

## Military OneSource Podcast — How the American Red Cross Supports Service Members

### Episode transcript

#### Intro voice-over:

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](https://militaryonesource.mil).

#### Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today, we're talking about the American Red Cross. The Red Cross has a long and special relationship with the military. In this episode, we'll talk about their emergency messages that help war fighters and their families during difficult times.

I recently traveled to Fort Bragg and met with a soldier who shared his story about a family emergency, and how the Red Cross and his command together, helped him in his time of need. That's in today's episode.

I also speak with a rep from the Red Cross and from Army Community Service. Because when a Red Cross message is created, there's a whole lot that happens, because when a service member knows that they're taken care of, when they know that their family is taken care of, then they're better able to focus on the mission. And that's what it's all about.

So, I hope that you find today's episode helpful. I encourage you to share it. And if you have any questions or comments about today's episode, there's a link in the program notes. We always like to hear from you. So, here is today's episode.

Thanks, everybody, for joining me today. I have three guests with me today. We're in the Soldier Support Center, which is enormous, because this installation is enormous. It's basically a city of soldiers and civilians, and it shows. Because we're on the ninth floor of this building, that's giving you an idea of how big this is.

But we're going to talk about what service members, what family members can experience, if they have an experience that involves the Red Cross. And we're going to unpack that. But I think the best way to unpack that, is to hear from you.

Can you please identify yourself, please?

**Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup:**

So, I am Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup.

**Bruce Moody:**

And you're with us today because you have a really interesting story to share — a personal experience. I think the way we're going to structure this is to hear your story and then unpack that to understand what the military does when a service member needs some help. So go ahead and share your story, please.

**Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup:**

Certainly. So, several years ago, I got a call from my sister, Ruth, who informed me that my father had had a stroke, and he lives back in Missouri. At the time, I was stationed at Camp Smith, Hawaii — so a bit of a distance. I'd had to take leave, of course. In the normal process when you're in the Army, you want to take emergency leave for something like that to help officiate the process. I knew I had to go contact the Red Cross in the hospital to make sure everything's all linked up. And I worked with my first sergeant at the time to help make all that happen.

So, we called the hospital Red Cross; they contacted my unit; I started emergency leave. But one of the things that my first sergeant helped me with, which I was not aware of, is that you can get financial assistance, to some degree, to help you travel from your place of duty to wherever you need to go for emergency, depending on the distance. And that definitely helped me out because going from Hawaii to Missouri is not cheap.

Yeah and to touch on that, my brother, who also had to go and see our father, who was not doing well ... He was unstable, so we didn't know how long he was going to last after the stroke ... He went through his own process to take leave in the Air Force, but it was not emergency leave. He took ordinary leave, and he didn't know about the Red Cross. It may have been a slip up ... maybe no one was really tracking what was going on in his situation. Maybe he didn't bring it up. I didn't bring it up to him either, so I feel partially responsible for that.

But in either case, we talked about it and, yeah, he was completely unaware of the whole process of contacting the Red Cross and getting that emergency leave to help him go to Missouri. So, he paid out pocket and took ordinary leave. But he still made it, thankfully, and thankfully my father pulled through.

**Bruce Moody:**

We're glad to hear that. It's a story that. We want to spend some time kind of unpacking. Maybe we'll start with you. You're Angelica. Can you please identify yourself?

**Angelica Sowen:**

I'm Angelica Sowen with the American Red Cross Service to Armed Forces.

**Bruce Moody:**

Services to armed forces. What is your main mission? What is the purpose of the Red Cross for the armed forces?

**Angelica Sowen:**

Absolutely. So, starting back with Clara Barton, we kind of first establish the Red Cross from the beginning of the Spanish-American War. We have basically served service members in every major operation, even leading up to our modern-day operations. We have Red Cross members in Poland currently with support to Ukraine obviously.

So, the goal of what we do is from when you raise your right hand, whether you're enlisting, commissioned, direct commissioned, etc., we want to support you and your family members from when you raise your right hand and you make that oath until the end of your life. That is what our goal is.

**Bruce Moody:**

So, you've been around for a while.

**Angelica Sowen:**

I have been around for a while. Not as long as Clara Barton.

**Bruce Moody:**

No, yeah. Okay. So, you haven't actually met her. Okay. Part of what you do involves coordination with the other support services that a service member would experience. And with that, I'm going to look to you and ask you to identify yourself.

**Audra Saterly:**

My name is Audra Satterlee with Army Community Service.

**Bruce Moody:**

And we're going to get into the weeds about this, but generally speaking, how do you work with the Red Cross, and then once you are working with the Red Cross, how are you working with other resources?

**Audra Saterly:**

So, Army Community Service is basically available for soldiers and their family members in any situation that they could face. The service members and their families face a lot of unique situations, and we have programs that support new families that they're away from their support networks, and we help them get established on the installation, make their networks, find available services that are there to help them through their entire journey, financial assistance, employment assistance, and we coordinate with a lot of different local agencies and organizations, Red Cross being one of them, to help get that information out to our family members.

**Bruce Moody:**

Angelica, what is a Red Cross message? What sort of messages would fall into that category?

**Angelica Sowen:**

Absolutely. Well, I'm glad, sergeant, that you mentioned making the process official. So, the Red Cross emergency messages are essentially a third-party verification system that's mandated by Congress. It's a service that we provide at that level.

We are mandated to provide it, so we kind of act as that third-party neutral party verifying that the information that's being relayed is true, that this is an emergency, the service member is needed and then communicating that and making sure it gets to them no matter where they are.

Essentially what falls under that category can be anything that might warrant an emergency. A lot of people think that it's simply, "Oh, my family member is hospitalized;" "there's been a sudden death," but it also can fall under something as simple as, "My spouse was injured and they can no longer care for our children. I'm needed back at home." That is an emergency, or even a sudden birth, so "My spouse has went into labor, and I'm needed at home to be there for the birth of my child."

**Bruce Moody:**

How does a message get started? Who can start the process?

**Angelica Sowen:**

Yeah, I'm very glad that you asked that question. I think that there's confusion on who can, so I'm happy to clear that up. But anyone can start a Red Cross message. Sergeant, in your case, it could have been you, a family member, it could have been someone in your chain of command, it could have been a friend. As long as they have the important information, where your unit is, first and last name, your rank, that sort of thing, then they're able to start the message. The way that you do that are two ways. Service members can call 1-877-272-7337, or they can utilize our mobile app. All you have to do is search Hero Care Network. Either of those is a way that you can put in an emergency message.

**Bruce Moody:**

I'm a retired Navy chief and so in my case, it was my chain of command that initiated the Red Cross message. It was in the day when we didn't have apps, so they probably used a phone number, probably one different than the one you're offering now. So now a Red Cross message has been created, that makes it an official validated issue, and when it's an issue, we need help. So, at what point are you jumping into the process here? And identify yourself again, please.

**Audra Saterly:**

Audra Saterly with Army Community Service. When the Red Cross message is put in and the unit puts a service member on emergency leave, they can bring that form to Army Community Service on the third floor of the Soldier Support Center here in this building, and they can apply for emergency travel, hotel costs, rental car, food for the emergency situation. The current policy is that when they're on emergency leave in CONUS, they can get a grant up to \$2,000 for airfare, and then anything else is a loan, unless they do a budget workup and that indicates their inability to pay, and then AER can increase the grant amount. If they're going for overseas travel, the grant can be up to \$4,000 for the airfare, and then everything else will be a loan.

**Bruce Moody:**

Sgt. 1st Class Northrup, go back to the topic of speaking up, of making sure that your chain of command knows what's going on and the importance of just asking questions. Because as we said, there's things we don't know, but then there's the things that we

don't know that we don't know. And so, the value of speaking up when you're in a situation like this.

**Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup:**

So, I think what you said was right on. There are things that I didn't know I didn't know; like for instance, the financial aid that you can get through Army Community Service. I spoke immediately up to my first sergeant because I knew right off the bat if we were going to get emergency leave approved, let them know as soon as possible because you have no idea what's on their plate, what's going on, and it helps them focus on this effort to help you out. If you wait 'till the last minute, even if they do their best to help you out, then result will not necessarily be the best for you necessarily, at no fault of them.

But again, going back to my first sergeant, she had a plethora of knowledge that I just didn't know about, and she specialized in this stuff. She worked in human resources most of her career, so she understood just who to contact, all that, so she made a whole thing, the whole process really smooth for me. Talk to your first line supervisor, talk to your first sergeant, and they'll have a whole bunch of knowledge that you can tap into and help you through the whole process.

**Bruce Moody:**

And there's a couple of aspects to this. One is money. It's not cheap to travel, and it's really not cheap if you have to travel immediately. So being able to avoid financial problems allows you to keep moving forward and allowing you to know that you've got your home life covered allows you to move forward. And by moving forward, I mean to be able to focus on the mission. If you've got money problems or if you're worried about what was happening at home, you're not able to focus on the mission. Your thoughts on that?

**Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup:**

Yeah, so I completely agree with that, and not even just a mission, but even just going back home with my family, because even my brother was talking about he had to take out stuff on a credit card to pay for that travel. So, he's already talking about it, while me, I was not even worried about that. I was not really worried about financial stuff, but just spending time with my father and my family, which was a big deal because it allowed us to even reconnect, spend that emotional support time that we needed with them. And like you said, when I went back to my duty station, I wasn't worried about paying that back. I just went back and focused on the mission.

**Bruce Moody:**

Angelica, what are the sort of questions that people are asking you or asking your colleagues when they hear that there is a Red Cross message?

**Angelica Sowen:**

A lot of questions I get asked is how to put one in, which I know we've covered and clarified, and that's great. A lot of things I clarify, too, are just that we cannot approve your emergency leave. But I would say, I'm an Army veteran myself, in the case of you speaking up to your leadership and stating, "Hey, I want to be at the bedside of my father who's just had a stroke;" your leadership cares about you. We're people first, and when you take care of the people, the mission is going to follow because you have more mentally resilient and able-to-focus service members. But that's one of the questions.

I think another one is, is there other things that the Red Cross can do outside of emergency messages? I had a service member that I was working with who they were at Hawaii for the first time and they did not have a vehicle. So, they had actually called that number because we offer something called critical community services, and they basically said, "I don't have the money to get a vehicle. I need this to get to work." So, we were able to work with them and referred them to a program that helps with a very low-interest loan for a down payment on your first vehicle.

So, I think that gets back to there's a lot of things that you don't know, and if these resources are available, we're doing a disservice not putting this information out there. We have to find ways to make sure everyone is aware so that you know there is that service available to you and there are ways we can help.

**Bruce Moody:**

And same question over to you. You're aware of the whole range of support, but maybe family members aren't, maybe soldiers aren't. So, what other kind of questions are you normally getting from people?

**Audra Saterly:**

We always recommend that Army Community Service is one of the first stops for a new family coming to the installation or a new family to the military because there is so much that they don't know until they know it.

**Bruce Moody:**

And I want to go back and at the risk of restating, but I think there's a lot going in here when somebody does have first a Red Cross message and they go to Army Community

Service, what are the first things that are available to them, or what are the first things that they should be asking about?

**Audra Saterly:**

Well, when a family comes to Army Community Service with Red Cross emergency leave, Army Emergency Relief would be the first thing that we're looking at to get them to their situation, to their emergency, so they don't have to worry about the finances involved with it. That would be the first goal.

After they've taken care of that, we want them to know that Army Community Service is here for them for any situation that they might need. Whether they're new to the installation, new military family to the Army, they can come to the lending closet is one of our programs to get new items when they're here without any of their household goods. Everything from new parent support programs so that they have support raising their infants all the way through the process, parenting issues and concerns. The financial readiness program is beyond just the AER; they can come get budgeting information, savings, investing. With new families, we definitely encourage that they register with the ePortal for EFMP so that they can get appropriate medical support, educational support, assignment coordination and family support services for their exceptional family members. Really, we cover everything. And if it's something that ACS can't cover, we refer to our outside network of organizations.

**Bruce Moody:**

See, I work in this space, and I was like, "Oh, yeah, we have that and that," and I'm just sitting here having a casual conversation. Somebody who has a Red Cross message, there's anxiety, there's stress. I think an important message here is you've got to speak up because you're going to miss things. And that's okay, as long as you don't miss saying, "Hey, I've got a situation here and I need help," and the people from the other end of the table are going to help you guide to discover the things that you need to address and the resources that are available to you.

There's two things. First of all, if you're experiencing something like this, you are absolutely not the first person to be experiencing this. This is just the journey of life. This is what happens. The other thing, and this is really important, is that you have every right, and frankly, your leadership has the expectation that you're going to step up and ask for help. You're not taking away from other people's resources, and your situation is just as valid as anyone else's, so please speak up. And I would like you to expand upon that.



**Audra Saterly:**

Well, we're here all day, every day, just ready to assist our service members and families. If you're experiencing a family situation, an emergency situation, you're not the only person to ever experience that, and there are resources available. But you don't know the resources unless you speak up and ask for the help. And you might be surprised at the plethora of opportunities and resources that will be handed to you.

**Bruce Moody:**

And I'm sorry, I'm just going to foot-stomp on that because I encounter people who say, "Sure, I have a problem, but I know people who have significantly more serious problems, so I'm going to handle this on my own, so I don't take their spot." And you're already shaking your head no.

**Audra Saterly:**

No, you'll never take somebody else's spot. There is resources for everybody. That is why we are here.

**Bruce Moody:**

I wonder if you have colleagues, fellow soldiers that you talked to kind of share your experience so that they're aware of what you went through and what's available to them?

**Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup:**

You mean as in how they handle the Red Cross messages and all?

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup:**

Yeah, it's unfortunate that these bad things do happen and we have to put that Red Cross message in, but yes, it's actually one of the things that I try and make sure is done when it happens to one of my soldiers where something happened to a family member, "Hey, did you put the Red Cross message in? Do you need help with that," all that. And sometimes it doesn't occur to them. Some of them are right on the money and they go

ahead and do it. But yeah, it definitely happens throughout the year. Going back to history, though, I just remembered that my father, who we were talking about earlier, had to do the same thing for his father during the Vietnam War where he had to get a Red Cross message put in so he can go back home to Kansas to visit his family. So, yeah, this is definitely not the first time this has ever happened.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, all the way back to Clara Barton, I guess. So just remind us again, so anyone can call up the Red Cross. And explain this, you're going to be validating what has happened. I guess what I'm saying is they don't need to come with all of the questions answered. A family member can simply call up the Red Cross and say, "I have this experience happening at home. I have a service member. What do I do next?" Is it that simple?

**Angelica Sowen:**

It is that simple. I would definitely say that. This is where I'm going to emphasize that if you are someone in the service, whether you be Army, Marines, Coast Guard, etc., make sure your family knows what's going on in your life, especially if you're not from a military family. And what I mean by that, make sure they understand what unit you're at. Make sure they know just kind of the basic identifiers about you, your rank, things like this, because while it is that simple, you can call us and you can say, "Hey, I am so lost right now, and I don't really know what to do. This has happened to the service member's mother. This was my sister," or something like this, "and I'm just trying to put in this message and get them home. What do I do?" We will be happy to walk you through the process, but this is where I'm going to encourage service members, empower your family so when this happens, you are prepared.

**Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup:**

I find that a lot of soldiers, it's something that I had them do until recent years, is making sure my family knows who to contact in unit if they can't get a hold of me because you don't know what's going on in that unit. Something might be happening. I might've gotten rapid deployment orders and things happen. But first thing is like, hey, small contact roster like you would give your spouse, should also be to your mother, your siblings, the people you'd want contacted or the people you would want to reach your unit if something were to happen. That's imperative.

**Bruce Moody:**

And can I say plain language is a good idea, too, because we love our acronyms, and make sure you've got a phone number, an email address, a name, a unit, and then

they'll be able to progress on this thing much more quickly. Any final thoughts on this? Angelica from the Red Cross?

**Angelica Sowen:**

Yes. I just wanted to also emphasize that leadership. We're talking a lot about service members going through this, but it can be hard for leadership to pull themselves out of the mission to also focus. We were talking before about how you, sergeant, when you were able to handle everything and go home, you could then focus on your time. I would encourage, leaders, make yourself aware that these resources are available so when your junior officers and your junior soldiers or service members are coming to you saying, "I have this huge problem," instead of you having to stop everything and stall the mission, you can say, "Perfect. I have these resources for you. Here is where you need to go. Here is a number you can call. I'm going to do everything to support you. Here's what I'm doing, but here's how I can empower you to help yourself," and then send them to us, and we will work with them.

**Bruce Moody:**

Can I just lean on that for a moment here? Because in our experience, it's the NCO. The NCO gets the first call when a service member is in a situation that would probably involve a Red Cross. Maybe if you could explain or just kind of foot-stomp the importance of the NCO being aware of the Red Cross as a resource?

**Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup:**

Yes, I think this ties into the previous stuff. If we know what's going on with the soldier, we can better support them at the unit. In recent times where we had a soldier, a family emergency, one of the first things I did is I turned around and let my superiors know so we could do everything we could to support that soldier. So, the NCO is a resource in making sure that soldier has what they need to take care of their family business.

**Bruce Moody:**

Excellent. And any final thoughts?

**Audra Saterly:**

Yes. I just wanted to say our military families face a wide variety of life stressors and challenges, just like any family, but those challenges are compounded by the military lifestyle that bring hardships into the mix, like deployments and geographical separations, being far from the family and their known support networks. So, I just wanted to leave the message that keep Army Community Service and American Red

Cross as family names in your notebook, on your fridge. Don't hesitate to reach out to us because we are here to be your family away from family. If we can't assist you with our programs and organizations, we can connect you with agencies that can.

**Bruce Moody:**

Excellent. We'll end it there. I want to really thank you all for joining me to talk about this.

**Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Northrup:**

Thank you.

**Bruce Moody:**

Alright. And I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. If there's a question or a comment you have about today's episode or maybe an idea for a future episode, we have a link in the program notes, and you can send us a message. 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.