

Military OneSource Podcast — Adoption Reimbursement

Adoption and Foster Care Program

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. Our guest today is Sergeant Major Steve Minyard. He is the senior enlisted advisor to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. Sergeant Major Minyard also knows a thing or two about today's topic, which is growing a family through adoption. Sergeant Major, welcome back to the podcast.

Steve Minyard:

Bruce, thank you so very much and just thrilled to be on the podcast today and to be able to talk about this so important topic.

Bruce Moody:

Well, we're definitely thrilled to have you with us because we know you have a lot of great information to share with families, families who may be considering adoption. But let's back up and get to know a little bit about you and your family, and we can talk about how you came to grow your family.

Steve Minyard:

Sure, Bruce. So born and raised in this great state of Texas, joined the military in 1993, so coming up on almost 30 years. Got a little bit of a break in service, and we'll talk about that as we kind of come up in how I met my wife. Went into active duty, did four years of active duty, left, and then went to college. Went to Texas Christian University there in Fort Worth. After I graduated from college, my reserve commitment was done with the Army, so I had a little bit of a break in service.

And shortly after I graduated school, I met my wife. We were married in 2002. Shortly after we were married, I got certified to teach. My degree was in political science. So she's a teacher as well. She had been teaching for years. I jumped into the teaching profession and only wanted to do it for about a year or two. And that's exactly what I did.

In 2005, I found the draw again, very compelling to come back into the military on full-time. I had jumped into the reserves in 2003 right after we were married and stayed there in Texas, but came active duty in 2005. And my first assignment with her, we moved up here to Washington, DC. We were living in the Rosslyn area of Arlington, and we're looking at kind of just the options of growing a family as new families do.

So we're sitting in our townhome here in Arlington, and just looking at what our options were and how the military could assist on that. We had been really drawn to adoption when we were in Texas. We had a couple that had done an international adoption and kind of highlighted it one day at church service that we were at, and it just really sparked our imagination in growing a family that way. So we had carried that with us. But as two teachers, we just couldn't make it happen.

So 2005, we're living in Arlington here, and we realized that there was a lot of benefits to being on active duty that would help us in addition to being stationed in Washington, DC. So we started initially to look at an international adoption. And, of course, here, every consulate, the State Department, all the kind of agencies that you would think would need to be involved in that process were here.

So that really got the spark of our adoption journey started in 2006 all the way up to 2014. So in a nutshell, that's the wave top version of our family, but there were a lot of steps that we had to go into and just really thrilled today to share how we went into those on a little tactical level and the things that the military, the Defense Department has done to make the four adoptions that we completed from 2007 to 2014. So this seven-year whirlwind of activity made it doable. And I'm enlisted. I started doing this as an E-6, as a staff sergeant here in the Army, and I think our last adoption was as a master sergeant. So making it a financially viable option too, the department just really helped in every step of the way.

Bruce Moody:

Well, let's get into that because we look at military life, and we look at deployments and moves. And maybe, it seems counterintuitive that military life is the place to adopt, but would you go ahead and share some of the ways in which the military helped you with the process?

Steve Minyard:

Absolutely. Yeah. So the first thing that we did was really just kind of exploring, "Hey, what is the process?" And the first place that we went to was a legal assistance office, and what are the initial steps? And you did a lot of research as well and looking for adoption agencies.

So the legal assistance office was able to give us a list of agencies that were bona fide, and they also let us know, "Hey, at the end of this whole process, the department recognizes that military service has its own challenges," kind of as you had alluded to. And as part of that, to mitigate some of those challenges, there was a reimbursement program that was available, which is up to \$2,000 per adoption or up to \$5,000 per year.

And so that was something that we had no idea was out there. And they also let us know that, "Hey, there are some administrative things that you're going to have to go through, through the military to make sure that they are plugged in as dependents into your family," because, of course, once that happens, then they would have access to healthcare.

And we were looking at several options of adopting children with special needs, and all four of our children are special needs. I don't think we would've been as excited to pursue that route were it not for the fact that we have very comprehensive healthcare here as a service member.

So those were a couple of the things that they had shared with us. And again, just being able to go to a military legal assistance attorney when we had documents to be looked at when we were signing things like contracts with an adoption agency, particularly when we were working with documents from the State Department, from the Chinese consulate. And I'm an active-duty service member, so I'm like, "Hey, I want to make sure that I don't do anything that messes up my clearance or anything like that."

They were very helpful with that as well, and making sure that our interests were protected because for anyone that has explored the adoption kind of process, not everyone has your best interests at heart, and not everyone has the children's best interests at heart. They made sure that both of those matched up. And I can say with all of our adoptions, all of the parties absolutely had all of the interests at heart as well, which is important. That's the number one baseline for any type of adoption story. You want to make sure that all of the parties are being looked after and they have an advocate and a voice for them.

Bruce Moody:

This is really astounding. It's interesting to learn about the need for financial help, the need for time, but also the need for guidance working your way through this journey of adoption because as you say, there's a lot to be wary of and the military, the various offices are helping you along as you go through your journey. I wonder if you would share a story or two that kind of gives us a window into what it's like to be a military family going through adoption.

Steve Minyard:

Sure. Yeah. So I'll share just a little bit on our last adoption. So we started it in about 2013. This was our youngest who is nine and going to school here in Washington, DC. And we were contacted by the agency that had done all three of our other adoptions, and they said, "Hey, we have a child with some pretty significant special needs, some intellectual and physical challenges." He had not been born yet, but the family had decided to place him for adoption.

And this was early spring, 2014, was when we got a call from Las Vegas, which was where the adoption was done. And they let us know, "Hey, you've been matched with the family." And suddenly, the wheels start turning. My PT test the next morning. Yeah,

that's going to happen. But now I've got a lot more going on. And I had a conference that I was going to go to later that afternoon, get on a plane, and fly to Salt Lake City to go teach.

So I come in the morning to do my fitness test and let my supervisory chain know, "Hey, I've been matched with a child who has just been born. And Tracy and I are going to make it happen. We're going to fly out there, and we're going to complete this adoption. He's going to be placed into our family." So sit down with them. They helped me go through the leave form. I had some concerns just making sure that the placement was done correctly. So I ran it again through a military attorney. I started doing what I had been doing the last three adoptions as well, which is keeping a record of expenses.

So I'm keeping a record of the flight that I'm going to get from my military duty, Salt Lake City to Las Vegas where the placement is going to be done. I'm adjusting my travel in the Defense Travel System to make sure that the government knows I'm traveling, I'm going on leave. And the government is absolutely not paying for that flight. I'm going to pay for the flight.

So you get in to DTS, and you do some little things in there to make sure that that is squared away. So I take care of that, go off to the conference, and then get on a plane and fly. I think they routed me to San Francisco. So I went to the West Coast and then all the way into Las Vegas and get that done.

So through every kind of step of the way, I needed my leadership chain and the folks that were my subordinates to know, "Hey, I'm going to be out of pocket for a little bit," and to make sure that I had secured my leave, so that when the adoption was finalized, I hit the ground again. And there was a week waiting period while Tracy had to stay basically in Las Vegas for a week while the widget turned under Nevada law for Kai to leave the state and come home.

So making sure that that leave was taken care of because I would be watching the rest of my boys and my daughter, because Tracy would be in Las Vegas for that kind of week period. I think I probably took about 10 days when I came back. But between that period of leave and making sure that as soon as Tracy hit the ground with our new addition to our family that he was in the DEERS system, so making sure that he was listed as a dependent. So if he was sick on that trip back or got sick, the second that he came to where we were, we were in North Carolina, he's already in the system, and he was squared away.

So I got all the documents and got him put into DEERS. So the second he landed on the ground, we had them taken care of. And then, I start getting all of my receipts together because I knew from the prior three adoptions again, hey, there's the DOD Adoption Reimbursement Program. I don't know if there's anyone out there that would be able to complete an adoption for \$2,000, but that absolutely helps because there are placement fees. There are court fees.

We had travel, and the DOD program allows for the reimbursement of travel. So we can include our airline tickets in there. I had to be in Las Vegas for two or three days. So I

included all of that into there, sent it up. And I think the last expense that we had, and we had already gone well past the expenses of \$2,000. So I submitted in the paperwork before we had... The last expense that most service members adopting, whether it's through foster care or a foreign or domestic adoption. And that's kind of the court finalizing the adoption.

And sometimes, that can come a couple of months later. And again, a military legal assistance attorney can help you with that. They're not able to represent in court, but they can look over the documents. They can make sure that your interests are done properly, are looked after, and they can also make sure that whatever's being charged to you by an attorney, we went through a separate attorney that actually represented us, that those are reasonable. And your judge advocates can look at that and absolutely give a good kind of sanity check on that.

So that was our final adoption. Again, completed in 2014. I think we got all the court stuff done around 2015. And being in the military just absolutely made every step of that easy because I've been in a civilian job, in the civilian sector. And being able to take the amount of time that I needed to at almost a drop of a hat, it is, well-nigh impossible in other employment spheres. But the military just made it happen. And the cool thing is that the military has a process for it. They've already thought about it. They've thought about the expenses of the adoption. They've thought about the need to have leave when you come back to bond with the child, which I think is just really cool.

Bruce Moody:

You touched on something, and I want to return to it because while we have been talking about the help that you're going to get financially and legally, there's also the local help. Talk to me, please, about the importance of letting your chain of command know about what you're trying to do.

Steve Minyard:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. So that was absolutely key. And I think where that really came in was on my first adoption where I had to let them know, "Hey, I am traveling outside of the country." So it's just as important with the domestic adoption, but you've got to really be cognizant of where you are going for a foreign adoption.

So I had to let the military know that I was doing that, and there were some things that I needed to do on the military side that they needed to let me know before I went and traveled, and that I needed to also let them know how things went when I came back. So that is absolutely crucial for anyone that's looking at a foreign adoption. But for a domestic adoption, letting them know often and early, anytime when there's an update. When I needed to go and get something notarized or sent it away, my chain of command and my supervisors were aware of that at every step, and my chain of command, specifically from the commanders in my chain, that I needed to sign off of different documents.

So you need your commander to sign off on a leave form, obviously. A commander is responsible for signing off on your DOD adoption reimbursement packet. So if you're not keeping your chain of command apprised of what you're doing, you go off on leave, and you just come back and say, "Hey, I just adopted a child," they may have additional questions there where you wouldn't have, if you just let them know what's going on because they have to approve the adoption reimbursement, again, the leave.

There's some other forms that your commander's going to need to sign to make sure that everything is squared away to complete the adoption. I don't think they have to do anything for the DEERS enrollment, but your command in general has got to be apprised of this at every step of the way. I'm so glad you asked that because that is absolutely crucial, and it makes it go easier because, again, the policies are there and your commanders and your supervisors should know about these policies or know who to go to.

If they dip into Military OneSource, they will get everything that they need for the relation of adoption or foster care to a service member. They will get every single resource that they could possibly need. And I would recommend that as the first place to go beyond maybe a legal assistance office as well to make sure that they are squared away as well. And just really talking to leaders out there. If you have a service member that is going through that, that Military OneSource is the best resource to go to get a broad wave top of what that service member is going to and what the benefits that DOD offers can be provided to them.

Bruce Moody:

It does seem like there is a point in time, and maybe you could tell us what is that point in time when a family needs to take that first step. And is the first step Military OneSource? At what point in the process, once a couple have determined that they're going to adopt, this is something they really want to do, they're in the military, what's the first thing they need to do in order to make sure that they're doing it right? So what's the first step?

Steve Minyard:

Absolutely. Yeah. So I'd say there are a couple of things that can be done in the initial steps. The first is I would recommend just doing a little bit of research outside of just where you are living. It can drive the process a lot, what state that you're in. What are the laws of the state? What are the local resources? What are the agencies that are around where you are living or are there any? And you can do that just from a simple internet search.

But once you want to make a little more of a concrete step, one of the resources that you can avail yourselves to, and I didn't know... But Military OneSource has adoption specialty consultation available. So if you call them, they can give you a little bit of guidance on the agencies that are available to you in the local area.

If you haven't established those yet, you may find a few. There are some big-name agencies that are out there that are nationwide, and there are some that are much smaller. We went with a little smaller agency that was nonprofit that was all over Northern Virginia. So that really helped where we were working.

So that consultation can give you kind of initial push of information of just what resources are available to a military service member or even a civilian working for the Defense Department, what are available to help you in that journey. And I would say after that, it would be talking to your local legal assistance or a judge advocate, and this would be regardless of component. So on one of our later adoptions, I had actually talked to a reserve component judge advocate that lived in the local area and was inducted into the bar of the state that we were actually living in who had a huge depth of experience in family law.

So sometimes, your active duty judge advocates may or may not have that perspective, but a reserve component is very likely because that may be their full-time job of just doing family law on the civilian side. And on the reserve component, there are mechanisms of getting hooked up with those judge advocates who can really give you, from a legal perspective, the first steps from there.

So you've got the agency lined up. You've got your agency selected. And then, you really want to make very, very thoughtful consideration of what the route of adoption that you are comfortable and ready and willing to take, given where you are in life, the number of children that you already have, where you live, again, your military status, are you staying on active duty? If an adoption is finalized after leaving active duty, then the DOD adoption reimbursement policy wouldn't apply. So you've got to kind of just think about that, where your career plans to go into that. That's a big decision as well.

For us, a lot of that consideration was really focused on our ability of our family to be able to provide the absolutely best care for whatever their special needs were and making sure. And once we were comfortable with that, we jumped in.

Bruce Moody:

And we're going to put links in the program notes, things that families should know when they're considering adoption. But absolutely, there's information about Military OneSource setting up a time to meet with an adoption consultant. You can do this via phone or via chat, is a lot of information. But Sergeant Major, we're just so grateful to have you with us. And maybe to wrap this up, rather than talking about the process or the policies, but if you could share with us an emotional encouragement to families that are in the military and at that point of considering adoption.

Steve Minyard:

Sure. Yeah. I would just say the most beautiful moments that I have seen just as a human being have been the moments when that adoption placement has finalized, and our children have been placed in the arms of their mother and their forever family. And as our family grew, those moments just got more and more beautiful. As we had more

kids that were suddenly from a child potentially adopted to, they had siblings. They were part of a family. They were a brother. They were a sister.

But that moment is just so beautiful and wonderful. It is absolutely worth it. I will tell you, it is daunting. The process of adoption is not easy, but I can't encourage you enough to say that it is absolutely worth it. There are millions of children around the world that would love to have a family. And all of the resources that we have as service members just give us so much of that rock steady, just that foundation to know that we have an outstanding world-class education system available to us through DOD.

We have world-class healthcare. We have an amazing package of benefits and policies that will help us through pre-adoption, after the adoption, taking leave, and then throughout the lives of our children. But know that you have a network out there to help you from both your chain of command, from those of us that have gone through this process before, from the call center and the folks that can help you with a consultation and get you plugged into all of the resources that are available as well, through the legal folks that can walk you through. There's a multilayer of... I'm putting on kind of my army right here. There's a defense and offense in depth here of resources that can help you through this. And again, when it is over, when the adoption is finalized, it's an absolutely beautiful moment, stunningly beautiful moment. And it is absolutely worth every second. And you'll see, of every jot and tittle, on every document that you've had to sign, it is absolutely worth it.

Bruce Moody:

We are just so grateful that you've joined us today. Thank you so much. Thank you for sharing all this great information. Thank you for your words of encouragement to military families. And then, we hope to have you back to the podcast.

Steve Minyard:

Thank you, Bruce. I really appreciate it and really enjoyed it. And I just thank you so much for the focus on this topic today. It's been a lot of fun.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely our pleasure. Thank you so much. Sergeant Major Steve Minyard is the senior enlisted advisor to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. And want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We hope to hear from you. Click on the link in the program notes. Send us a comment, a question, or an idea for a future episode, and be sure to subscribe to our podcast wherever you get your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families as they navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for joining us today. Take care. Bye-bye.