

Military OneSource Podcast — First Steps Toward Fostering in the Military

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.mil](https://militaryonesource.mil).

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. We're going to talk about foster parents today, and how military families can become foster parents. There's a significant need across America for foster parents, and we want to focus today on talking about how military families can become foster parents. And we'll do so with our guest who is Melinda Kline, and Melinda is the national project director for AdoptUSKids. So, Melinda, welcome to the podcast.

Melinda Kline:

Oh, thank you so much. Thank you for the opportunity to come and visit with you and share this information. Like you said, Bruce, I am Melinda Kline, and I'm the national project director for AdoptUSKids. And AdoptUSKids is a project that's operated under a cooperative agreement with the Children's Bureau, through the Department for Health and Human Services.

Bruce Moody:

Interesting. So what is the mission of your organization?

Melinda Kline:

I do like to talk about our mission.

Bruce Moody:

Good.

Melinda Kline:

So two things. I'm going to say twofold, all right? The first part of our mission is to really raise public awareness that this is a thing, that there are children who need families, both foster and adoptive families in our public child welfare system. And so that's across the whole United States. And then the other piece, that's probably less pertinent here today, but AdoptUSKids works really diligently to assist our state's tribes and territories to increase their own capacity to recruit, engage, develop and support foster and adoptive families. So we help them serve their own jurisdictions.

Bruce Moody:

So let's help AdoptUSKids with their mission, which is helping to raise awareness of the issue of foster parenting. Help us understand what is foster parenting, and what is the need for foster parents across America.

Melinda Kline:

I really appreciate that question, and I appreciate your help in spreading our mission and helping people know this. But I think this is so important for folks to hear, because the first job of foster families is to just serve as a temporary, safe, loving family for children who have been separated from their family, hopefully temporarily. And also just to be a resource to their family, and to help them reunite with their family. I know that we are asking a lot of foster families, right? We're asking them to take all the emotional risk, to take children into their home, to love them, to accept them as their own, but also then to let them go, like to help them go back to their family, or perhaps there's a lapse in finding another family member for them.

So it really is designed to be temporary. And I say that at the same time as, if we are unable to return them to their family, if a judge makes that declaration, or the system has decided they can't be returned to their family, then we do want them to stay, because we don't want them to go place to place, right? So, again, I just want to repeat that we ask the foster parent to take on the emotional risk in bringing children into their home and loving them and caring for them, and in essence, advocating for them as well.

Bruce Moody:

That's so interesting. And we're going to get into the specifics of military families, but let's spend a little bit more time here. And I don't want to put you on the spot, but do you have any data with you regarding how many kids out there are placed in foster care, those sort of numbers?

Melinda Kline:

Of course, I did come prepared with data.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent.

Melinda Kline:

So our latest outsource data show us that there's shy of 400,000 kids. So we're sitting around 368,000 kids who are in foster care, and over half of them will be reunified with a family, and then we're looking about a third of them, around 109,000 kids, who are waiting for adoption at any one time. And again, of that 109, many of them will be adopted by their current foster family. And so they may be in what we're calling a traditional foster family, or hopefully with relative or kin, that's serving as their foster family. So I make that distinction. But then, at AdoptUSKids, and in many of our state's tribes and jurisdictions, we're looking for what I would call a traditional foster family, who would be a stranger to the child, right, but a kind person who's going to take the training and welcome them into their home.

We are looking for those adoptive families for about, I don't know, 11% to 14% of the kids who are in foster care that parental rights have been terminated, there's been no relative identified, or someone that they know that's planning to adopt them. We call that an adoptive resource. So they don't have an adoptive resource, and that's when we go to our photo listing, and our narratives, and try to recruit families and make sure that people know that there are these children lingering in foster care. Does that make sense?

Bruce Moody:

It makes sense, there's data, but you can just see the emotion behind the data.

Melinda Kline:

Yeah.

Bruce Moody:

So very interesting. Yeah. Maybe we should talk about foster parents, foster families, right?

Melinda Kline:

OK.

Bruce Moody:

So if you are looking at a foster family, what do you see as attributes that make them successful foster families?

Melinda Kline:

Wow, I love that question, because I just think it's an excellent question. If you and I start talking about our families, and comparing how different our families are, all families are so different, right? So, first, we want to look at the attributes that we have for kids who are in foster care. So we're looking at different races, different cultures, different interests, different needs, right? And so what we want to do, what attributes we want to look for in families is all kinds of families, right? We want to find just the right ones that will meet the needs and match with the children that we have in care. So I just think that's who's successful as being a foster or adoptive family, are just those families who are willing to show up, families who will stay dedicated, families who will meet the needs of the children.

I think it's really important that they be willing to accept all kinds of imperfections within their family and become what I call the "no matter what" family. You're going to stick with these children and be their families no matter what. And a lot of my staff will tell you, I'm always talking about how I really love quirky families, like nobody that's trying to put on some perfect airs, but just the quirky families really serve our children the best.

Bruce Moody:

So I heard diverse, OK, I heard quirky. OK. When we're talking about a successful military family, they're typically so we'll say quirky, and diverse, and dedicated, and sort of have a, no matter what attitude, in the military, we would say Semper Gumby. I mean, you're just able to deal with whatever happens, and you're just able to respond to whatever happens. So if you're looking at two columns, right, and you're looking at what makes a good foster family, and you're looking at some of the attributes that you see of a military family, what sort of connections are you seeing?

Melinda Kline:

Oh my gosh, yes, so many. And I'm going to take that word, Semper Gumby. You're going to have to send me that so I'll spell it correctly, but I might put it in my vocabulary now.

Bruce Moody:

Half of it is Latin and half of it is not.

Melinda Kline:

Well, I like it. So when I think about those attributes, I really think about what you said, the flexibility that they have. A military family would really have that sense of commitment and dependability. I also think they have a real, like what I've seen in my experience. I was previously in state government in Kansas, and what I saw in my experience here is that old adage of it takes a village, right? And so the military families that I've worked with in the past really had that sense of community, and the willingness to be a part of the village, and also take the support and support others as well. So I saw those military families really supporting each other, and I think that just really makes them uniquely qualified to serve children who are in foster care.

Bruce Moody:

Interesting. We can go on on that topic, but let's get into some of the ways in which a military family can get involved in being a foster family. And maybe we can begin by explaining how there's state and county agencies available, and they're willing and able to help military families to meet eligibility criteria. So how does that work? Unpack that for us.

Melinda Kline:

Absolutely. So it's so hard because all of the states, like I said, they're their own jurisdictions. Sometimes we have county-run systems, and sometimes there are state-run systems. So all of them are a little bit nuanced, and a little bit different. However, the commonality is that we need families. So I gave you the numbers. Oftentimes foster families do adopt the children, so they're no longer in the foster pool, right? They're no longer willing to provide temporary care because now this child needs all of our love and attention, or these children need our love and attention. So they cycle out of being available for foster care. There's always this constant need. And so when you say the jurisdictions, that's almost something I could guarantee, that jurisdictions, if a military family calls, and they are interested in becoming a foster family ... And sometimes it

might be for their kin or relative, someone that they have a close emotional tie with, that this child has coming out of home placement.

So jurisdictions are going to work with that family, and try to help them overcome any barriers to becoming a licensed foster care provider, or a kinship relative provider, either one. So it's hard for me to say specifically in their jurisdiction, but I can almost guarantee that across the board the need is so great, and they can start by getting ahold of AdoptUSKids, Google "adoption," and we're one of the first ones to come up. Many, many, many people start their fostering and adoption journey at our website, and then we have adoption specialists that can help connect them back to their state or jurisdiction and help them find the right person that can help them get started.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, I want to dig deeper into that, but first, I wonder if you have any success stories about military foster parents.

Melinda Kline:

As I've been talking about this, Bruce, I keep thinking of this particular family that was here in Kansas. So it's my work not at AdoptUSKids, but when I was here in Kansas, there was some children that came into care. They had a parent that was deployed and then another parent that was in a relationship with someone in the military. But the children came into foster care, and eventually they did get adopted, and the military family kept them in touch with their parent who was deployed. But also they were a military family. So as I was talking about community and that sense of a village, they've continued to keep those connections, and I want to just say they co-parent the children. It's probably one of the biggest successes I've ever seen, really pulling together to ... One of the children with special needs, and they pulled together.

I think they even used OneSource, so that's a good thing. But the insurance, and the military offers, and the therapy sessions that involved both the parent that was deployed, as well as the family that was fostering, it all was orchestrated really beautifully. So it's something that I always think about when someone asks me about military families adopting

Bruce Moody:

For military families, they may look at their life and say, we move too much to be eligible or to be effective as foster parents. For military families who are considering becoming a foster family, they may look at themselves and say, we move too often to

be eligible to be foster parents, how can a military family set themselves up for success if their intention is to be a foster family, but one that moves a lot?

Melinda Kline:

Well, like I said, the idea is that children would be placed in their home temporarily, with a path to be reunified with a relative or family, or a family member. And so we often will have emergency placements or respite care. I've seen military families be very, very successful providing respite care for kids who are in foster care. So maybe they come and stay the weekend while the foster family gets a break or has other obligations that they are taking care of. So it gives them an idea of what fostering looks like, perhaps opens their eyes to what adoption from foster care could look like and then it also gives them an opportunity to serve, right, so whether they're moving or not.

So that's one part of my answer. The other part of my answer is that even though I know that moving from place to place can be a hardship, it's better to move with a family than to move from home to home by yourself. Both of those can apply. I think the important thing for your families or your listeners to hear is that there is a place for them to serve foster children, and just to be really honest and upfront about that when they're contacting their local jurisdiction and asking those questions and figuring out what's best for them as a family and how they can best serve children who are in the foster care system.

Bruce Moody:

You bring up a really interesting point, because you mentioned local jurisdictions and in sort of the context of moving around a lot, which would lead me to understand that you really need to do a certain amount of administrative work, training, requirements, as you go from place to place. Does that repeated set of requirements become an impediment, or how do military families deal with that?

Melinda Kline:

Well, that is a great question, and I believe I can only give from what my experience is, but most states are pretty flexible. If you were in Kansas and you took the TIPS-MAPP course, so you completed your 30 hours of foster parent pre-service, and you became licensed in the state of Kansas, but now you are going to move to, I'm going to say Hawaii just because I'd like to go there. So you're going to move to Hawaii, someone at AdoptUSKids could help you get in touch with the folks that you need to talk to in Hawaii and get them to accept your TIPS-MAPP course so that you could get licensed in Hawaii as soon as you got there.

Bruce Moody:

So that really is one of the advantages of working with AdoptUSKids, in that you're a national organization that deals with a bunch of jurisdictions. You stitch them together, and you help people as they move from one to the other. Do I have that right?

Melinda Kline:

We absolutely are a great touchpoint for that. So we have our adoption specialists. Each one of them has connections to specific states and jurisdictions, and so we can serve families in that way to help them locate who they need to visit with. We help do a warm handoff in that sense.

Bruce Moody:

Well, Melinda, this has been a really interesting conversation, and I hope that we are informing and inspiring military families who have considered being adoptive parents. We're certainly going to put some links in the program notes to your organization, AdoptUsKids, but also to Military OneSource. You could simply call Military OneSource and say, "I heard a discussion about becoming a foster parent, that's all I know, tell me where to go next." Both our organization and yours will get people on their way. In just closing, Melinda, maybe you can discuss to us the rewards of providing a safe and loving home for a child in need.

Melinda Kline:

Well, I can't think of anything that's more rewarding than having the needs of our children who have experienced grief and loss through the foster care system, and we just want to serve those children, help them return to their families, if they can, help them stay within their cultures, their communities, and if not, we are always looking for those quirky families, I want to say. And those great families, those fantastic families, who can meet the needs of the children. And as you can see, if you go to our website, we make PSAs with the Ad Council every year, and the new ones feature families that are part of our speakers' bureau, unscripted, there's a 90-second little video there. But it's families who adopted teens out of foster care, and just hearing their stories, I think people can see themselves there and know that they can do this.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. We appreciate you being with us today.

Melinda Kline:

Thank you so much, Bruce. I really appreciate it.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. Please come back. Melinda Kline is the national project director for AdoptUSKids. Great to have you with us today. And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always love to hear from you. Click on the link in the program notes, send us a question, a comment or 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.