

Military OneSource Podcast — Emergency Family Assistance Centers and How They Help During Disasters

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 Military OneSource Mill.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. We need only look at the recent wildfires in Maui, or Florida's Hurricane Ian in 2022, to see how natural disasters can affect military communities, and how critical emergency assistance is.

To shine a light on this topic, today we are talking with Judith Wright. She is the Navy's Emergency Family Assistance program manager. Judith, welcome to the podcast.

Judith Wright:

Thank you so much for having me here today.

Bruce Moody:

We are glad to have you with us today. So you are over at Commander Naval Installations Command. Am I right?

Judith Wright:

Yes, I am a program analyst with the Fleet and Family Support Programs in support of emergency family assistance and deployment support.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. I worked at CNIC, CNIC, however you want to refer to it, 14 years ago right after I retired from the Navy. So yeah, good memories, good times.

So as you say, you're with the Navy. But as we talk about Emergency Family Assistance, would you say that the information we're going to go through today is purple? In other words, it applies to each of the services?

Judith Wright:

Yes, absolutely. Every service has a need to not only prepare for disasters, but to take care of their impacted personnel and families after recovering from a disaster or a crisis. And every service has the very same emergency family assistant functions we're going to talk about today. So everything is purple, and everything is applicable to all services.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. Okay, so let's get some definitions going here. Emergency Family Assistance. We're going to unpack this, right? We're going to get into all the bits and pieces. But let's just briefly, generally define Emergency Family Assistance.

Judith Wright:

So, Emergency Family Assistance is a program that we have across the DOD for our preparedness functions, and then our recovery functions that include things like mass care, needs assessment, everything that an impacted service member or family member might need to get them back to a pre-disaster mission-ready state.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. And one of the things about what we're talking about today is that Emergency Family Assistance is really one portion of the larger emergency response efforts. So Judith, let's kind of get into the type of support services that are offered.

Judith Wright:

Sure thing. So probably our biggest, I guess, known lift in terms of the support functions is the EFAC, that's the Emergency Family Assistance Center.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. So, we're talking about the Emergency Family Assistance Center. This place provides support, information, referral to other services. Can you get into that, and how that works?

Judith Wright:

Absolutely. So our EFACs are probably our biggest lift at an installation or in a region for mass care and disaster recovery support. And they're really a one-stop shop for all recovery support needs.

So this is an installation's rallying point for sharing up-to-date official information. It's a place where service providers are going to be consolidated to make those recovery needs getting met more readily and easily accessible for those service members, personnel, or families who've been impacted.

We have about 19 categories of recovery services that we make sure are offered and available to impacted individuals, so that they can get that assistance and that support in navigating their recovery.

So if you've been impacted by a crisis or a disaster and you don't really kind of know what you need, it's always a great idea to visit an EFAC if one's stood up on your installation or nearby, just so that you know what services are out there and available to someone recovering from a disaster or a crisis. And to have someone available to walk through all those options and all those support benefits that are there with you.

Bruce Moody:

I want to run through the typical assistance that would be provided, and maybe we can go and answer that with sort of like running through a real-world example. And before we started

recording today, you and I were talking about an experience that you had, I think it was Hurricane Michael, but when you were in Pensacola. And maybe you can share how the emergency family assistance centers would play a role.

Judith Wright:

Absolutely, yes. So, there's all kinds of crises and disasters that military families may face in their time. And the longer that you're around, I think, and the more that you're moving from place to place with different disasters or different crises, the more likely it is that you might be faced with one of these.

And one of the great benefits of having an EFAC available on that installation is that, like we were saying, you can get those services in-house. And so with Hurricane Michael, when that took out some of the other installations in that Gulf Coast region, Pensacola set up an EFAC in response. And so we had families that lost homes, they were displaced, and it was such a devastation to that area, that families ultimately could not stay. They had to leave.

And it's mid-school year. So when you think about families who are impacted by this disaster now uprooting their children, having to relocate and get them into another school to finish out the school year. Our EFAC personnel, right there in Pensacola, were able to have families come in, process them through with assistance with going through FEMA, connecting with local schools that were willing to take their kids on mid-school year.

People that had 504 plans or other EFMP needs, they were able to work through those needs with the family and make sure that we didn't have any further traumas or issues for those families to navigate as they were trying to recover, and settle into a new place, and get assistance with recovering all of their items and relocating their homes.

So an EFAC can really be a great service. And in addition to some of those services that I just kind of described, EFAC services will generally be dictated by the type of disaster or the crisis it's experienced. But some typical assistance that you can expect to see are support with housing, financial support, legal assistance, crisis/disaster-related counseling like we were talking about, childcare and school-aged care needs. And there's so much more.

We bring in partner agencies that are outside the fence line in our internal agencies. All those recovery stakeholders just to assure that our families are getting help with everything they need from FEMA claims processing, to Red Cross passing out cases of water, to everything in between. We're truly there to be that one-stop shop to help that family navigate the whole list of recovery options and processes.

Bruce Moody:

Judy, this is really interesting, and there's a lot that you just gave us. But one of the things I caught in what you're saying is, how are different services working together to support families during a disaster? Or after a disaster?

Judith Wright:

That's a great question. So we have really leveraged a lot of our technology in recent years, but we are always working to make sure that we are collaborating and supporting. So Tyndall

Airmen went all over because their base was really, really impacted, almost a direct hit. And so they went all over the southern area, and as far north as DC in some cases.

And so anywhere that they walked into an installation, even if it wasn't an EFAC, even if it was just a military family service center, we made sure that we could connect those folks with resources. An airman walked into the Navy EFAC at Pensacola, we were able to assist them and get them the resources they needed.

But another example would be, recently we had Typhoon Mawar in Guam. And we had, from what I'm able to see, several EFACs. Both community-based FACs, family assistance centers, and at least three DOD military-focused EFACs, emergency family assistance centers.

We were able to make sure that we had representatives for the DOD in the community FACs. And in every single DOD-level EFAC, we were all cross-talking making sure any service member that walked into either the Anderson Air Base, or the Naval Base Guam, or the one that the Army National Guard set up, services could be provided across the board.

It didn't matter what branch of service you were in. It didn't matter what your needs were. We had the resources or the ability to connect you to the resources in every single one, inside the fence line or out in the community. And it was really a great opportunity to see that purpling and that cross-collaboration between the services happening. But in addition to that, like I was saying, we leveraged our amazing technology opportunities, and we created a joint landing page for those people in joint region Marianas, on Guam specifically, who had been impacted by Typhoon Mawar.

And we had a purple, joint resources landing page with all kinds of information, regardless of your service related to JIC information, so your joint information center, updates and information. We had information on how to get in an account for yourself, respective of your service. Be that ACT Pass or AD Pass or NFAS.

And we also had information on resources, and lines of grants, and other things available to you that were being updated pretty consistently. And so it was just a really great thing to see all of that effort going into being a purple response. So it was really neat.

Bruce Moody:

So the phrase that we like to use is, no wrong door. Would it be fair to say that's what you're going for, regardless of where a person goes, they're going to get the same information and be routed to the same type of support?

Judith Wright:

Absolutely. There is no wrong door when it comes to getting assistance from your family services. We're here to help you.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. Not easy to do. Takes a lot of work. A lot of meetings. I've seen you guys, I've seen this. It doesn't just happen. It takes a lot of work.

So as families are recovering from a disaster, there's a lot of paperwork involved. And you mentioned grants, and you mentioned a couple of the administrative stuff that comes along. Filing a claim, for example. So how is what we're talking about today available to help families when they're doing something like filing a claim?

Judith Wright:

All of our military family service centers have had training on not only standing up an emergency family assistance center, but on helping families walk through that center. So considering things like, have you filled out your FEMA claim? Do you need help getting to a FEMA contact? Let's sit down and look at the paperwork.

Do you need emergency grant assistance? This aid society or that aid society is offering that opportunity right now for you to get some assistance so that you can get groceries replaced, because you just lost power for a week and a half, and all your groceries are probably bad. Or all those little things that we might not think of because, one, we're in shock and we've just experienced this big trauma. And two, the needs are so overwhelming, you may not know where to begin.

So we're there to walk that walk with you, and help guide you from resource to resource.

Bruce Moody:

Okay, Judy. I'm going to stress test your no wrong door approach here, right? So here we go.

Scenario: Family is stationed at Tyndall. But for some reason, the family is elsewhere. Totally away from their home installation. And they're involved in a natural disaster, and they need help. And as it happens, there's a military installation nearby.

Can they engage that local installation for help? And would that local installation be able to plug them into the community resources and the other stuff, even though they're not from that area?

Judith Wright:

That's a great question. And the answer is yes. So this happens all the time. We'll have service members that might be deployed, and families that are left behind, and have a crisis or disaster that they experience. Or you're, like you were saying, on travel and you're in an unfortunate situation where you are near a disaster or a crisis.

If you get to a military family assistance center, or if there's an EFAC nearby, it doesn't matter what service it is, we're going to get you connected to your resources. We're going to get you connected to whatever needs you might have. But let's say that you're far away from any installation.

You can also call Military OneSource. They have that one 1-800 number that will put you in touch with someone live, and they can get you started on the process of connecting to assistance and support. You can call your local military family assistance, or your local military family support center.

And if Tyndall was your home base, but you're in Hawaii, you can still call them, and they'll still get you connected. So there's lots of avenues and resources nowadays. You can always also go to a Military OneSource's page for more information about EFACs, and crisis centers, and what resources that there are, and how to start navigating that.

But long story short, whichever location you can get to or call will get you connected to the assistance you need.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. Thanks, Judy. As we try to wrap up this conversation, I'll note that we've got a bunch of links in the program notes, more information about emergency family assistance centers and what they can do for you. But one of the things I really want to maybe close with is the financial relief that families can get from emergency relief services.

Judith Wright:

Absolutely. So especially when we stand up in EFAC, we tend to bring those partner agencies offering grants, or FEMA so that you can process your claim, or those sorts of things in-house. But if we don't stand up in EFAC, that doesn't mean those services aren't available. We can still connect you to those services in other ways.

But there are lots of community-based services. There's lots of military aid society-based services, that we keep a really great list of as our resources that open up lines of accounting, or open up grants, or open up other opportunities for support and assistance post-disaster.

And if you're not sure where to start, or which ones are available after a disaster, just call your local military family support center. We are keeping tabs on what disaster declarations have been declared, and what that means in terms of funding streams and support opportunities.

We have folks that are ready and able to connect you to all those opportunities so that you are not left wondering how you're going to make it through this paycheck to the next one because you've just experienced this disaster or crisis. Come see us, talk to us, give us a call. We're here to help.

Bruce Moody:

You know Judy, just in closing, you say that you're here to help, and there are so many resources that are available. But I wonder if you just take a moment to kind of just describe the type of people who are at these services. And nobody wants to find themselves in a disaster, but when they do, what are the kind of people that they're going to encounter when they contact these emergency family assistance centers?

Judith Wright:

Most of our EFAC staff are also your day-to-day Military and Family Support Center staff. That you would walk in and see, who would offer you stress management, child parenting classes, deployment support assistance. When an emergency, a disaster, a crisis happens, we shift our focus and we become your resource navigator, your advocate post-disaster, your connector to information and referral services.

So we're the ones that are really staffing the immediacy of the EFAC, but then we reach out to our other stakeholders. There are so many people who want to help after a crisis or a disaster, and we bring those partner agencies in. So Red Cross, FEMA, your local level community resources, your food banks, your external folks that have cases of water or disaster relief kits. So there's a whole host of folks that come in post a disaster or crisis, depending on what the crisis needs dictate in your community, and we're bringing them in that one place to get you those services and supports.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent. Judy, thank you so much for joining us today.

Judith Wright:

Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. Judy Wright is the Navy's Emergency Family Assistance program manager. Great to have you with us, and we hope to have you back.

Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always look forward to hearing from you. Click on the link in 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 listening. Take care. Bye-Bye.