

## Military OneSource Podcast — Meet the New Leader for Military Family Readiness Policy

### Episode transcript

#### **Bruce Moody:**

Hi, I'm Bruce Moody. Today we're bringing you our interview with Stephen Simmons. He's the new deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy. From his office in the Pentagon, Mr. Simmons oversees initiatives to strengthen military families, enhance quality of life and foster resilience to support the warrior culture. He was appointed on June 2 and hit the ground running, so we sat down with him to get his perspectives from a month on the job and hear about the priorities and the goals he brings to the organization.

We hope that you'll share this episode with other military families and organizations and leadership, and you can find us on any podcast platform, just search for Military OneSource, and subscribe while you're at it. And as always, we love your feedback. We have a link in the program notes, and you can share your thoughts, questions, comments. We like to hear from you. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with support and resources for every step of military life. Now here's today's conversation.

Mr. Simmons, welcome to the podcast.

#### **Stephen Simmons:**

Alright. Well, good morning, Bruce. It's so wonderful to be here today and honored to join you. I think we're about a month into my tenure now, I think, exactly to the day, so it's fantastic to be here.

Little bit about myself, and I'll just give you some background for your listeners and the broader audience there. So, born and raised in West Texas. Grew up in Midland, Texas, oil country there, and Friday Night Lights football, so lots of fun there. But came from, I guess you could say, a legacy military family. My background — grandfather served, my aunts and uncles served. And even going back to ... We could trace that all the way back to the Revolutionary War. So, I think you could say service is in my blood. I spent a lot of time around military service organizations growing up.

And so grew up; graduated high school; went to college. About halfway through college, I'll say, got a little bit bored with college, and chose to enlist in the Marine Corps. Had a 100 ASVAB. Went and talked to the Marine office and said, "I just want to be a Marine," and the rest is history. So, I soon enlisted in the Marine Corps. A couple of years went

by; earned my degree and then commissioned as an officer in the Marine Corps. Was a combat engineer; and later I went to Civil Affairs, but as a Marine, I had a lot of experience both on the operation side as well as the manpower side. So, I worked a lot in the manpower spaces, specifically around retention. And I think that's where I became very conscious of the military family and the role, they play in retention decisions and just how critical that element is and got a really good view of the family readiness matters.

At 17 years, I left the Marine Corps in 2022 and transitioned to Amazon. So, went from military to corporate and went through that transition, which can be very stressful, but did very well there. And then with President Trump's election, I was asked to come and handle family readiness and take that on and was thrilled to have the opportunity to come back and serve our country once again. So, thrilled to be here.

One thing I kind of want to point out throughout my military service and private sector experience as well is the role of my family. And my family has been a part of that throughout, both growing up, but then later on, met my spouse before I joined the military, joined, we got married shortly afterwards. And so, she's been a part of my life before military service and continues to be a part of my life to this day. I've got two wonderful boys as well, 10 and 2: they're fantastic, but my family's seen every aspect of my military service and they've been with me throughout.

So, I think a lot of what I look at is not just the decisions I make and the oath I took as a military service member, but the impacts that that had on my family. It wasn't just me taking that oath, it was them staying behind and feeling the effects of that oath. Throughout service life, my wife and now my two boys have gotten a full taste of the military life cycle throughout. And so, Bruce, thrilled to be back, but also very much I've got a deep perspective of the role of family and how that shapes everything we do.

**Bruce Moody:**

Perfect to have you here. So, what are your impressions of the team at Military Community and Family Policy?

**Stephen Simmons:**

Yeah, so initial impression on Military Community and Family Policy — the team is amazing. We have a big team with a bigger scope of work. I told the staff, "We're a mile wide and inch deep sometimes." We've got a lot of very highly qualified and dedicated professionals, and truly the experts in their field, not just nationally but globally; they're some of the smartest individuals I've met. And they are doing a lot more work than probably what the size of the team would look like. So, just amazed at the size of the team. But the scope of what we do and what we accomplish with that size is just utterly amazing. Whether it's working with exchanges, working with our Military Community and Family counselors and how we work with them, and everything else — the range of opportunities that we have to support our military family — there's somebody covering it.

**Bruce Moody:**

Mm-hmm. Yes, we do have Military OneSource, but there is so much more beyond that. So, we do say that warfighters can best focus on their mission when they know that their loved ones are taken care of. And I wonder what are your perspectives and experiences that you can share regarding this?

**Stephen Simmons:**

That, I think, is the heart of the matter. And the secretary came out and said, “We are readiness and lethality focused.” And absolutely 100% correct in that assessment. But for us to do that, we can't have warfighters looking over their shoulder, looking backwards, when we expect them to go charging into battle. And a big part of that is us keeping that covenant with the warfighters that their families are going to be taken care of, both in training and in combat operations. And that's where we come in.

Speaking personally, I'll tell you, it is absolutely hard to be asked to deploy, even just go on a routine trip or just go out to the field, and that there's all kinds of chaos happening back home. The dishwasher is never going to break until you leave. And then guess what? It breaks and you're leaving your spouse alone to fend for it, and you're going to hear about it when you come back. And I think first off, our spouses play such an important role in everything that we do because they're being asked to handle a lot more than the civilian spouses because we're gone. Even when we come back home on a regular day, military service personnel are exhausted. They're coming back and then they're going to have to turn around and get up early the next morning and go do it all over again.

So, I think there's a stability factor there, but I think there's also an absolute readiness factor. I can absolutely say I was ready to deploy, not because of the training that I did, but because I knew my family was ready to go. I had a great spouse, I had kids that were resilient, they were supportive. And because of that, that gave me the confidence to be able to know that, at a moment's notice, I can pick up the phone at midnight and be ready to jump on a plane tomorrow and go wherever I needed to take care of business.

And I think it's that knowledge, that resiliency that our families have, but also that confidence that we have in our families that allowed me to go forward, and I think it allowed so many of our warfighters to go forward. So, I think we should recognize the resilience of our family members, and I think I could give you thousand stories of how the Simmons household has coped with the various challenges that come with military life and everything else, from the PCSs to just the minor pop-ups that happen all the time.

**Bruce Moody:**

But also, to include retention. Whether you're going to stay or not is a family decision. So, what does that mean to you?

**Stephen Simmons:**

And that right there, you took the words out of my mouth. Retention is a family decision. It's something I've been talking about a little bit. We hear family readiness is military readiness, but I think we need to look at long-term strategic health of our military is rooted in retention. We bring in highly qualified young men and women to serve. We train them and they are phenomenal, but if we can't keep them around, we're going to have to turn around and do it all over again. But if we can keep them year over year, that's important. But for us to do that, it's not going to be their decision that they make and say, "I'm tired of this." Ultimately, it's going to be their family. Working retention matters in the Marine Corps.

What I've seen is we lose service members because we lost the family, and the family got tired of the lifestyle. We burned one too many bridges as a service and we didn't do so much for the family. And I think we see that in a couple different ways. We see just the typical stressors: PCS season is a big one, deployments, just operational tempo in general, those are big deployments. But then when we add in other factors like spouse employment, you have some very highly qualified spouses out there that have amazing education and career backgrounds and they want those career opportunities. And when we uproot them, at some point they may want to pursue those career opportunities as well. And how do we make the service member choose between their military career and their spouse's career? And I think there's a lot of great ways we're getting under that now. But at the end of the day, we've got to look at retention holistically and that means include the family.

**Bruce Moody:**

And when we talk about holistic, we're talking about the family, the service member, their spouse employment and child care and all of those issues. But let's also talk about individual wellness, relationship wellness. What needs to be done for warfighters and their families when military life starts to become a strain on relationships and individual wellbeing? In what ways does the help in these areas help to solve other problems down the road?

**Stephen Simmons:**

I think what we need to do is we need to stop being reactionary as a service. And what I mean by that is unfortunately, we work with people's problems when they become a problem, instead of recognizing how do we fix this problem before it becomes one? And I'll give you a great example: relationship counseling. Honestly, having been married for almost two decades now, you have to have relationship counseling to be successful. Everybody needs it and you probably need it a bit more. But oftentimes we don't direct a service member to go get relationship counseling until it's almost too late. They're already going through an ugly divorce, they're already having relationship strains that's

causing other issues to creep in, substance abuse, domestic violence, things like that. And then the service is forced to react.

And I think what we need to do is recognize how do we develop young men and women to have successful relationships out of the gate? When they join the service, when they choose to add a spouse and start a family, are we there to support them in that adventure? Because at the end of the day, we're all going to transition out of the military; we're going to either choose to exit service; we're going to leave service; we're going to retire, but your spouse and your family's still going to be there. So, how do we help create some stability and build that relationship there?

And I think there's some things we can do. I think adding some stability. The secretary's done a fantastic job addressing this with the PCS task force, looking at how do we reduce PCS tempo? That's a big one, I think. I think that's a big stressor right there. How do we offer more relationship and financial management counseling and services sooner that helps stabilize relationships? And I think we could probably look at a string of bad divorce, had a rough relationship, relationship strain happened because of financial management issues. And I think if we can look at how do we get ahead of that, remove the stigma from counseling. I'm here to tell you, everybody needs counseling now and then. It's okay to go ask for help, but let's ask for help when it's a small issue, so we're not required to get help when it's a big issue.

**Bruce Moody:**

I want to talk about stigma for a second here, because I talk about it a lot on the podcast, and I talk about it with leaders. And everybody says, "There is no shame in getting help. In fact, it's a sign of strength." And yet, the stigma remains. And I wonder we need to keep repeating ourselves or I wonder if we have to look at where the stigma continues to persist? What are your thoughts on really getting out the message, especially to our junior troops, that getting help, asking for help, is a sign of strength?

**Stephen Simmons:**

Yeah, I think there's a lot of different steps in that. And the first one is I think we need to engage more with our senior leaders. If we look back historically, we've got a military that's spent the last 20 years in combat, and I think we skipped some leadership steps along the way. And so, if you look at our leaders in the military now, I don't know that their families, their spouses were in a position to maybe receive the same group therapy sessions that typically got. I don't know that the network was as strong to build those relationships there as they were. And I think that's a hard thing to come with.

The other thing is we do have this zero-defect mentality that constantly leaks its way into the military. And I think it's even tougher with the younger generations. If you look at the Zoomer generation, and everybody panics about new generations, how do we reach them? Well, they're fantastic. They are smart, they are driven, they want to succeed, but they want to succeed so bad they're afraid of a mistake sometimes.

And so, I think we need to engage with commands. I need to talk to commanders and tell them, "Hey, encourage your troops, encourage their families, go seek help, go ask for help." But then I think we also need to encourage those military personnel, "It's okay to go ask for help. Go talk to somebody about your problems, work with them, and work with them before it becomes a big issue." And I think if we get past this mentality of like, "Well, as soon as I've asked for help, I've rung the bell, I've given up. I should just leave because I'm a terrible soldier." No, you're a great soldier, you're trying to keep your physical and mental readiness there.

And I think stigma goes beyond mental health. I think there's a lot of things. The service member is changing. We see older, more experienced service members joining later in, I'd say, their life cycle. So, instead of 18-year-old fresh out of high school and joining as a single service member, we may see a 22 or 23-year-old who's maybe got an associate's degree, and has already started a family, and they're joining. And that's great. A matured service, they're going to add a ton to our readiness, but we've got to be able to support them.

And if you have an E-3 joining, and they've got a family of three or four dependents to feed, that may mean we need to look at WIC as a resource. We may need to look at other CDCs and other resources that we can provide for them to make them successful. And I think removing the stigma of it's okay to ask for help, and let's figure out how do we support that, because we want everybody to be successful, ultimately.

**Bruce Moody:**

And you did touch on food. I think that's such an important topic. It obviously is. And since this is the military, we're calling it nutritional wellness, but it's food, it's eating well, it's making sure you have enough food in your body to think clearly, to act the way you need to act. And let's talk about nutritional wellness within the military family, what it is, and what it does to contribute to readiness, not only to us, but also to the next generation.

**Stephen Simmons:**

Yeah, Bruce, it's such an important topic and something I'm really keying into right now. I think if we look at my big priorities, nutritional readiness is going to be a big one. I think we hear a lot of conversation about food security. And first and foremost, our military and their families should be food secure, period. That's a non-starter. If they're not, we've got to fix it.

But looking holistically at this problem, again, I think there's a lot of steps that we need to do. First off, we've got a young service. As always, we have young service members. Some of them are on their own for the first time, but we have to teach them good nutritional habits. And I think it drives me nuts, I'll just say, as a military commander, looking out and, hey, it's chow time, and there's a chow hall a half mile walk away, and there's a gas station a quarter mile walk, and you see all the service members walk to

the gas station, get a Monster and bag of Doritos, and then they come back to work. And that is not nutritional readiness. There is nothing healthy about that. So, we've got to figure out how to fix that, and I think, offer good, healthy alternatives.

And I think getting into this generational impact, it goes beyond just feeding our service members, but it's feeding them good, healthy, nutritional food, hitting that nutritional readiness, not only for them, but also their families, because those family members, I think nutritional resilience, you have to give children, that's our next generation, give them all the building blocks to succeed, and we want that. And I think nutritional readiness is such a big, important part of that.

And I think there's a financial readiness portion of that. I think understanding being disciplined, go to the commissary, pick up some whole foods. We actually have an organic market initiative that's starting up. Learn to cook balanced meals and get all your proteins, get all your vegetables, get your nutrients. And I think if we look at a lot of the health issues that our society's having generationally right now, a lot of it you could tie to the prevalence of fast food, packaged foods, everything else. So, how do we get away from that? I'll be the first to admit I'm guilty as much as anybody. I'm sprinting, running around, and then, "Well, hey, I've got 15 minutes, and that McDonald's line's looking really good." But how do we get past that?

And it may be a part of encourage commanders to give their troops time to eat. Also ensuring that there are healthy options, even at that exchange gas station, making sure there's not just Doritos and Monsters, but also salads and whole foods and proteins readily available. And I think it's availability. There's a spectrum. We're going to be looking at that. We're really going to be positioning our office as the food security champion for the DOD. And I want to look at this for service members, I want to look at it for their families, I want to look at for the children of our service members who realistically, they're probably the next generation of service as well. A lot of us all came from military backgrounds and our families did. And there's a statistical probability that they will probably choose to serve as well, and we want them to be ready. It's a national readiness imperative. And not just for us, but the entire nation. But I think the DOD can lead the way on this. I think we can set the example, and we have to set the example, we owe it to our kids.

**Bruce Moody:**

Let's talk about the kids a little bit longer. And what are the challenges that you see, regarding the physical and mental resilience of our kids? And what can we do in this space to address this?

**Stephen Simmons:**

Bruce, and again, you're touching all the topics I'm very passionate about, let's talk about the mental resilience first. Our kids in the DOD, the dependents of our military service members, they are the most resilient of their generation. And I think sometimes



we make the mistake to either treat them as a victim, we look at them with pity, and I don't think they need our pity, I think they need our respect. They are tremendously resilient. If you look at them compared to their peers that are not serving in the military, these kids have had to deal with more challenges growing up than anybody else. Parents coming and going, parents leaving, PCSs, moving. Your average civilian moves maybe once or twice in 20 years. Military, it's every two or three years. My son, who's 10, has PCS'd five times. And you know what? Yeah, it is tough. I get it, I hear it loud and clear.

But I think also, I think because of that, they're much stronger, much more resilient. I have had the opportunity to talk to a group of teenagers, all sons, and daughters of service members. They came to talk to us here at the Pentagon. The level of mental acuity and just absolute focus on the presentations they gave me rivaled that of Ivy League students. They were fantastic. And I think we should look at this as we have resilient kids in our DOD.

Now, that said, they've got challenges. There are things that we've got to figure out. How do we better support them? Because the challenges are real. PCS is real, getting around base is real, making friends, how do we connect them with fellow service members' kids so they can get together? And I think that's a challenge, but I think we should approach it from a ... We want to help them be mentally resilient, but also the fact that they are. And I think they're going to do really good things. The future's in good hands, I'm absolutely confident in that.

But we want to make sure all the support is in place for it to be in good hands. And again, I think I go back to it's a strategic readiness imperative. Generational service is a statistical reality, and I think we should be looking at it as even if those kids don't choose to join the military, their friends may. And we want them to look back and say, "Hey, my mom and dad served. It was a good life. I'd recommend it to anyone." What we don't want is a young man, woman growing up and look back and say, "Well, my parents served. That was a terrible experience. I wouldn't recommend it for anyone." And we don't want that. We want them to choose to serve or encourage their friends to serve as well. And I think if we look at that, you walk around the Pentagon, everybody I talk to, they're connected to the military service somehow. Either they served or they've got a family member that served. And I think that's really cool. That's the coolest part of our heritage here.

You talked about, though, Bruce, getting to the physical fitness piece, and this is where there's a lesser-known statistic out there, but the number one reason youth are failing their black belt classes in karate is physical fitness. It's not the technique, it's not anything that they're doing karate-wise, it's the physical fitness, just being able to actually be physically fit enough to perform all the functions. And that scares me. I think there's a readiness imperative that we need to look at here. And I think this isn't a military youth problem; it's a national youth crisis. Because I think what we see is we've turned to electronics. Unfortunately, I think parents are just, this generation, keep your kids inside, don't let them go outside. And I think very good reasons why, but I think what we're seeing now is a degradation of physical fitness. And it shows in the recruiting



pools. The percentage of young adults who want to enlist is very small, who are actually qualified to serve. And we've got to figure out how to fix it.

And I think a big part of this is actually how do we encourage youth physical fitness? We want to get to a point where, yes, we're getting kids outside playing. We want them to get outside and be physically fit. And I think this goes back into nutritional readiness, but also physical fitness and how do we encourage that and champion that? And I think we got some really cool projects that are coming up. I'll come back on and tell you about it as we get a little further. But I'm very excited about it because I think there's some things, again, where I think the DOD can lead the way. Again, our families, our larger DOD communities, I think we can champion some stuff, and I think we can set the example for the nation.

And I'm excited about it because I think this is the time to transform and look at it and say, "Yes, we see this as a strategic imperative. How do we give our kids a good shot for physical fitness?" Which not only military service, but just good physical health. We want a healthy population. And I think what's cool is this generation is very keyed into their physical health. I think they're a lot more interested in their physical and personal wellbeing, and how do they stay healthy? So, let's give them the tools to be healthy.

**Bruce Moody:**

As we're having this conversation about warfighters and their families, we're acknowledging this is not just a job, it really is service, it's a life of service. And they take it very seriously. This is a commitment that is met and felt with every member of the family. What do we owe them in return, and how are we able to deliver on that promise?

**Stephen Simmons:**

Yeah, Bruce, that's the heart of the matter. I think when we look at warfighters, then the warfighter culture, the warfighter ethos that Secretary of Defense Hegseth talks about all the time, it doesn't just extend to our warfighters that are wearing the uniform, but their families as well. And I think warfighter culture starts at home. And I think that's something that we have to recognize. Let's embrace it. But I think if you looked and asked anybody if they're serving our country because of the pay, they would laugh at you. They're not in it for the money. They're here, they're committed because they have chosen, they're called to serve. And I think part of that calling is they're committed; they swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution. And I think part of that oath, especially in every one of you service members out there who have family, you know when you're taking that oath, you're not taking it lightly. And you're taking that oath for your family as well, and they're part of that decision.

And so, I think it's a hard commitment sometimes, it really is, because you're not promised stability, you're not promised an easy life. I think I'd say it's a good life; it's something I'm happy to be a part of, and I think so many are, but it is going to be hard.

And the easy part is signing yourself up; the hard part is signing your family up. And so, I think what do we owe them? I don't want to get us into the benefits culture. I think we always talk about we owe them an entitlement; we owe them this other benefit. And I think those are nice to have. Everybody works very hard, and we want them to be successful. And some of the times that comes with an entitlement, but it's not about the entitlements. And the military is not an entitlement culture; the military is a warrior culture.

And so, I think what we owe them and owe those families especially, we owe them part of that social covenant. And we make this social covenant with them that we're going to take care of their warrior, we're going to take care of their family. And we're telling the warrior, "We're going to take care of your family." We're telling the family, "We're going to take care of your warrior." And I think that means when we send a warfighter out the gate, we're going to take care of them when they're deployed. But we're also telling that deployed warfighter, "We're going to take care of your family." And I think that goes to a lot of different things: education, child care, healthcare, those are so important.

And then I think on the other side of it, I think it comes down to trust. And I think when we can make those commitments and deliver on those commitments, we build trust, we build respect across the community. And I think that's where one of my chief things is restoring and rebuilding the trust that maybe's degraded over the last 20 years, because we lost a little bit of that just because this constant operational tempo. And I think we need to really look at how do we restore and keep trust. And you can get it right a thousand times and mess it up once and you lost it. And so, I think what we owe them, though, is commitment to that social covenant, commitment to you raised your right hand, you wanted to serve; how do we support you in your service? How do we support your family in that service? But I think also recognizing that it is that commitment and we're going to honor our commitment to you as well.

**Bruce Moody:**

And how does honoring that commitment support the priorities of the secretary of defense?

**Stephen Simmons:**

Yeah, it comes down to that, and secretary of defense's priorities, lethality, readiness, warfighting, I'm going to make the argument and the assertion that you cannot have any of those if you aren't supporting the family that underpins all of that. And I think the anecdote I'll share with you is our child development centers, the CDCs, it's child care that you can depend on. And if we have a warfighter that's even in garrison in training and they don't have child care, they have to take a day off. They may have to put in for leave, and now they're not training. They're not as ready as they could be. So, I think a lot of these programs that we offer, a lot of the support that we offer, while, yes, it is very happy; it's good news stories, there is a readiness imperative that is behind each of

these. Mental resiliency, physical resiliency, taking care of your children via child care programs, making sure your spouse is employed and has a good job. That is so important. And so, in doing those underpins the warfighter readiness. Again, it allows our warfighters to go forward without having to look backward and say, "Hey, is my family taken care of?" They can go and train fully, they can go and deploy fully. And I think that's going to help the readiness. I'm very conscious of ... I think we see the readiness numbers on paper, but then I think there's those small little death by a thousand cuts, or small little cuts that can really add up. And I think a lot of those cuts that can degrade readiness, it really comes down to family stability. If the CDC has a water main breakage and is out for the day, go pulse your unit commanders and find out how much training they got done that day.

**Bruce Moody:**

Right.

**Stephen Simmons:**

It's a simple, factual reality. So yes, I want to make sure we care about the families, we want to make sure they're taken care of, but we're taking care of them because there is a readiness imperative. And I think sometimes we hear the saying "family readiness is military readiness," but I think we can tie a direct line to that, and we can show that through the numbers.

**Bruce Moody:**

You've been here a month. Do you have any priorities or goals that you've set for yourself or for the organization?

**Stephen Simmons:**

Yeah, Bruce, it's been a month. We are charting a pretty massive course on the organization. So, we're actually developing a campaign plan as we speak. There's some amazing priorities that are coming out. I think the big one that we're going to be really zeroed in on in the short term is we're building a much better look at our data. And data doesn't sound fun. It scares a lot of people because it's walls of numbers. But we need to get at our data and get to the second, third, and fourth layers of data, and really take a look at our data-driven decisions. And why I say this is so important is I think we're in a world of finite resources, so I think we need to back up our performance with our data. And then I think that's going to reveal where our gaps are as well.

And why I want to do this is there's multiple studies on family readiness when we see those come out almost quarterly, and usually the data that they pull from those studies is about a year old, maybe six months if we're doing really good. And my personal feeling is that's looking backwards. Yes, it tells us some stuff, it tells us how we did, but

what I really need with the data is I need to look forwards. We need to predict what's going to happen. You're reading me the news if you tell me what we did last year; you're impressing me if you tell me what we're going to do next year.

And so I think as we get better with our data, and we're doing some really cool initiatives, like I talked about with this, where it's going to allow us to be very predictive, it's going to allow us to see a problem before it becomes a big problem. See a problem, maybe be able to resource it better, maybe adjust a policy faster, and I think be more nimble. And so, I think probably bringing in the corporate private sector background, that's where I'm hoping I can help maybe solve some of the opportunity areas that this organization always has, because it's large government bureaucracy. And that's okay that it's that way, but I think we can be faster. And I think ultimately the goal is from policy to employment, how we shorten that time, so our families are taken care of.

**Bruce Moody:**

Now, my final question for you kind of gets on the topic of how do we know the best way forward to go? And part of that is in hearing from military families. So, what would you describe as being the value of hearing from military families? And when we meet with them, when we send out surveys, what are we gaining, and what do we do with that feedback that we get from them?

**Stephen Simmons:**

Yeah, Bruce, and that's actually a great segue from the last question. So, first off, I want to tell everyone, there's no bad news story. I want to hear from as many military families as possible, I want to hear from single service members, I want to hear from the community at large. And there's some great news out there, there's some not-so-great news out there. But I can't fix a problem if I don't know about it, so I want to hear about it. I think we need to have absolute honesty in our data, but honesty in our studies and honesty in our feedback. So, the audience out there, I want to hear from y'all. I'm relishing every opportunity I get to meet with military families and the community at large, because I think that's how we get a better site picture, and dial into the challenges and how we fix it.

I think when we send out surveys, yeah, I'll tell people, "We're looking at that data heavily. We are paying attention to those. So, don't throw it in the trash, fill it out, get us your feedback, because that's just going to help us shape information there." What are we doing with that feedback? A lot of that comes down to policy. At the end of the day, we are a policy office. So, the number one thing I can do is advocate for change policy. Sometimes that just means a simple memo. A lot of times that means we're going to be working with our Defense-State Liaison Office and some of our other congressional liaisons to work with lawmakers to actually update the law and update a policy that allows us to better support. That's not always a fast process, but the more

data that we're armed with, the easier it is to make the case and show why we want to change this. So, we take that data very seriously.

Like I talked about making our data faster and more nimble, I think we're going to be looking at ways to conduct some kind of constant surveillance. I don't want to say a survey, but ways to get instantaneous feedback on just how we're doing. Obviously, social media is a great way that we see out there. And we watch the feeds, we listen and monitor, but any ways that we can surveil our audience; get the feedback; and then that allows us to be more nimble. So, I think there's a feedback mechanism.

The other thing I'm doing a lot right now is I'm posturing our office to be the feedback mechanism for the DOD. And what I want to do is, even if the issue isn't something that falls under our purview, and housing's a big one that I'll shout out there, it is something that we're going to hear about. And I think military spouses are going to probably be the ones that tell us about a housing problem. Let us be that echo chamber, and we can take that and run with it, and I'll pass it out to my counterparts and get them engaged on it. And I think we're having a lot of success there on some other areas. So, I think as we continue to build this team and develop our office, being the feedback mechanism, it's going to be a very big effort for us, because what I want to do is be able to give people the insight, give them the data that they need to actually make a decision and run with it. So, I'm really excited about our work in that space.

**Bruce Moody:**

Well, Mr. Simmons, thank you so much for joining us, and please come on back.

**Stephen Simmons:**

Awesome, Bruce. Look forward to joining you again. Thanks.

**Bruce Moody:**

Excellent. Thank you. Bye-bye.

And that's our interview with Stephen Simmons, the new Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy. Want to remind you all that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We have a link in the show notes, you can send us your questions, your comments, we like to hear from you. So, go ahead and use that link. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast 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.