

Military OneSource Podcast — 2022 Exceptional Family Member Program Survey Results

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information, and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. My guest today is Tomeshia Barnes. Tomeshia leads the Department of Defense's Office of Special Needs, and she's a colleague and she's back on the podcast. So Tomeshia, welcome and it's good to have you with us.

Tomeshia Barnes:

Thank you, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

So what we're going to talk about today is a survey that we did in 2022, and we have the results and we're kind of going through them and we're figuring out the next steps. The survey was for the Exceptional Family Member Program. Just before we get too far along, Tomeshia, why don't you just give us a quick overview of the Exceptional Family Member Program?

Tomeshia Barnes:

The Exceptional Family Member Program, commonly referred to as the EFMP, is a program comprised of three components. The three components are identification and enrollment, assignment coordination and Family Support.

Identification and enrollment is the point of entry into the EFMP, and that is when a family member is identified as having a special medical or educational need. Medical services will coordinate that documentation of those needs and the families enrolled in the EFMP.

The second component is assignment coordination, and that is really coordinating assignments for families enrolled in the program to ensure that they have the resources to address those specific needs. And then we have Family Support, which is the most

visible component of the program, and it consists of helping families access and navigate the services, support and resources available to them within their community.

Bruce Moody:

So that's the Exceptional Family Member Program, as you said, commonly referred to as EFMP. We did a survey in 2022. What was the purpose of that survey?

Tomeshia Barnes:

As discussed in our previous podcast on the EFMP, the department is committed to enhancing and improving the program. In order to do so, it was very important that we obtain information on the lived experiences of military families enrolled in the EFMP. We sought to get information that would allow us to proactively enhance and improve the program, but ensure that our efforts were designed to meet the needs of families and address the challenges as well as celebrate the successes that they're experiencing.

Bruce Moody:

Tomeshia again, we had the survey back in 2022, a survey of EFMP families. What is it that you hope to learn from the results of the survey?

Tomeshia Barnes:

There are several things that we hope to learn from the survey. So one of the key things was satisfaction with the program. We really wanted to understand the level of satisfaction with the program as a whole, as well as satisfaction within the three components of the program.

We also wanted to learn how families accessed information. As we seek to put information that families truly need in their hands, we really wanted to know how were families accessing critical information. We really wanted to learn more about the provision of support that families receive before, during and after a permanent change of station move. We wanted to learn how families are accessing services and support and we really wanted to learn where challenges may exist for families.

Bruce Moody:

So we want to talk about what you learned, the findings and such, but give us an idea of the survey process. How did we survey these families?

Tomeshia Barnes:

So this was actually a web-based survey fielded November 2022 to March 2023, and it actually was a census survey in which all service members with a dependent enrolled in the EFMP received an email with information on accessing the survey. And we also included access information on Military OneSource as well.

When we looked at this survey, it was designed to include the topics of eligibility, of course, we also obtained background information, definitely satisfaction, information about enrollment, Family Support services, assignment coordination. And we also really

wanted to talk about things that happened or aspects that impacted families before, during and after their most recent PCS moves.

And then importantly, we looked at use of programs and services that weren't necessarily components of the EFMP, but services and programs that families enrolled in our program would need access to. And a key area that we also looked at within this survey was retention as well.

Bruce Moody:

OK. So that's how you did the survey. Let's talk about the findings. What did you learn and maybe highlights?

Tomeshia Barnes:

So what we actually learned within this survey, a couple of key highlights and we definitely encourage listeners to go on Military OneSource and see the entire survey results, but a couple of things that I really like to highlight for this conversation is that one of the key questions that we really ask is, in the past 12 months, how satisfied have you been overall with the EFMP? And from that question, we learned that overall, 43% of respondents reported satisfaction with the EFMP, while 25% indicated neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction, and 33% indicated dissatisfaction.

Another key question that we really looked at is that retention piece. And so we really wanted to know the impact of EFMP enrollment on a service member's decision to stay on active duty. And for that question, 49% of respondents indicated EFMP enrollment will not have an impact on their decision to stay on active duty, while 25% indicated a positive impact and 26% indicated a negative impact.

And another key finding that was of interest to us is we really wanted to know how often was a service member PCSing without their family due to their dependent's needs. And within the survey we learned that 78% of respondents indicated they never had to PCS and/or move without their family due to their dependent's needs. While 20% indicated needing to move without their family due to their dependent's needs one to two times, and 1% indicated three to five times.

Bruce Moody:

Can you explain to us how the Office of Special Needs plans to use the findings from this survey?

Tomeshia Barnes:

So with these findings, there's really three key things that we definitely strive to do with the findings. One, as we look at the survey results, one of the things that it shows us is that there are areas of improvements and critical things that we as a policy office can do to strengthen the services and support provided to military families. So as we look comprehensively at the survey results, we're utilizing the data to identify areas in which further standardization, and we can also leverage data to improve and enhance the experience of military families. And we really strive to further enhance that warm

handoff process, but really ensure that the needs of families are being met as they're relocating and that adequate support is in place to assist them through before, during and after their PCS move. So that's one component of how we're utilizing the survey results.

A second component is we did identify the need. We really want to improve the feedback that we're receiving from families. And in order to do that, we're looking at developing and implementing future outreach methods to obtain direct feedback from families after they experience a component of the EFMP. And our hope is to design and get approval for a tool that enables us to get that real-time data from families. So instead of measuring what happens, maybe a year later or two years later, as soon as they experience a component of the program, we're able to get their immediate feedback. And so that's one of the other areas that we are utilizing this data to inform.

And the second piece really dives into how we collect programmatic data to identify gaps and strengths across the department. And from the data that we received from families from the survey, we really are seeking to further enhance our data collection method that enables us to really have more granular data on the components of EFMP, but at that installation level.

And so as we look at the satisfaction, we look at the availability of services, we look at how their needs are being met when they're PCSing, we also sought to obtain additional data points through our data collection reporting process that enables us to really find information at a more granular level of what's happening at the installation level for families. We look forward to talking a little bit more about that in a future edition if possible, Bruce.

Bruce Moody: All right, we'll absolutely do that. We should mention for families who are not in the community of families with special needs, they may not be aware of just how important standardization is. But I assure you, for families with special needs, this is a huge issue. And I want to go back and I want to mention again that we do have our EFMP podcast series, apart from this one. We'll put a link in the program notes. In there, we have a whole series of episodes. Tomeshia and I, we break down this EFMP policy that addresses standardization across the services. Really encourage you to either have a listen or to share it with somebody who would benefit from that.

And Tomeshia, I want to talk to you about surveys in general. Why is it so important that families respond to these surveys when they get them?

Tomeshia Barnes:

Thank you, Bruce. That's a wonderful question. The reason why it's so important for families to respond to surveys is it provides an opportunity to hear directly from families about their lived experience. When we're looking to enhance and improve the program, there are so many facets of important information, but one of the most essential components of information that we need is the voice from families. Their experience matters, their voice matters. And hearing from families allow us to make intentional revisions and enhancements to the program that is truly designed to meet their needs.

So for us, Bruce, meeting the needs of military families enrolled in the program is the heart of what we do. That is what drives programmatic improvement.

And so in order for us to really enhance and improve the program, we must obtain feedback from families and connect with them, not just really to hear their voice, but we want to hear and learn what they're experiencing and to utilize that data to drive how we're further standardizing the program, how we're enhancing the program. And that's really where we get that information that we really critically need to do this work. We have to hear from families, and surveys such as the 2022 EFMP survey gives us great data that we definitely will utilize to drive programmatic enhancements. That's why we're here. And so hearing from our families helps drive what we need to do as an agency and as a department.

Bruce Moody:

I think it's really important to reiterate this. People see a lot of surveys and they wonder if it's even worth it. And it absolutely is. People like Tomeshia are on the receiving end of people's contributions to these surveys. So we really encourage people to be a part of these surveys when they come their way.

Maybe in wrapping up, I just want to ask you to share whatever you would like about the program or the survey or something that we haven't yet addressed.

Tomeshia Barnes:

So one of the things I really want to emphasize in this conversation that it is very important to the department that we hear from families. And we encourage families to participate in any future survey or effort to hear from them and collect data from them on their lived experience with the EFMP because that information truly will drive the policy changes as well as further standardization efforts.

And we also want to emphasize that if a family or individual missed the opportunity to provide feedback on this survey, they can always provide feedback on Military OneSource through the automated messaging system. And we encourage families to communicate with us. We want to hear from them, we want to hear their experience, we want to listen to them and learn from them and use that data to drive our actions. So the most important piece is, we want to hear from families and take action based off their experience.

Bruce Moody:

Tomeshia, thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you for talking about this survey. It's such an important issue. Want to let everybody know that we're posting this survey to Military OneSource. We'll put links in the program notes, so you can go and have a look at the results of this survey. Tomeshia, it's always great to have you on the podcast.

Tomeshia Barnes:

Thank you for having us Bruce and allowing us to talk about all things EFMP.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. And we'll do this again soon. Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always value hearing from you. So you can click on the program notes, send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode, and be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for joining us. Take care. Bye-bye.