

EFMP & Me Podcast, Season2, Episode 2: Advocating for Others

Transcript

- **[Jen Wong]** You have a family member enrolled in EFMP and you want to know how to best advocate for them. Today, we'll get some great advice about knowing your rights, building relationships and more — in this podcast for families enrolled in EFMP.

I'm Jen Wong and this episode is about advocating for yourself and others.

- **[Jen Wong]** Hi, and welcome to the EFMP & Me podcast, brought to you by the Office of Special Needs and Military OneSource. I'm Jen Wong, Program Analyst with the Office of Special Needs and your host for today's episode.

This podcast series highlights topics you can explore further by visiting EFMP & Me on Military OneSource. EFMP & Me is a digital tool that provides valuable Exceptional Family Member Program-related topics, resources and checklists to service members, families, providers and leaders, 24/7.

Today, we'll be discussing advocating for yourself and others, and we'll focus on three key areas. Knowing your rights through the policy or law, knowing your resources and building relationships.

I'm pleased to welcome Gunnery Sgt., Marine Corps, retired, Jonathan Alexander. Jonathan, could you please share a little more about yourself?

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yes I can. Thanks for having me here today, Jen.

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** I enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2004 and reported for duty as a bugler to Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., and my unit was "The Commandant's Own," the United States Marine Drum and Bugle Corps.

I'm currently married with four children, and while I was in the Marine Corps, two of those children were enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program at Henderson Hall while I was stationed at the barracks.

In 2017, I was medically retired from the Marine Corps, and at that point, we moved our family to Hawaii. Since then, I've completed my Master of Social Work degree with a concentration in military and veteran affairs at Hawaii Pacific University, and I'm currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Hawaii, and my focus is early childhood special education.

My youngest daughter is currently receiving special education services here in the public school system in Honolulu, and to kind of wrap all that up, my wife is the person that has taught me to be an advocate.

In the Marine Corps, a lot of what we do revolves around your obedience to orders, and so, with that, you get comfortable with someone telling you what to do, and you do it. It's how we're effective, and it didn't really work out that way with our kids.

There were situations where we weren't getting what we needed with the medical staff, and seeing her advocate for our children produced results, and it produced results that were beneficial to them, and so, through that process, I started to learn about how I needed to be vocal for others that aren't able to do so themselves.

- **[Jen Wong]** That's amazing. You and your wife sound like a power team when it comes to advocacy, and you sound very busy. I'm very jealous that you all are busy in Hawaii.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, it's sunny today.

- **[Jen Wong]** Oh, man.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** I'm sorry.

- **[Jen Wong]** OK. Let's jump in. We have some great conversation today. Let's jump right into the first topic, which is knowing your rights or your family members' rights and the policy or the law. So, Jonathan, you sort of alluded to this. I'm guessing that, coming from a military background, you may intuitively refer back to policy.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah. I mean, policy is the framework by which most of us operate in the military. Whenever there are questions about what it is we're supposed to do, how we're supposed to complete that task, we refer back to policy. It's all laid out in there, and if that's not something you're familiar with reading, it can be very confusing.

From, I'll call it a young age in the Marine Corps, we're taught to read orders, policies and directives because it shapes how our career is going to turn out, it shapes how effective your unit's going to be, and that applies to the military just as much as it does to the civilian side of things and with special education rights.

- **[Jen Wong]** Mm-hmm. I could definitely see that because I could also see that referring to policy and learning that in the military is such a great foundational skill for military members and military families that can easily transition into the civilian life when it comes to advocacy.

For example, let's say you want to advocate for your child who may need additional support in school. What laws cover that? Is it IDEA? Is it Section 504? Is it both? If it's a federal law that the states need to abide by, are some states going above and beyond and even providing more protections? And so mobile military families need to be aware of that when they're PCSing as well, so I think it's very important to research the current and the most up-to-date and correct version of the policy or the law so families can be informed to effectively advocate for themselves or for family members.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, and with that, it's like we don't know what we don't know-

- **[Jen Wong]** Right.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** ... and what I mean by that is ... here's a great example. When you enlist in the Marine Corps and you choose a job, there's a foundation of knowledge that you have coming in, but as far as that job's concerned, you don't know anything about it, so they send you to school, and you learn everything there is to know about it at the rank that you're at.

As you progress, you acquire more information, and you add those skills onto what your toolbox is. Not knowing anything about this policy, it can be scary. So, the big thing is we need to empower parents to get past that uncomfortable stage. It's uncomfortable learning new things.

One of the things that we need to understand is that we do have a voice. Now, with that voice, how do we speak up? Well, some of the things you can do is make a list. Every time something pops in your head, every time you have a question that you might not feel comfortable asking, just make that list because at some point you're going to be able to ask those questions.

Break past that uncomfortable barrier, and an example is the IEP meeting. IEP meetings can be very scary. There are a lot of specialists there. There is your teacher, there is you, and when you're sitting at a table where you're not at the head of the table, but all the specialists are, there's a lot of uncertainty that occurs.

You may not feel comfortable addressing it at the time, but one of the things that they do at this meeting is that they give you a questionnaire. They give you, "These are your rights and your privileges throughout this process," so if you don't feel comfortable speaking to them directly, you can fill out that questionnaire, and you can send it in, and you'll get some feedback.

If you don't feel comfortable going by yourself, bring someone in to support you. There's a lot of advocate groups out there that can come sit with you in a meeting and at least make you feel more comfortable that you're not there alone.

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely, and that questionnaire you referenced, even for some families, if that particular school district doesn't offer that questionnaire, I'm sure that they can email the IEP team in advance to provide that list of questions you said to make in advance. That way, if you feel uncomfortable or you feel like you might forget at the meeting to bring those up, you can provide that to the teacher at the IEP meeting, and she may read them for you there.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Exactly.

- **[Jen Wong]** I could see that happening, yeah, absolutely, but a lot of that does sound overwhelming and uncomfortable even, so as you kept moving forward in your advocacy journey, did you find help reviewing information or kind of interpreting all that jargon that happens?

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** It was tough for us, initially, like I mentioned before, that this was a completely new topic area for us, something that we'd never experienced, and so it was a steep learning curve, but the Exceptional Family Member Program had come a long way since we started.

Now, it's a great place for you to learn about this information. You can learn about your rights, your laws. You can learn about the policy, and you can also reach out to the schools. They have resources. You have your special education teacher, the department. There are legal officers accessible across all the services at the JAG offices as well as school liaisons. Did I miss anything there?

- **[Jen Wong]** Well, I think you've just led us to our next topic in conversation, which is knowing your resources. You just mentioned all the great folks that you can reach out to and the resources available at the installation, but I would also add Military OneSource.

I would recommend starting with EFMP & Me because, even the example we were talking about earlier about special education and "Oh, is that under this law or that law, or what's an IEP, or what's a 504 Plan?"... There's a whole section on EFMP & Me that lays out what the options are for your child and the corresponding laws, and you can go on there to kind of build that foundation, and you can even sort the information by who you are.

So, if you're a service member or a family member or a leader at any level, or even a professional like an EFMP family support provider or school liaison, you can go on EFMP & Me and those curated checklists and tool tips and references to other places on Military OneSource like these podcasts and fact sheets and e-learning courses.

There's so much of a variety so that you can build that knowledge base in your advocacy journey and so you can also learn what those other resources are out there. So, I'd recommend starting there.

I'd also add the state Parent Training and Information Centers. Some people call them PTIs, and they provide information and assistance to parents of children receiving special education.

If you don't know your state PTI, you can ask your EFMP Family Support provider, or you can even go on Military OneSource to look it up. Or you can also call Military OneSource and speak to a special needs consultant, and they can also provide that information and those referrals over the phone as well.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, I agree. Military OneSource is great, but if you are more comfortable speaking to someone face to face ... in the Marine Corps, we call it kneecap to kneecap, or sitting right there, you can always go stop in at your local EFMP office. You can look through those flyers, you can look through those handouts that describe what EFMP is and what they can do for you and your family. It's just like, sometimes, you just have to put it all out there and reach out to that person that can help you.

It's going to feel uncomfortable, but talking to that EFMP Family Support provider or the school liaison, or your nurse case manager, and just saying, "Hey, this is what's going on.

This is my family's specific scenario. I have concerns with this. What do you think will help?" or even if it's like, "I don't have a lot of concerns right now, but, knowing our situation and what's going on with our family, it's like do you have any resources? Do you have access to anything that can help us with short-term and long-term planning?"

- **[Jen Wong]** That's a really great idea, yeah.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah. So, just a small scenario for us was projecting ahead for when I was retiring, just like you're talking about those short-term and long-term goals. We came in. "Hey, this is what's going on. What do you guys think we should do?" and we were able to sit down and have a pretty effective conversation as far as that was concerned.

- **[Jen Wong]** Yeah. That makes so much sense, and when I was working at the installation, sometimes I got the impression that some families may have been hesitant to ask for help, or, like you said, just lay everything out on the table because they thought, "Oh, there's another family who has more needs. I don't want to take up this person's time," but I'm thinking of one example where I had asked this one family ... I said, "What does your family like to do for fun?" and he mentioned that his wife takes the other kids to ride bikes in the neighborhood while he stayed home with his son, who was differently abled and didn't ride a bike.

I mentioned, "Hey, you know your county runs like a three-week program to teach the kids adapted bike riding, and they even have different modified bikes to meet their needs?" Bike riding wasn't even the most important need on the table, but just because he had come in, and we had that open discussion to just say, "Hey, this is my family. What's out there? What do you all do for fun?" he was so ecstatic to learn about this quality-of-life program that could actually enable the whole family to enjoy bike riding together.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, and, I mean, that follows right in line with you don't know what you don't know. By coming in or expressing that need through that conversation, you were able to provide this outlet where, now, the entire family can go and do activities together instead of one staying home and taking the other ones out.

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely, and when families are asking for specific resources or even just general resources, one thing that military families deal with is they learn all the resources, and then it's time to PCS again, and you need to relearn the local laws or installation policies and the local resources for the new location.

One thing that's nice that EFMP does offer is called a warm hand-off. You can walk in and talk to your EFMP family support provider and tell them your family's moving, and you and that provider will review what services you're currently using that you'll need to set up at the next duty station, any questions about the actual travel, maybe resources at the next duty station.

For example, the current provider, let's say they're in Virginia. They may not be the expert on the resources that are in Hawaii, but they can reach out to the provider who's

in Hawaii and get the family and that provider connected, and they can start coordinating together.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah. I mean, it's essential. It's necessary and needed. I think, without that warm hand-off, you're just going into that land of confusion, and by having that resource there to tap into, makes that transition, along with all of the other things that are occurring for this PCS move, just a little bit smoother.

- **[Jen Wong]** There're a lot of transitions in the military, and it just causes a lot of relearning, but there's a wealth of information out there, a wealth of resources out there to be able to help along the way.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah.

- **[Jen Wong]** You had mentioned earlier, you, yourself, went through a transition with your retirement. Well, you retired, and you moved.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah. A lot of things kind of all occurred at once. I was going through my medical retirement process, and, as you were just discussing, a lot of different things were going on.

Well, this medical retirement process happened to coincide with our oldest child starting high school, our middle two transitioning into middle school, and then we were still trying to find a good placement for our daughter in elementary school, and so the decision to move here was kind of twofold. One, we came over to help take care of my wife's grandmother, but the other was we talked to our older son.

I'm an Army brat. I grew up moving quite a bit, and so we presented to him. It's like, "OK, you're getting ready to go to high school. We can stay here in the D.C. area. If you start here, you finish here. If we're going to move, this is the time that we're going to move," and so we gave the option of Hawaii. This is where my wife is from.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** He's like, "Well, I want to go to Hawaii," and so ...

Jen Wong (16:07): Easy decision.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Easy decision, yeah, but, logistically, it was ... I mean, it wasn't a mess, but it was a mess. Now, we're thinking about getting the kids into schools, and where are we going to live? How are we going to get our stuff over there?

I know that the military helps with a lot of this, but the biggest thing for us was transitioning our daughter into a school system over here that, well, one, we didn't really know anything about, and, two, is wherever she's going to end up be a good fit for her? So, that's when all the questions started.

That's when we started reaching out, "Hey, what do you guys know about the services over at Tripler?" because that's where we would be going since I was a retiree, and being able to go to the EFMP office in Henderson Hall and have them tell us, "Well, these are the people at Tripler that are in the EFMP program. This is your social worker. This is your counselor," just knowing that information, having those numbers to give

them a phone call if we needed to, had helped kick-start the process, but, at the same time, it also helped alleviate a lot of stress that we were currently going through because the medical retirement process in itself is very ambiguous.

What I mean by that is that from you beginning that process to ending could be anywhere from three months to a year, and, for me, that process ended up being a little bit over a year. We actually moved my family a year before I came out, and so you add that on top of everything else, and, logistically, it was a nightmare, but knowing that at least we were going to be able to get our children into school and find a good place for our little one just took a big load off of our shoulders.

- **[Jen Wong]** That's a lot of transition, moving, medical, schools, even being geographically separated from your family, all at once, but you all made it through, and it sounds like you made it through with some good help.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Oh, yeah. The help was fantastic, and the help that we continue to receive over here is great, and a lot of that had to do with just establishing those relationships prior to us coming over here to Hawaii.

- **[Jen Wong]** OK. Let's talk about the next topic then. Let's talk about relationships. Those are so important, and let's talk about how important do you think building relationships is, and how has your experience been? You said you've had a positive experience, but could you elaborate a little more about how you've been building those connections and how it helped you, but then also how it helped in your advocacy, having those people around you?

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah. So, our EFMP journey was a very long and slow journey at first, and the reason I say that is because EFMP itself has evolved, and as we get older and more mature, we start to understand more and are able to advocate more.

So, for us, when our youngest son ... He was born in 2005, was going to be placed into EFMP, well, one, we didn't even know what the Exceptional Family Member Program was. It was more of... my command was like, "According to policy, we need to enroll your son in EFMP," and so going through that whole process. We did all that, and then a year later we would get contacted that we need to renew eligibility again, and we're like, "Well, what is this for?" Like, "What are we doing?"

So, we thought it was an assignment-only program, like this is going to help us if we PCS, but after a few more years, our youngest daughter was born in 2011, and we knew that we needed to enroll her in EFMP, there was a change. There was a shift where they started reaching out to us more, and at that point we realized that there was a family support component as well with EFMP.

We started engaging with the team there. It got to the point that our conversations were so often that whenever I needed to stop by Henderson Hall, that was a second stop for me at Henderson Hall. I would go do whatever I needed to do, and then I would go into the office and hang out with them for like 30-45 minutes, catch them up on what

our youngest two were doing. "These are things that we're going through," and that conversation would allude to, "Well, these are the things that we need."

So stopping in once a month, twice a month, gave us that comfortability to where we felt we could come in and ask questions. We felt that we could come in, and this is where those seeds of advocating begins, just having those conversations and getting comfortable.

We were able to do that, and the really cool thing about it is that family support component. They started doing outreach events, and you mentioned earlier where the family was going bike riding, and then you had that adapted bike class where their child could learn how to ride a bike. The events that we're able to go to with EFMP made it so that our entire family could go.

We're in that same scenario now, same scenario we were then, is that one of the parents will go take the other three children to go to the movies or to Dave & Buster's or whatever, and then the other parent would stay home, or even with travel. A good example, my wife went to her sister's wedding this year, and she took the other children, and I stayed home with our young one, and being able to go to these events as a family was amazing.

We got to see service dogs in training with Semper K9. We got to have luncheons. You guys had children's activities. There were activities that everybody in the family could do, so I could walk around my little one, and we could participate, and it was just great, and getting involved, feeling comfortable, and everything was just such an immeasurable experience.

- **[Jen Wong]** I really like two things that you just mentioned. Well, first, if I could back up, you mentioned that your leadership had said, "Hey, go enroll in EFMP," and I actually do like hearing that because it means folks are aware of the program, what it is, who's eligible.

So, whether you're single, and you don't have any dependents, or whether you're in a leadership role, whatever role that is, knowing how to take care of the people to your left and right and refer them where they need to go. You didn't know about EFMP, and you got referred to it, right?

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah.

- **[Jen Wong]** So, then, that way, with your youngest child, you knew the next time around, hey, now I know what this is. I can enroll my daughter now. So, that's pretty awesome.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Exactly, and I would also like to say that, around the time that we enrolled our daughter, we would have annual training every year, and that's when the Education Office would come over from Henderson Hall. I remember the EFMP brief, and I think that it was so useful because, just like you said, you're going to have a lot of marines, sailors, soldiers, airmen that are single or they have children, and none of them have needs or disabilities, that won't know about this resource, but they're going

to have a junior marine that has a child that has these special needs, and they need that outlet.

They need those resources, and so for them to be able to sit in this brief and see that, "Oh, this program is available," just fills their toolbox with the knowledge that they can impart on their younger marines.

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely, absolutely, and there was something else that you said in your whole journey, working with the program, and I love how you made it a two-way street, right? So, you mentioned that EFMP reached out to you to say, "Hey, what's going on? Let's look at your paperwork, but let's also talk about you and your family," but, then, you made it a common occurrence to say, "Hey, let's go to the exchange and stop by and say 'Hi' to the EFMP folks."

You kind of made that two-way street to build that relationship, and showing up to the events, and getting engaged, not only with the professionals at the program, but also the other families that are there too.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah. I mean, I had no idea until one of the ... it was probably the first or second EFMP event that we went to, that there were a few other marines in my battalion that were also members of EFMP, knowing that they were there, it's kind of indescribable. I mean, it's not like you're part of a secret club or anything, right, but knowing that there are other people going through the same thing as you, it opens up the dialogue between you and them as well.

There was an admin officer that is currently ... well, he was stationed over here, and he knew I was coming over here because we retired, and we were still able to see each other over here.

The relationship that we built over there continued over here years apart because we had this commonality, and them being new to the island gave us the opportunity to help them out around the island.

It's the same thing with those resources that we're sharing and becoming comfortable. The relationships we formed with the families at EFMP lasts longer than your current duty station. It lasts years and years.

- **[Jen Wong]** That's awesome. That's awesome to hear that you were able to get that from the program, and then, also, I know a lot of families are able to build those relationships on the installation, off the installation, with civilian organizations, and even online there's a lot of great support groups and message boards or places to meet other individuals or families online.

With the combination of it all, you kind of start creating this village around your family to support your family, and you're sharing knowledge, you're sharing resources, and you're really empowering each other to, like you said earlier, have that voice.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, and with that village, I just kind of want to talk about it's like we were around people who just got it, you know? We didn't have to worry about

our children melting down, screaming or crying, saying that they're just done doing diaper changes, or like, hey, one family might recognize that, "Oh, mom and dad need a couple minutes, so let's ... Hey, I got your child for a couple minutes. Why don't you guys just go outside, take a breath, then come back in," and that is all encompassing of that building a village.

By having that village, it creates this sense of empowerment, and that empowerment leads you to be able to advocate more. You start reading more. You start asking more questions. You gain confidence because you're in a safe space to begin that journey towards advocating for your child, and then, even sometimes, for yourself.

A great example of that village is the Marine Corps is very big on celebrating our birthday, Nov. 10, 1775, and if there's one thing we know how to do as Marines, it's have a good birthday party.

Now, as much as it is mandatory to go, we want to go, but that's also an event where we want to bring all of our family members with us. We want them to be as proud of the Marine Corps birthday as we are of the birthday, but as our younger children with needs get a little bit older, it's not as feasible to bring our entire family because of those meltdowns I was talking about earlier, or the child not wanting to be there. We don't want to interrupt the ceremony, all of the pomp and circumstance.

One of the best memories I have of our EFMP experience in Virginia was that we had a cake-cutting ceremony for the EFMP families. The CO of, I think it was, Henderson Hall came in. He read General Lejeune's birthday message. We cut the cake, we had a dance, we had food and it was such a good time.

I love seeing those pictures pop up in my Facebook memories every year because it was a time where all five of us, of our family, were able to enjoy an event that I hold really dear, and although we couldn't have attended the battalion ceremony that year, thinking back, it's like I didn't have to worry about that because I was able to take part in this ceremony.

That was one of the biggest areas that we felt the most support from our EFMP team, as well as all those family members. It's like you guys understood it. You took something that Marines hold dear, and you put it into a format that our families could participate in. It's just like, sometimes, I don't even realize that the pieces are starting to fall in place, and that everything is connecting.

- **[Jen Wong]** Yeah, and I bet that was really special for your wife and the kids as well, not getting a sitter or not worrying about so many other pieces to be able to go there and have that special memory for everybody.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, and that was also the time I had just got injured, so I was in crutches. I was in a cast on my leg ...

- **[Jen Wong]** Oh, no!

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** ... and so I can't put my dress blues on, but I was able to put on a nice shirt and tie with my crutches and still take part in the ceremony with our family, so it was great.

- **[Jen Wong]** That sounds like such an amazing family event, and you mentioned just feeling so safe and like building confidence when you're surrounded by like-minded folks at these events. The last installation I was at in Japan, I saw a lot of events for adults as well because we do have adults who are enrolled in EFMP, and so there were some adult events, and I saw the same thing.

I saw attendees getting together in the safe space and just really gaining confidence, sharing those resources, and then a couple of them ended up coming out to the family events just to volunteer. Even if they didn't have kids, it was a way to have something to do, meet other people, give back, and so it's really exceptional for anyone, whether it's an adult or a child, really.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, and talking about the village, I was talking to my wife yesterday, and she reminded me of this story, so I need to make sure that I mention it. One of the EFMP events we went to, Semper K9 was there, and we got to see the puppies in training. Now, after my injury, mobility became a severe issue for me, and I ended up getting a service dog through Semper K9.

- **[Jen Wong]** Wow.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Now, the funny thing about this is that your Facebook memories pop up, and we had a Facebook memory pop up with this EFMP event, and my service dog, Kiernan, was one of the puppies that we met. We have a picture of my daughter holding Kiernan, and this is probably a year before I got Kiernan.

- **[Jen Wong]** No way!

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** So, well, one, Semper K9 was great, and I love Kiernan, but that's one of those resources that EFMP was able to provide. It's like, when I was thinking, I was like, "OK, I really need a service dog. There're just a lot of mobility issues that I could use some assistance with," they were the first people to pop into my head, and had I not seen them at this EFMP event, I wouldn't have known about them, so it's a small world, but a big world at the same time.

- **[Jen Wong]** True, true, and it's so awesome, like how you said earlier about you don't even realize the pieces are falling together. We started this conversation about knowledge, knowing the law, knowing the policy, and then we kind of talked about the abundance of resources that are out there.

Then, we talked about the relationship building and then how each of those things help empower you, help you have this voice, and help you in this advocacy journey, but it sounds like, for you, there's no particular order to these things.

It sounds like, for you, it kind of started with the relationships, and then, from there, through those relationships, you kind of learned about the laws and the policy and the resources, it sounds like.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, exactly, and you can only learn so much from reading the policy. I'm a very practical application type of person, and I feel that reaching out to those that you can build relationships with not only helps you understand the information that you've been reading a little bit more, but you can hear it in action through stories, through situations and scenarios.

The building the relationships thing was huge for us. It's like, I like to have people in my network to help answer those questions, to fill in the who, what, when, where, why and how for me and for my family. For example, what is the resource? Well, why do I need it? Who or where do I go to, to access this resource? Then, from that point, it's like, OK, well, how do I accomplish this? Then, when do you recommend me doing that? Like, where on the timeline does this fall? Is this something that I can wait on, or is it something that I need to get done sooner rather than later?

- **[Jen Wong]** Yep.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** It's like, when we started this journey, for us, that was the last step, but in learning more, it's transitioned into the first step. The family becoming more open and putting ourselves out there ... Like I said, sometimes you just have to go in, you have to lay it all on the table, and, "Hey, this is my story. All right. Now that you know my story, where do we go from here?"

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely, and like you said, you can only read so much in building your baseline knowledge. I don't know about you, but, for me, word of mouth means a lot. Hearing it from somebody else who's experienced it or used it, or they recommend it, that means a lot to me, too.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, and that was something that we were able to do at those EFMP events. Like, once all the parents got down and were sitting together and we just started talking, it's like, "Oh, well, my child's getting ready to transition from early intervention into pre-K, so I know that the IFSP is going to turn into an IEP. What do you recommend?" They're like, "Oh, well, we just went through this situation two years ago. This is what you do. If they can't help you, then, this is who I contacted."

I think, at one point, we ended up creating a Facebook group for the EFMP parents of Henderson Hall, so instead of just meeting once a month and kind of getting together and asking these questions, we created a forum where, whenever that question popped into your head, you could ask it, and someone would reply, and so that was great.

- **[Jen Wong]** That's so awesome. That's awesome. So, Jonathan, while you were learning about the policy, the law, all the resources out there, and building those relationships and those networks, you probably had to stay pretty organized and prioritize in order to stay on track with your advocacy for you and your family, it sounds like.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Yeah, and, on top of that, staying organized and prioritizing, it doesn't only apply to when you have your PCS move every few years. For example, for us, as retirees, there's a lot more planning that needs to be done. Not only are we dealing with every aspect of the military transition, we also have to think about our family transition. So, what's the transition going to look like from this school district to my final move? Is my child's IEP, Individualized Education Program, or 504 Plan, is it written in a manner that can be understood? Do we need to have that meeting before we go? Thinking about that, if we're dealing with a child that is in early intervention program, they have what's called IFSP or Individualized Family Service Plan, that needs to be transitioned into that IEP, so these are things that you may need to call that extra meeting for in order to ensure that smooth transition.

Another thing we have to think about as retirees is that we no longer have access to ECHO, which is the Extended Care Health Option, and what that provides us is a very low-cost solution to getting durable medical equipment.

For instance, my daughter was growing. We needed a new wheelchair. She had grown out of her old one. We needed a good bed for her, so she ended up getting a hospital bed. She needed an activity chair. She needed a stander, and so these were all things that, by using that organizing and prioritizing, we were able to plan ahead.

My wife was on top of it. She's like, "I need to meet with my case manager. These are the 'we need now' things before my husband retires," and so having that checklist because, once you retire, if you're lucky, the hospital can get it for you at cost. If not, then you know all of that's out of pocket.

So, when it's time for retirement or PCS, and whether that's by choice or, hey, it's your time to leave the military, you want to make sure that you're thinking of those family needs as well. So, by organizing those thoughts, by having a folder with timelines, the needs and necessities that are coming up, you can stay ahead of those expected changes, and you'll ultimately be prepared for the unexpected ones.

Sharing a personal story, we were retiring, and we were looking for the needs for the next few years, and, like I said, my wife was able to do that. Our relationships hadn't ended yet, and so we were still able to get that information about resources and were able to project out the benefits that are available.

- **[Jen Wong]** That makes a lot of sense, and what you said about planning for short-range and long-range priorities in your transition ... You talked about ECHO no longer being available, so you have to go in and research and reach out to your network and say, "Hey, what's out there?" whether it's the folks at the hospital, "Is it Medicaid Waivers? Is it some sort of community-based program? What's available?"

I know we sort of talk a little bit about this in some of our other episodes, about financial planning or transitioning out of the military, and so some resources to consider would be those other podcast episodes as well as the SCOR, the Special Care Organizational Record, which is available on Military OneSource to download. It's a great tool to be able to organize those educational and medical records, and when you

really see it all there on paper or on the screen laid out, it really does help you do that short-range and long-range planning. Another example would be on EFMP & Me, there's that Separation and Retirement Checklist.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** A good example of using the Separation and Retirement Checklist would be as if we were applying a patrol order, or in the Marine Corps, you say BAMCIS, and what that means is Begin the planning, arrange reconnaissance, make reconnaissance, complete the planning, issue the order and supervise.

- **[Jen Wong]** Oh, wow.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** So, that's something that you can pull from the military. That's something that we have access to, and we're good at, and apply it to something that's going on in daily life. Begin the planning. OK, we know we're transitioning here pretty soon. Arrange reconnaissance. OK, now, we're arranging our resources and trying to get things in order, and then you just follow those steps, and once you've done those, now, it's a supervisory position. I've done everything that I need to do. Now, I just need to see it happen.

- **[Jen Wong]** That's great. I had no idea about that, Jonathan, but that's a great example of how you can transition those military skills into the civilian life with your advocacy. I've got to ask you, Jonathan, as we wrap this up, what final pieces of advice could you offer to our listeners on this topic?

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Ask questions. Ask a lot of questions. It's the only way we're going to learn, and the only way that we're going to be able to advocate. Keep on growing your village. Your village doesn't stop at your duty station. That village will still be there. You can still reach back, but, at the same time, you're expanding it and moving it forward, and not only is that village growing to support you, your village is growing to support others.

There's going to be someone in your shoes at some point that has these same questions that you have, that now you have the knowledge that you can share. I had a gunny while I was in who was saying, "You have to pick up those gold nuggets and put them in your pouch, so, that way, you can take them out and shine them up for another day," and this applies to the knowledge that we have.

It's like, OK, I'm going to put it in my pack, and I'm going to hold onto this because I remember it. Someday, I'm going to need it, and when I need it, I'll just reach into that pack, pull it out, shine it up, and at that point, I'm able to share it.

Finally, make sure that you have a sounding board to speak to people to find what you need.

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely, absolutely, and I know our listeners will benefit so much from what you've spoken about today and your advice. I do want to say to our listeners, thank you for joining us. Please continue to grow your village, connect with others, share the resources like this podcast and the links associated with this podcast so that others may benefit as well.

Make sure to visit EFMP & Me. I mentioned earlier there were some particular checklists about special education, but there are checklists on a variety of topics. There's one called Advocating on Behalf of Your Child. There's one about building a support system, organizing for success, getting assistance, even what is EFMP? So, there's a lot of information on there as well as in the other podcast episodes.

You'll see a lot of common themes out there to assist all of our listeners. So, connect with your family support provider and start to grow your village, and, again, Jonathan, thank you so much for joining us today.

- **[Jonathan Alexander]** Thank you very much.

- **[Jen Wong]** You've been listening to a podcast for families enrolled in EFMP brought to you by the Office of Special Needs and Military OneSource. Come back to catch our episode on Family and Community Life. I'm Jen Wong. Thanks for listening.