in support so as to enable families with special needs to receive the same level of service, regardless of their Military Department / Service affiliation or geographic location, the OSN and the Military Services have engaged in a long-term process to standardize EFMP policies and procedures. This standardization process has been a three-pronged effort:

- **Identification / Enrollment** (of a family member) with special medical and/or educational needs.
- **Assignment Coordination** to ensure the special needs of a family member are considered in the assignment process.
- **Family Support** to help families identify and access community resources.

## **Policy Reauthorization**

The OSN had policy oversight responsibility for DoDI 1315.19, "Authorizing Special Needs Family Members Travel Overseas at Government Expense," which previously guided OSN's EFMP efforts. OSN has updated this DoDI and on April 19, 2017, it was published under its new name, "The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)."

## **Family Member Travel Screening Pilot**

The FMTS Working Group (FMTSWG), comprised of the members of the OSN and medical representatives from the four Military Services, developed five standardized FMTS forms to replace nine Service-unique screening forms (refer to Figure 2). These five standardized forms guide the screening of any special medical, educational, and/or dental needs during the FMTS process and provide a consistent FMTS experience for active duty families with permanent change of station orders to overseas and remote locations. The FMTSWG has initiated a Pilot to test the ability of the forms to integrate into Service-specific processes and requirements. The outcomes of the Pilot will inform the way forward in implementing standardized forms across the Department and enabling a consistent FMTS experience for military families.

*Figure 2: Comparison of Pilot Forms to Service-Specific Forms*

<b>Pilot Forms Replace Current Service Forms</b>			
<b>Standardized Pilot Forms</b>	<b>Air Force Forms</b>	<b>Army Forms</b>	<b>Navy Forms</b>
<b>DD Form 3040 TEST Screening Verification</b>	AF 1466	DA 5888	NAVPERS 1300/16 (PART II)
<b>DD Form 3040-1 TEST Medical and Educational Information</b>	AF 4380	DA 7246	NAVMED 1300/1 NAVMED 1300/2
<b>DD Form 3040-2 TEST Dental Health Information</b>	AF 1466D	N/A	NAVMED1300/1 (PART II)
<b>DD Form 3040-3 TEST Patient Care Review</b>	N/A	DA 5888-1	N/A
<b>DD Form 3040-4 TEST Administrative Review Checklist</b>	N/A	N/A	NAVMED 1300/2

#### *Development of FMTS Pilot Training Materials, Communications, and Support Tools*

The OSN and designated medical Service representatives developed and distributed the following items to personnel conducting travel screenings at the eight locations identified as participating in the FMTS Pilot:

- Training materials, including presentations, feedback activities, demonstrations, and simulations to prepare staff participating in the Pilot to fulfill their responsibilities.
- Communications documents to spread awareness of the Pilot to leadership, installation-level staff, and families.
- Support tools, including trackers, guides, products, and manuals to enable Pilot staff to facilitate the FMTS process and to collect data and feedback as the Pilot progresses and concludes, with a view to identifying and modifications and changes that may be needed in order to cascade the Pilot program across the whole of the Department of Defense.

#### *FMTS Pilot Briefings*

In preparation for the Pilot's kick-off, Service headquarters leaders, Service Family Support representatives, and local commands at participating installations received an overview briefing on the FMTS Pilot from the FMTSWG. Briefings were delivered to the following individuals and organizations via in-person meetings and on-line Defense Collaboration Services:

- Deputy Medical Operations Group
- Medical Operations Group
- DoDEA
- Service EFMP leadership
- Installation-level leaders at Pilot participating locations

- EFMP Family Support staff members assigned to the eight Pilot locations

#### *FMTS Pilot Training*

In preparation for the Pilot's kick-off, the OSN and Service medical representatives on the FMTSWG developed and executed an in-person training conference to assist EFMP staff participating in the Pilot in successfully fulfilling their role-specific FMTS responsibilities. The objectives of the conference were to prepare Pilot participants in both CONUS and OCONUS locations, distribute and familiarize participants with standardized Pilot forms, gather feedback on the standardized forms, and enable the Pilot participants to network and learn from one another in a collaborative, cross-Service environment.

Throughout the 3-day training conference, the FMTSWG delivered role-specific training presentations and facilitated interactive simulations to familiarize the Pilot participants with the new standardized forms and FMTS processes. Additionally, the FMTSWG provided information about Service-specific process requirements and procedures and described in detail how they would be standardized during the Pilot. Pilot participants shared local-level practices for screening military families, offering constructive feedback on the layout, utility, and application of the standardized forms. Pilot participants shared questions, conceptualized how the forms would integrate into their current processes, and identified areas for improvement through written feedback at both the beginning and end of the training conference.

#### *FMTS Next Steps*

The first phase of the FMTS Pilot is the form distribution period, which began on January 30, 2017, and was originally projected to last for 90 days; however, in April 2017, the FMTSWG decided to extend the form distribution period for an additional 90 days, through July 28, 2017. This extended Pilot period will allow the Services to include more participants in the Pilot during their peak permanent change of station season. Feedback and data collected during the Pilot's form distribution period will be continuously analyzed; all findings and recommendations for the way forward will be collated and compiled in the FMTS Pilot Report.

#### **Family Support**

The OSN identified the Family Support EFMP component, which involves providing support to families in identifying and accessing community resources through Service family centers, as a standardization focus area. Family Support providers develop service plans to guide the delivery of services to military families and offer non-clinical case management via installation family centers. With a standard Family Support process, families will receive improved and consistent support in identifying and accessing community services and resources at any location, regardless of Military Service affiliation or geographic location.

In order to address the family support challenges identified by the Services and the Advisory Panel, the OSN and Service-designated Family Support representatives participated in monthly Family Support Working Group (FSWG) meetings to share Service-specific insights, identify gaps in support, and develop and execute initiatives that will improve and standardize the family support experiences of military families.



### *POM Project/Pilot*

The OSN and the Services collaborated with Cornell University to develop and pilot the POM Project, a standard survey that measures family satisfaction with the delivery of family support services. Representatives from all of the Military Services participated in the Pilot to assess the viability of the survey tool. Leveraging family insights, these metrics will facilitate the identification of potential program improvements and lay the groundwork for the future use of metrics to capture feedback directly from military families.

### *FNA*

The FSWG developed a standard FNA form to guide core family support processes (i.e., needs assessment and “warm handovers” to family support providers at gaining military installations) and assist Family Support Offices in providing continuous support and a consistent experience for families. The following are included in the FNA:

- **A Family Services Plan** facilitates non-clinical case management to assist the family in identifying goals and coordinating support, both on the installation and in the community.
- **ISTS** facilitates the documentation of current goals and activities to assist Family Support Providers in clearly and consistently communicating the needs of military families transferring from one Service installation to another.

After incorporating ground-level insights and best practices from each of the Military Services, the final structure of the FNA was validated by the four Service FSWG members during their monthly meetings. The OSN then initiated the forms approval process by submitting the FNA to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) Information and Management Control Office to secure approval to collect information from both internal (DoD) and external (non-DoD) sources. When approved, this form will assist family support providers and families in assessing and prioritizing their needs. This approval process requires extensive coordination with a number of entities such as:

- The four Military Services
- OSD Forms Manager
- OSD Privacy Officer
- OSD Chief Information Officer
- OSD Records Manager
- DoD Office of General Counsel
- Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP)
- OSD Information Management Control Officer
- DoD Internal Collections Officer
- Office of Management and Budget

In preparation for DoD-wide adoption of the FNA, the OSN updated the FNA training video to provide information to Family Support staff on how to use the form properly.

### *Military Family Learning Network (MFLN)*

The MFLN offers professional development opportunities for family support and EIS staff through web conferencing and on-line self-paced learning modules. In 2016, MFLN conducted a

total of 17 webinars for Family Support staff covering such topics as how to address sensitive topics with families, working with families in crisis, dealing with interpersonal relationships, empowering caregivers, Medicare, and the Autism Care Demonstration Project. In collaboration with MFLN staff members, the OSN and members of the FSWG provided extensive feedback and suggestions for potential future webinar topics that would be most relevant for Family Support staff and military families with special needs. This insight informed discussions about future FSWG standardization initiatives.

#### *Family Support Reference Guide*

The Family Support Reference Guide provides guidance for EFMP Family Support providers on the delivery of information and resources to military families with special medical and/or educational needs. Service Family Support representatives provided Service-specific program information and feedback to the OSN for inclusion in the updated Family Support Reference Guide, which will be made available and publicized on Military OneSource (MOS).

#### *Navy Family Support Training*

The OSN was invited to provide an overview of EFMP standardization efforts and training, including the process for completing a FNA, the Family Services Plan, and ISTS, during a Navy Family Support training session. The training materials will serve as the foundation for additional FNA trainings and will be leveraged in both future single-Service and cross-Service training efforts.

#### *Family Support Next Steps*

As several long-term Family Support initiatives come to fruition, the FSWG has shifted its focus to new projects and increased standardization efforts. Based on the gaps and challenges that have been identified by the Service-designated Family Support representatives, the FSWG has developed a plan for the way forward to address these challenges and improve the experience for military families.

The FSWG will prioritize and pursue the development of standard on-line training for Family Support staff. A standard training curriculum will provide Family Support staff with the opportunity to develop the set of skills that is essential to the execution of their roles and responsibilities, while also guiding a consistent experience for families, regardless of the Family Support office or Service from which the family is receiving services and support. This “next step” will build on the FSWG’s recent work in developing and disseminating standardized Family Support tools, such as the FNA, POM Project, and Family Support Reference Guide. Additionally, enhanced training will address challenges associated with onboarding new staff to ensure that each staff member has the knowledge, skills, and abilities to deliver effective family support services to the highest levels of quality and consistency.

#### **EFMP Data Repository**

The OSN developed and piloted the EFMP Data Repository, which centralizes management of EFMP data and improves reporting capabilities for OSN and the Military Services, a key statutory goal. Standard data terms have been developed and will be applied to facilitate a consistent data collection, recordation, and submission process across the Services.

Implementation of the Data Repository, will position the OSN and the Services to further standardize data collection processes and refine data terms.

#### *Data Repository Next Steps*

With the consistent and standardized collection and submission of EFMP data across all Services, the OSN will be able better to analyze EFMP trends and identify gaps in services and to undertake efforts to bridge those gaps through enhanced support for military families.

#### **Way Forward for the EFMP**

The OSN will continue to analyze EFMP processes and IT systems across the Services to identify additional initiatives that would contribute to consistent and streamlined EFMP management and an improved experience for Service members and their families.

#### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Services**

The OSN oversees the DoD-wide implementation of DoDI/DoDM 1342.12, “Provision of Early Intervention and Special Education Services to Eligible DoD Dependents,” both published as 32 CFR Part 57, which applies the requirements of the IDEA within DoD. DoD’s current IDEA efforts span more than 200 programs worldwide, affecting more than 8,600 children in special education and related services (RS), and just fewer than 800 children and families receiving EIS. In collaboration with EDIS, which are operated by the Military Medical Departments and DoDEA, OSN aims to improve educational services for children with disabilities.

#### **Monitoring the Provision of IDEA Services**

The OSN monitors the delivery of IDEA services across DoD with a view to improving educational outcomes and functional results for children with disabilities. Monitoring also ensures that all DoD IDEA programs meet the compliance requirements of the IDEA and DoDI/DoDM 1342.12. 32 CFR Part 57 requires the Military Departments and DoDEA to establish a system to ensure compliance with the requirement to provide EIS, special education, and RS to eligible family members. 32 CFR Part 57 also requires the DoD to validate internal monitoring activities that are conducted by both the Military Medical Departments and DoDEA, and to determine the overall status of compliance across all of DoD.

#### *Overview of Monitoring Activities*

The OSN coordinates monitoring activities annually to confirm DoD-wide compliance with the IDEA and DoDI/DoDM 1342.12. In 2016, compliance monitoring included the following tasks:

- Conducting electronic file reviews of select site data, completed paperwork, and local processes.
- Collecting ground-level feedback from approximately 20 selected CONUS and OCONUS installations.
- Developing reports to document findings and verify compliance or lack of compliance with DoDI/DoDM 1342.12, to identify areas for improvement.

In conjunction with annual monitoring activities, the DoD components responsible for the delivery of IDEA services: the Military Medical Departments (which provide early intervention and related services through EDIS); and DoDEA (which provide special education to school-age

students) are required to submit a report on the status of any corrective actions taken in response to identified concerns or deficiencies. The OSN maintains oversight of systemic compliance by reviewing the compliance reports and data collected and submitted by the Services and DoDEA.

#### *OSN/DoDEA Monitoring Activity: Puerto Rico*

OSN conducted a virtual review of DoDEA's provision of Part B IDEA services to students at four DoD schools in Puerto Rico. The monitoring team, comprised of two members from OSN and one member from DoDEA, reviewed a sample of 25 of 284 records of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) from four DoDEA schools. An IEP outlines the individual instructional goals and objectives for the specialized instruction each student receives. In the context of the review, the team looked at Case Study Committee meeting invitations and meeting minutes, as well as eligibility reports associated with each student's IEP. The OSN's review generated a report with minor recommendations, but overall, the review validated that DoDEA-provided IDEA services were in compliance with law and regulation. But as a result of the recommendations identified in the Puerto Rico Compliance Report, several changes to OSN's monitoring process have been recommended. These include a recommendation that OSN collect information through site visits or desk audits from at least three DoDEA's locations before issuing a report. This would ensure that monitoring is more systematic in nature and likely to generate a more accurate picture of DoDEA's delivery of services across the board.

#### *OSN/Army EDIS Monitoring: Puerto Rico*

In March and April 2016, in accordance with the IDEA and DoD implementing regulations, the OSN conducted a desk-based monitoring of the EIS provided to eligible DoD dependents ranging in age from birth to age 2, by the Army's EDIS programs at Fort Buchanan and Ramey/Aguadilla. The team reviewed Committee meeting invitations, meeting minutes, eligibility reports, and transition meeting documentation associated with Individual Family Services Plan (IFSP) for five of sixteen available records. The IFSP outlines the goals and outcomes that the family has identified, together with the service provider, for their child/family. The OSN's monitoring of DoD's Part C IDEA services in Puerto Rico revealed compliance with the IDEA and DoDI/DoDM 1342.12.

### **IDEA Technical Assistance and Training**

As part of its oversight of IDEA programs, the OSN provides technical assistance and training to DoD program administrators and service providers. OSN's 2016 training and technical assistance activities included:

- Providing technical assistance to the Military Medical Departments' EDIS program managers and DoDEA headquarters special education staff on major revisions to the DoDI/M and implications for program implementation.
- Collaborating with the U.S. Army Medical Command's early intervention program to provide program implementation guidance and securing funding to support training of early intervention providers in all Military Medical Departments' EDIS programs.
- Providing advice and technical assistance to the Military Medical Departments as they worked to standardize EDIS early intervention services processes and forms.
- Collaborating with the MFLN to provide webinars for EIS providers in DoD and to service providers outside of DoD who often work with military families.

## **DoD SICC**

32 CFR Part 57 authorized the establishment of the SICC, which is charged to recommend policies regarding the provision of early intervention and special education services. The OSN chairs the SICC, which meets quarterly to discuss DoD early intervention, special education, and related services and to problem solve current challenges. The Military Medical Departments EDIS program managers, together with representatives from DoDEA and OSN, are regular members of the committee. In 2017, the Committee will address monitoring revisions and compliance reports and continue to problem solve challenges raised by committee members.

## **DoD Advisory Panel on Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs**

The OSN established the DoD Advisory Panel on Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs (Advisory Panel) to gather insights into family experiences with DoD support services and to inform policy development. Panel members comprise seven members of families with special needs from across the Military Services.

The Panel meets on a quarterly basis to receive from its members their first-hand accounts of the services that military families with special needs receive and the challenges they encounter in navigating support programs. As set forth in section 563(d) of Public Law 111-84, as amended by section 582 of Public Law 111-383, the Advisory Panel is tasked with the following three official responsibilities:

- Provide informed advice to the Director of OSN for developing the overarching, DoD-wide policy to support military families with special medical and/or educational needs.
- Assess and provide information to the Director on existing services and support for children and adults with special needs that are available from other departments and federal, state, and local agencies.
- Assist the Director in supporting military families with special needs.

Advisory Panel members serve as “program ambassadors,” disseminating program information to military families and sharing community insights with the OSN. Although the OSN regularly collects insights and feedback from Service leadership and Service-designated representatives, the Advisory Panel presents a unique opportunity for collecting additional insights directly from military families with special needs who receive support from DoD programs. These insights will prove invaluable in informing policy decisions going forward. With consistent feedback from the Advisory Panel, the OSN is positioned to leverage ground-level insights from across the Military Services to prioritize initiatives, inform policy development, and address specific challenges experienced by military families with special needs.

### *Establishment of Thematic Meeting Structure and Facilitation Approach*

The OSN and Advisory Panel members determine the theme for each meeting, and the OSN delivers a brief presentation related to that theme in order to share OSD-level information with Panel members and answer questions about current processes. The OSN developed an organizational mailbox (“org box”) to collect input from the military community on topics for Advisory Panel consideration. OSN manages the organizational mailbox and follows an established protocol for considering and responding to submissions. The org box was advertised in “The Exceptional Advocate,” a bi-monthly electronic newsletter for military families with

special needs, service providers, and leaders, and has proven to be a very useful vehicle through which the OSN can receive and respond to questions from families in the military community.

The OSN, in collaboration with the Advisory Panel, develops an agenda for each meeting. While discussions focus on big-picture, community-wide concerns, members also have an opportunity to share specific challenges encountered by military families with special needs during “Hot Zone” discussions. Issues raised during “Hot Zone” discussions have included the identification and enrollment of EFM, assignment coordination, TRICARE/ECHO, services for adult dependents, and perceptions of stigma associated with enrollment in the EFMP. OSN will use “Hot Zone” discussions to document issues and track action items. All comments and feedback will be captured on a “Hot Zone” discussion tracker, which will inform future efforts and initiatives undertaken by the Advisory Panel and DoD.

#### *Development of Platform for Engagement*

To continue conversations and engagement with military families between meetings of the Advisory Council, OSN organized an online platform for virtual engagement. The OSN developed the DoD Advisory Panel APAN Site to provide Panel members access to meeting materials, online discussion boards, and informal feedback tools. APAN is the unclassified information sharing and collaboration platform for the DoD, provided by the Defense Information Systems Agency. APAN facilitates communication between Panel members in real time, allowing them to collaborate on and address issues as they surface.

#### **Way Forward for the Advisory Panel**

Building on the recent accomplishments of the Advisory Panel, the OSN is committed to the following:

- Facilitation of greater communication among Advisory Panel members and with families with special needs in the military community writ large via APAN and the conduct of interactive, dynamic Advisory Council meetings.
- Determination of priorities for upcoming discussions, including Family Support, Assignment Coordination, IDEA Services, and information and referral services as a means of best leveraging community resources.
- Population and analysis of the “Hot Zone” tracker to identify and track systemic challenges to be addressed with potential policy and program solutions.
- Prioritization of potential initiatives for the Advisory Panel and DoD to undertake.

Advisory Panel meetings are scheduled for 2017, with future themes to be determined based on the comments, questions, and interests of the Panel members.

## **Outreach and Engagement**

Communication with military families with special needs and the provision of information about the EFMP remain a major focus of the OSN. In the last year, the OSN has accomplished many communications goals (see Figure 3).

*Figure 3: Communication Methods and Accomplishments*

<b>Method</b>	<b>Accomplishment</b>
The Exceptional Advocate	The OSN publishes “The Exceptional Advocate,” a bi-monthly electronic newsletter for military families with special needs, service providers, and leaders. Every other month, readers have access to articles, resources, and tips on a variety of special needs-related topics. An estimated 8,300 subscribers receive the bi-monthly electronic newsletter.
Military Family Readiness Council (MFRC)	As a participant on the MFRC, the OSN shares information with the Council and the public and advocates for military families with special medical and/or educational needs.
Social Media	The OSN utilizes social media platforms to share resources and provide information about services available to the military community. Innovative and creative communications via social media reach out to our special needs families on-line, engaging them in their comfort zone and rendering it more likely that special needs families will receive the information and support they need.
MC&FP	The OSN collaborates with MC&FP’s Military Community Outreach Office, which provides oversight of efforts to promote MC&FP policies and programs writ large. Through the Military Community Outreach Office, OSN messages are shared with other key DoD stakeholders, military service organizations, service providers, and community organizations. Detailed communication plans ensure the delivery of uniform and consistent information about the OSN, special education, early intervention, and EFMP resources and policies.
MOS Website	The MOS website is currently being redesigned to include updated information and training regarding EFMP processes, programs, and services available for both military families and service providers. Enhanced functionality and user-friendly features will assist families in more easily navigating the site and accessing the resources they need.
Defense Health Agency (DHA)	Collaboration with DHA on numerous issues affecting family members with special needs enables the OSN to connect with families via webinars and policy discussions. These efforts assist the OSN in identifying additional gaps in service and in partnering with DHA to address those gaps more effectively.
National Disability and Military Service Organizations	Through meetings with several national disability and military service organizations, the OSN has spread its message throughout the community, providing detailed information about how the Department serves and supports military families with special needs through programs such as the EFMP.

## **Legislative Action**

Recently, the OSN and its leadership met with professional staff members from the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) to provide an update on EFMP progress and current initiatives. SASC staff expressed concerns regarding the timeliness of the publication of DoD policy for families with special needs. Although at the time of the meeting, OSN was able to report only that the DoD policy was in the final stages of publication and release, we are pleased to report that DoDI 1315.19, “The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)”, has since been signed and was published on April 19, 2017. The OSN also noted that in collaboration with the Military Services, the Office continues to enhance and improve services for families with special needs, exceeding the requirements outlined in section 1781c of title 10, U.S. Code, and section 563 of the NDAA for FY 2010, Public Law 111-84, as amended.

The Department remains committed to EFMP standardization and looks forward to sharing the results of its Pilots and information about the implementation of recommendations in future reports and briefings to Congress.

The Department believes that current statutes relating to services and support to military families with special needs are sufficient, but commits to immediately informing the Congressional defense committees should it identify gaps in special needs policies and programs that could be bridged through new legislation.

## **Conclusion**

Service and support programs for military families with special needs are complex, involving policies and procedures spanning the domains of medical (identification / enrollment), personnel and medical (assignment coordination), and family support (family support) functions. OSN works diligently to oversee activities related to special needs families across the Military Departments, to develop and implement policies and processes to enhance family experiences, and to increase the quality of life for military families with special needs, all with a view to ultimately improving mission readiness.

The activities and accomplishments outlined in this report, and other collaborative efforts with DoD and Service representatives, have positioned OSN well to continue to assess and improve service and support programs for military families with special needs.