

Military OneSource Podcast — MWR

Program title: Podcast: American Red Cross

Episode transcript:

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody.

For nearly 140 years, the American Red Cross has helped United States military veterans and their families prepare for, manage and respond to the challenges of service. The legacy continues as the Red Cross serves the military community 24/7/365 in hometowns across America and in installations around the world.

Today, Susan Malandrino joins us on the podcast. Susan is with the American Red Cross. She serves as the communication lead for Armed Services and International Services. In addition to that, Susan self-identifies as a military brat and is a military spouse. Susan, welcome to the podcast.

Susan Malandrino:

Thanks so much, Bruce. I'm so happy to be here.

Bruce:

Happy to have you with us. I want to mention up front that this podcast, we had a date to record it, and then Hurricane Ian happened. You called us and said, well, you needed to reschedule. And, of course, we were fine with that. But let's take a moment and tell us if you would, what the Red Cross was doing in response to Hurricane Ian.

Susan:

Well, thanks for asking that, and thanks so much for your flexibility with a little pause and giving us a little moment there. So, Hurricane Ian was just devastating and it's been a real challenge for communities all across Florida and the Southeast. We have 70,000 service members currently stationed in Florida, and we have 1.4 million veterans in the state. So, from our perspective, this is a really critical time for those folks. And we are providing all sorts of services. We're providing services specific to the military community, but we're also helping out in communities where we have shelters, we are serving meals, and we're really just helping people pick up their lives again and move forward after this massive tragedy.

Bruce:

Well, thank you to the Red Cross, thank you to the military community. You are really a product of the military community. You really identify yourself as a military brat ...

Susan:

I am.

Bruce:

... Or a military spouse. Tell us about that. What does that mean? What does it mean to be a military brat? Some people see that as a pejorative term.

Susan:

Oh no, it's great.

Bruce:

Some people embrace it. All right. What is a military brat?

Susan:

It's wonderful. I mean, I think the main thing when you think about military brats, is that you're flexible. You have to be, right? You can't control your environment. You can't control the situation where you're going to live or what's going to happen. So, you have to be flexible. But one of the really ... I use the term "brat" lovingly. I love that you meet different people and you see folks from all walks of life. You get different experiences. As a military spouse, I've been all around the world really meeting different folks and learning all sorts of things. It's really, really neat.

Bruce:

So, it is neat. Draw the line from that to the Red Cross. How did that happen?

Susan:

Yeah, so I've been a military spouse for 15 years now, and we have done tours all over in Europe, in Asia. And when we were stationed in Japan, I taught classes through MWR on base. I taught fitness classes and I needed to get a CPR certification in order to do that safely. And the Red Cross was on base and did this and did it for free. I thought, oh wow, that's cool. And I didn't realize until I'd worked for the Red Cross these years later, we PCS back to the states, and now I work for, I'm based in Washington DC and I work for the Red Cross in this capacity. I didn't realize that we were on military installations all over the country. We are at virtually every military installation, and we're at 37 OCONUS locations. We're really tied into the military community, and we're here to help all sorts of things from CPR to a variety of different classes or resources that are specific to the needs of military families.

Bruce:

So you're physically on installations and also nearby installations and ...

Susan:

Yes.

Bruce:

Get into that in some of the things that you provide.

Susan:

Absolutely. We are on military installations. We are in military and veteran VA hospitals.

On military installations, we do reconnection workshops. Your spouse is going on deployment, we'll do workshops, getting your family ready to prepare. Mom or dad is going on deployment, we help with child workshops, really preparing the emotional challenges of that.

We also are in military hospitals. Our dogs are there to provide comfort and care. Our volunteers are there to provide comfort and care. We really span the gamut. We have a military and veteran caregiver network, which this post 9/11 generation, we have a ton of families who are military and veteran caregivers, and we have a community that supports that group of folks and really provides resources for them to connect. And then lastly, our Hero Care Network and you and I will talk about this, is a centralized locations for all things military. We provide help, financial resources and connection for military families who may be having challenges.

Bruce:

Right, the network. So that's the Red Cross Hero Care Network. Let's really focus on that now. Why don't you tell us about it?

Susan:

Yeah, absolutely. The Hero Care Network is really the centralized place. It's kind of your one-stop shop. What it does is we provide financial assistance and we help service members get help during an emergency. And the network is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year. And I can give you some examples if that would help, of the specifics of what the Hero Care Network does.

We were just talking about Hurricane Ian, and we right now have built up our workforce to be able to answer the calls, for that influx of calls coming in. But I can talk about last year when those big storms hit Texas. Texas, also another big state with a ton of military bases. I don't know if you remember the temperatures dropped and there were a ton of storms that hit Texas, freezing pipes. People had all sorts of issues. And we really were able to connect veterans with specific resources. So, to fix those broken pipes, to help them clean up after that massive storm, and really to help them move on to the next chapter.

One other thing the Hero Care Network does, in addition to veterans, we work with military families, current active duty and their spouses. If a service member is down range, they have an emergency, we can connect that family and the service member and let them know about the emergency through our emergency care messages.

Bruce:

So this is something that I'm familiar with. When I was in uniform, when I was a very, very junior person, I got one of these messages. My grandfather had passed away. And that sort of message that maybe people are familiar with, what does that look like today? And it's interesting because these messages deliberately go through a service member's chain of command, and that allows for a number of things to happen. So, what do these messages look like today and what happens when a message is delivered?

Susan:

Yeah, absolutely, Bruce. And I'm really glad that we were able to get that message to you and during your time, your loss. It's really important for service members to know that they can stay connected and that wherever you're serving in the world, if you are on a ship, if you're down range, if you're, I don't know, in a sandy place, to really know that you're going to get the information of what's happening during a critical time. But yes, as you said, we work with families.

So, a family has an emergency; they call up our Hero Care Network, and we begin the process of initiating an emergency care message. The Red Cross takes that information, we verify it. So, does this meet the criteria? Is it an immediate family member? A mom, a dad, a grandparent? Is it an immediate family member, and is it a critical emergency? An illness, a death or a complicated birth, something along those lines.

We'll verify that emergency, and then we will send an emergency message to the unit commander. So that unit commander is really going to be the person to take the message and relay it to the service member. But that unit commander makes the decision: Does the service member get emergency leave? That decision is really in the unit commander's hands. And if the service member is granted leave, we then work with the Military Aid Society. In your case, Bruce, I think you were in the Navy, right?

Bruce:

Yeah.

Susan:

So that would be the Marine Corps Relief Society. We would work with them and we would facilitate either a grant or a loan. And if you were granted leave, we would help facilitate that and help get you home for your family at that critical time.

Bruce:

So, there's a lot that happens.

Susan:

Yes. And it's complicated. Exactly.

Bruce:

In order for that to happen, what needs to happen beforehand? If a service member's going on deployment, do they need to make sure that they've registered with the Red Cross or something? What do they need to do to make sure that, in the event that a message has to send, that it sends as quickly and triggers all of the things that you've just talked about?

Susan:

Absolutely. I think that is such a great question. When a service member is going on deployment, I mean, I joke as a military spouse, during deployment anything that can go wrong will go wrong, right? The car battery is going to die, the washing machine is going to break. All of those things. And really, as a military spouse in my case, what can you do to prepare yourself ahead of time?

I would encourage military families ahead of time if they're preparing a deployment binder. For folks who are super particular, I definitely recommend a deployment binder where you have all your resources in one place. In the event that something happens, you are really prepared. But in that I would, as part of your pre-deployment checklist, I would download our app, our Hero Care app. I would have our phone number saved in your phone, so you can call us at the ready.

And then here are the things, when you call us, we're going to need some information. In order to verify those messages, in order to really be of assistance and to help you as quickly as possible, there's some things you're going to need to have. And those, they're really basic. We need your service member's, full legal name, no nicknames, just the full legal name. We need their rank or their rating, branch of service, their social security number, their military unit address. That might not be something you have on hand, but that will help us connect with the right commander, and information about the deployed unit and where their home base is. So having those ready and at the ready, that information that's going to help us initiate this message and make it the process smoother.

Bruce:

At the ready. I think that's really important because for anyone who's been in an emergency, you know that emergencies basically have already started before you're aware of them.

Susan:

Absolutely.

Bruce:

So by the time you are aware of an emergency, you have a lot immediately that you have to do. Speaking for myself, in those situations, your IQ goes down a couple of notches, and really just to have that binder, to have a page with all of that information nearby so you can just pull from it and read from it, that really seems to be something that could really facilitate things, make it so much easier.

Susan:

Absolutely, Bruce. And if you're more modern and you know, you can just have a note in your phone. For younger folks who don't have the old school binder, you can have a note in your

phone, you can have the app programmed, and you can have our phone number at the ready, really just to prep yourself. But I 100% agree with you. You're in the middle of it. You're in the middle of the chaos, and this will really help you see things a little more clearly.

Bruce:

With regard to these messages, is there any confidentiality? Can these messages be couched in a way that makes them confidential?

Susan:

Yes. If you are in immediate distress, you need to call 911 or you need to call 988. But our messages are, where you call us, when you're ready to call us, our messages are confidential.

Bruce:

So, what does that mean? If I'm responsible for a unit of troops, I'm going to get a message for one of my people, and am I going to necessarily know what the message is?

Susan:

Yes. You are going to get the basic facts of the nature of the emergency and of the service member involved.

Bruce:

Got it. Got it. OK. So, we've been talking about this network. Yes. Who is the network? Because the military is a diverse population, so how is that network able to respond to serving a culturally diverse military?

Susan:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that is one of the things I love about being a part of the military community. It is one of the most diverse workforces out there. You have folks from all over the country who come from different backgrounds and different cultures, and they're all together for a shared sense of purpose. We love that.

Many of the people who work in our Red Cross unit that works with the military, or it's our service to the Armed Forces Unit, or who work at the Hero Care Center, appreciate that diversity. They come from diverse backgrounds themselves. I was talking to one of our Hero Care Center operators recently, and this was right after Hurricane Ian struck, and he is a native Spanish speaker, and he was talking about the folks who were calling us, because the Hispanic population in Florida is so high, we have amped up our callers who can speak Spanish. If somebody needs help in their native language, we can really meet that need and address that need.

Bruce:

Can a service member volunteer?

Susan:

Yes.

Bruce:

Can a family member volunteer to be on this Hero Care Network?

Susan:

Our Hero Care Network folks are specially trained, and they have gone through a series of robust training, but we do take volunteers for a variety of our programs. So really, depending on what you want to do, you can volunteer with the Red Cross. If you want to do something military specific, absolutely. We have a whole litany of programs in which you can get involved and volunteer. If you want to help with disaster relief, you can volunteer with the Red Cross. I would definitely encourage, depending on what your interests are, to reach out to us and we can connect you with something that you are passionate about and a job that you can really work on.

Bruce:

And we'll put the contact information, we'll put a link in the program notes for this episode.

Susan:

Yeah, absolutely, Bruce. And I'd say that 90% of our workforce are volunteers, and we absolutely cherish and love what they bring to our organization.

Bruce:

Susan, this has been such an inspiring conversation. I really have a new appreciation for what the Red Cross does in the community, in the military community. And I just wonder if you have any parting words for families, especially those who are facing deployments.

Susan:

I mean, deployments are so challenging. I mean, we've all been through them. They're really challenging for the service member. They're challenging for their family at home, who's putting in the hard work as well. I would just say really connect with us, be prepared, and know that we are here to help you. We are here to help you through the challenges you might face during deployment. And we're here to walk beside you during this time.

Bruce:

Susan Malandrino from the American Red Cross. Susan, thank you so much for joining us today.

Susan:

Thanks so much, Bruce. Really appreciate it.

Bruce:

Want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department through our website. We're a call center. We're all over social media, and now we're a podcast, so we hope that you'll subscribe. We cover a huge range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks so much for listening. Bye-bye.