

MCFP OSN EFMP Podcast Season 2 Episode 3 Family and Community Life Transcript

Transcript:

- **[Jen Wong]** Let's say you're a military spouse, completely new to military life or new to EFMP. How do you even begin to navigate and find support through all the changes of military life? We're going to talk about that and more in this podcast for families enrolled in EFMP.

I'm Jen Wong and today we're talking about family and community life.

- **[Jen Wong]** Hi, and welcome to the EFMP & Me podcast series 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 a variety of topics that can be further explored by visiting EFMP & Me on Military OneSource. EFMP & Me is a digital tool that provides valuable topics, resources and checklists related to the Exceptional Family Member Program, and this is available to service members, families, service providers, leaders 24/7.

- **[Jen Wong]** In today's episode, we will be talking about family and community life in the military, and knowing the available resources to tackle and overcome challenges and find ways to live your best MilLife. I'm so excited to welcome Erika Slaton to today's discussion. Thank you for joining us, Erika. And could you tell us a little more about yourself?

- **[Erika Slaton]** Absolutely, Jen. First of all, thank you so much for inviting me to this podcast. As you mentioned, my name is Erika Slaton, and I am the Director for Military Community Support Programs, which is an office within Military Community and Family Policy. I have the pleasure of managing and overseeing three centralized quality of life programs, many of which we're going to talk about today. The first is the Military and Family Life Counseling program that provides more than 2,500 licensed counselors and locations worldwide.

- **[Erika Slaton]** The second is the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program, which is a virtual career center that helps military spouses achieve their career and education goals. And then lastly is Military OneSource, which is the Department of Defense's flagship program that provides comprehensive information and assistance to our military community 24/7. I am also the spouse of a retired Marine, so I have firsthand experience with military life and I'm just so happy and blessed to be in a professional role to lead these programs that supported me as a military spouse.

- **[Jen Wong]** That's wonderful. And thanks again, Erika, for joining us. It's great to have you here. Today we're going to discuss, in a broad sense, some stages of military family

life — joining the military community, challenges along the way, and separating from the military lifestyle and moving into the civilian lifestyle. And along the way, we'll discuss scenarios and resources that may be of particular interest, especially to military families with special needs. So, Erika, how about you? Could you tell me a little bit about your start as a military spouse?

- **[Erika Slaton]** Oh, Jen. I sure can. I'm going to tell you, boy, I'm surprised I made it, Jen. And it's not just being a military spouse, but I will share that right after boot camp, I got married and had twins to boot. Okay?

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

- **[Erika Slaton]** I don't know how I survived. And so throw on military life, and oh my goodness. It was a whole new world for me. I had no idea what to expect, and trying to navigate life as a military spouse and then understanding the military with all the acronyms and all the benefits that are available, and then now we're going to move. It was a little bit overwhelming, and then, again, having children, twins to boot, learning how to be a mom, learning how to cook, okay? Look, no judgment. Okay, Jen, but I'm going to tell you the first quote, unquote, "meal" that I cooked for the family. I put some chicken and water with salt, and voila. That emboldened it, and it's like, "Hey, yeah. Bon appetite."

- **[Jen Wong]** Oh.

- **[Erika Slaton]** It was a disaster, but I say all that to say everything was new for me, trying to navigate everything. And by the way, I wasn't living on an installation. So I felt like I was living on my own because I really didn't know anyone. I was miles away from home, so it definitely started out as a bit of a challenge for me.

- **[Jen Wong]** But you made it, though.

- **[Erika Slaton]** I did. I'm still here. I'm still here.

- **[Jen Wong]** You made it, and you know what? I'm sure your story sounds relatable to so many military spouses listening. And you mentioned the newness of it all and the learning curve, and for military families with special needs, there may even be another layer of newness and learning, too. So whether it's a medical need or an educational need, like you mentioned, sometimes there's new lingo to learn and you may not know about the available resources. There could even be a sense of isolation in it all, such as what you experienced living off the installation. And so it's really important to build your support system because we know it's so much easier not to navigate these things alone, right?

- **[Erika Slaton]** Mm-hmm (affirmative). Absolutely.

- **[Jen Wong]** If you could go back in time, knowing what you know now, aside from cooking the chicken differently, which I'm sure you must be a great cook now ...

- **[Erika Slaton]** Maybe.

- [Jen Wong]... what would you do differently, Erika?

- [Erika Slaton] Oh boy. You know that saying, "If I knew then what I know now, I'd be a rich woman." I would be a rich woman maybe, but one of the things that I wish I would have done was to really find out all of the resources that are available to me just as much as I could, and then not only, obviously, keep that to myself, but share it with other new military families because there's just so much out there. And I'll talk specifically about Military OneSource. That program, Military OneSource, it started more than 15 years ago, and so it is so much more robust now just because the program continues to evolve to meet the needs of our military community.

- [Erika Slaton] So, as a military spouse, there's so much that I could have taken advantage of then, but certainly now for military spouses. So one, there's so many specialty consultations that are available to military spouses, and the first one I'll start off with is peer support. And peer support is an opportunity for a military spouse to connect with another military spouse through Military OneSource to just talk about the stresses and challenges of military life, like deployments and frequent relocations. And so, gosh, being able to talk to someone who's been there and done that is huge.

- [Erika Slaton] And then second, there is a specialty consultation that we offer through Military OneSource, specifically for new military parents, and it's for expectant parents and parents of children up to age five. Now our consultants can help military parents with a range of topics, whether it's potty training to sleep issues, and boy, I feel like I didn't sleep for two, three years there. But then also finding time for your own self-care. There's also a spouse toolkit that's available through our Building Healthy Relationships consultations, and that includes a range of topics. And one of the topics that's included in that toolkit is information about military culture, and secondly, building relationships in the military community.

- [Erika Slaton] And then the last thing I'll just share is employment and education assistance is available through Military OneSource as well, and the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program is actually the number one reason why people contact Military OneSource. I would've taken advantage of a \$4,000 non-competitive scholarship, called the My Career Advancement Account scholarship for eligible military spouses to help me pursue a license, associate degree, continuing education credits. There's so much that I would've taken advantage of then, and especially as a military spouse now.

- [Erika Slaton] There's one tip I often give spouses, and I give presentations, like last year I did 50 plus presentations just talking about Military OneSource and a variety of the resources that we offer through Military Community and Family Policy. But one of the things I always say is, "You can use Military OneSource to outsource your to-do list." I mean, you really can. There's so much that Military OneSource can assist you with. So, do you need support around child care? Hey, we have someone who can support finding some resources around child care, resume writing, maybe you need to brush up on your interview skills. You can also use a lot of resources and tools that are available through

the Military OneSource website, like Plan My Move and Military Installations and Plan My Deployment, all of those checklists that are available to help support military spouses.

- **[Erika Slaton]** And then lastly, I would be remiss if I did not talk about MilLife Learning that's available through Military OneSource. There are tons of e-learning videos and training on the Exceptional Family Member Program info. There's MilFam 101 for new military families. There's finances, or actually a module on finances, and boy, my goodness, I will tell you, as in a new military family, it is so important to make wise spending choices. Especially, again, I mentioned the twins, right? So important to take advantage of these training opportunities. And there's Relocation 101, and there's the Morale Welfare and Recreation, or MWR module — that's all there to support military families. So, there's no reason not to learn about these resources because they are all available for free through Military OneSource.

- **[Jen Wong]** Right, right, Erica. And I love those MilLife Learning courses. I can go on there and learn more at my own pace. If something comes up, I just pause the course. I'm logged in. I can go back to it another time and finish up. There's just so much amazing information available through Military OneSource. Like you said, 24/7 on the website, but also by phone or chat or online. I know for families with special needs, Military OneSource has EFMP ROC specialty consultants, you mentioned those consultants earlier. We call them EFMP ROC. ROC stands for resources, options and consultations. And it's because they do just that. They are available 24/7 and they connect you to resources, help you identify the options that are available and provide those one-on-one consultations. And what I really love is they can even do three-way phone calls. So they will often do a three-way phone call with TRICARE or the EFMP Family Support provider who's at the installation. And then you have this whole team who's helping you out, and everyone's all on the same page, just there to support you.

- **[Erika Slaton]** All on the same page, there to support you, how powerful is it to have a team of people in your corner? And one thing about Military OneSource is that Military OneSource augments the support that's available through the military services. So certainly, EFMP ROC consultants are there, but there really is a team there to support military families through any military life situation. So, yeah, absolutely, it is a team approach. We want to make sure that we're supporting our military community on all fronts.

- **[Jen Wong]** Exactly. And that team, it includes everyone on the installation as well. So, families can go and drop by the Military and Family Support Center, and there's so much to learn there about programs, resources, events, even employment opportunities in your local area. There's so much at the center. There are programs where you can meet with other spouses and workshops or luncheons or other activities, and definitely don't discount the events that are also being held virtually, too. Those are so convenient. Stay in your pajamas, log in, and if you have a little extra time, you could think about volunteering to get to know folks, brush up on your skills and make those local connections there on the installation.

- **[Jen Wong]** And so if you haven't been into the Military and Family Support Center, most of them offer personal and family life education, programs for single active-duty, families, spouse groups or clubs, and all sorts of fun groups and clubs, different subcategories, whether it's a book club or fitness, or my last installation had a cooking one. And so lots of great fun activities. And then there's those unit groups, those family readiness groups that often get involved with the Military and Family Support Center as well, and they're offering information about what's going on in the unit, deployment and training information, social activities to get the unit together and the families together, or providing those workshops and those briefs to inform everyone, "What does happen in an emergency? What is the family center where do we go to in an emergency?" or things like that.

- **[Jen Wong]** Like you mentioned, the spouse education and career services, things for new parents, and definitely Exceptional Family Member Program. There's great support there as well. But also there's other great places on the installation, too. Some fun places, most installations may have a gym, bowling alleys, movie theaters, craft shops, libraries. My last installation in the craft shop, they had a 3D printer, and so they had classes you could go in there, make all sorts of cool stuff. But if you want, you can connect with your EFMP Family Support Provider, and they'll connect you to all these folks and all the different available programs on and off the installation. And don't feel like you have to be new in town to go stop by or to pick up the phone and ask. Just pick up the phone today and ask. Even if you've been here for a year or two, and you just haven't connected, you don't have to be new.

- **[Erika Slaton]** Right.

- **[Jen Wong]** But I do remember this one Marine, he would definitely help out the new folks. He would always stop by to chat, and he referred to himself as the self-proclaimed donut guy.

- **[Erika Slaton]** Oh.

- **[Jen Wong]** And there was a group of Marines who worked at a Navy base in Maryland, and their closest Marine base was in Virginia. So although they took advantage of the services on the Navy installation, he always wanted to introduce his new Marines to the Marine Corps family. So when he had a few new Marines, he'd drive them over to our installation and he'd stop by the Military and Family Support Center, and he'd walk them from door to door, and all the different programs would do an introduction, talk about their program, and sometimes even do a one-on-one consultation right there on the spot, if there was a connection or a need. And I really appreciated him for two reasons.

- **[Jen Wong]** One, because he'd even bring the single Marines to the EFMP office so we could tell them about the program. And I really appreciated that because knowledge is key, especially when knowing how to help the person to your left and the person to your right, and I also appreciate him ... Well, one, he brought donuts. He always brought donuts. And while the junior Marines were walking around from door to door, he'd sit in

our office and we'd eat donuts and chat. And you know what? Even he learned more about EFMP, and he even realized that he had a family member with a qualifying need. And so he got enrolled, and they ended up PCSing, I think it was to Camp Lejeune, but he felt at ease knowing that when he did PCS, his wife's new medical condition was going to be supported at the new duty station.

- **[Erika Slaton]** Mm-hmm (affirmative). Wow. I love that story, Jen. It is all about just asking the questions. And I know, specifically, as a military spouse, I'm going to foot stomp this, okay, Jen, because for service members who are married, oh my goodness, it's so important to bring your spouse on the installation to meet people as well and to find out about these programs. I know as a military spouse, I did not learn about many of the programs that are available to me until 13 years into our marriage.

- **[Jen Wong]** Wow.

- **[Erika Slaton]** I don't fault him for it. Maybe I should fault him, and I am sure that there are many programs that he didn't know about either, and so that's why, Jen, I love being a part of this podcast because it gives the opportunity for us to tell people about these great programs, whether they're on an installation, and if they're not on an installation, there's also other resources you can tap into available in the local community. Many people may not know, but we have Military OneSource state consultants. These are an extension of the Military OneSource call center. These state consultants go out and give briefings and presentations on Military OneSource. You may have seen them at a Yellow Ribbon event or a family day, and they can share about, again, not only resources that are available through Military OneSource, but ones that they've identified in the local community to support service members and spouses as well.

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely. I know whenever we had the family days at our installation and all the different resource tables were set up, we'd always ask the Military OneSource folks to come out and bring their information and get an opportunity to face-to-face chat with all the families right there on the installation.

- **[Erika Slaton]** Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

- **[Jen Wong]** Because knowing the resources or getting connected to the people who know the resources is just so helpful in creating this awesome MilLife, right?

- **[Erika Slaton]** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

- **[Jen Wong]** And so it also sounds like it's a family affair. So Erika, what do you think about what's available for the military kids?

- **[Erika Slaton]** Oh boy. Military kids. So I will tell you this, again, being a new military spouse, new mom, I learned real quickly that if my kids were not happy, the family wasn't happy either. So it's important not just to prepare myself, but I had to focus on my kids too. And I remember being new to military life, it's so important to make sure that the kids have the support that they need to ease that transition, and so, goodness, not only the different resources that are available for kids, but activities. You even have the new school. So there's so much that we can do to support our kids.

- **[Erika Slaton]** And I remember, specifically, moving from Missouri to Pennsylvania and we had been in Missouri for quite a bit of time. They were younger then, so it wasn't as bad. But then I remember moving from Pennsylvania to Virginia, and they were much older, and let me tell you, there were tears. There were tears. They did not want to leave Pennsylvania because they had made all these connections. And so for military families, for those who move every few years, it does add a whole new complexity to military life, and I always think about having to sell my home and packing and finding a new place and just the whole move ... Jen, just the whole moving process itself is so stressful. It's just so stressful.

- **[Erika Slaton]** And then for kids, finding new schools for kids and doctors and dentists, that list, it's so long. And then during your military member's career, understanding that sometimes not everybody moves as a family. I know, personally, we made the decision to have us stay in Missouri while my service member PCS'd and moved to different locations. He also went overseas for a stint there, but I wanted my children to be stable for some time, and so they call this geo-bachelor, so he was a geo-bachelor for a little while. And so us, as family members, in one place, and then the service member in another place, that was really challenging. Every family member has to make that decision. It doesn't work for everybody, but it's the decision that we made.

- **[Erika Slaton]** And so making sure that all of the family members stay connected and ensuring that we celebrate those special moments together, birthdays and all the different holidays that occur during the year is just so important to make sure that we stay connected. And so I remember, certainly, even reuniting with my service member when he came back home, that was a challenge in itself as well. I distinctly remember even that reintegration process, it can be challenging for families. And so, specifically for couples, that's where you've got counseling assistance that's available. That reminds me we have a campaign that's called Re the We, specifically for relationships, and what it does is it helps to demystify what couples counseling looks like.

- **[Erika Slaton]** If you think about the Wizard of Oz, "What's he doing behind the curtain? What is he doing back there?" But it pulls back the curtain around what relationship counseling looks like. Counselors, I had mentioned the Military and Family Life counselors who are out there supporting our military community worldwide — we have them on video, through social media, talking about what couples counseling looks like. So it demystifies it and hopefully encourages couples to seek support around their relationship, especially around communication.

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely. And I would think that communication is the key here. Talk to your spouse about what is or isn't working. Talk with the kids and keep them connected and involved in the conversation, and I'm thinking whether it's taking care of you or whether you're a caregiver and you're taking care of your family, enlisting help from your support system, those connections you make and those professionals you meet along the way, like how you just mentioned, the Military Family Life Counselors.

- **[Erika Slaton]** Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, absolutely. It's so important to know about those resources that are available. I mentioned Re the We, which encourages couples and others to seek counseling services. But I remember there was a military spouse who shared with me that every time her child moved to a new location, it just made her child very anxious. So literally, at every move, their family went and sought counseling. And so absolutely counseling, it's a game changer for many people.

- **[Erika Slaton]** I personally have gone through counseling myself, as a family, and it can be such a powerful tool to support the family, and so there's certainly non-medical counseling that's available through Military OneSource, and you can get counseling face to face, video, chat, even by telephone. So there's not only individual counseling, but there's also family counseling to help to relieve those life stressors, and by the way, all for free. And Jen, if I could just take a moment, I want to share a story, if I could.

- **[Jen Wong]** Sure, sure.

- **[Erika Slaton]** So we had a spouse who came to Military OneSource and reported just feeling very overwhelmed after completing her first permanent change of station move or PCS move to a new duty location. So her service member was about to leave for deployment, and she was experiencing challenges in locating services for her two children with autism. Now this was during a time, at the height of COVID, where there were many closures and service limitations and stuff. She was really having a hard time connecting with her family center on base.

- **[Erika Slaton]** So again, she called Military OneSource and got connected with our EFMP ROC special needs consultant, explained what she was looking for, and the EFMP ROC special needs consultant explained what services were available, like applied behavioral analysis, or ABA, and they conducted a three-way call to TRICARE to confirm eligibility and locate providers. And then the consultant also contacted the EFMP Family Support provider at the spouse's installation and conducted a warm transfer. So earlier we were talking about that team of people, right?

- **[Jen Wong]** Exactly.

- **[Erika Slaton]** And so that's where Military OneSource can really help make those connections, and so the EFMP ROC special needs consultant also located local support groups for parents of children with autism and linked the spouse to a support group for spouses of deployed service members, and they all met virtually. This is what I love about virtual now is that you really can be anywhere in the world and meet with people. And after a month, the spouse thanked the EFMP ROC special needs consultant for really just having been there, and she reported feeling a lot more confident in making this new place their home. And so she also confirmed that her boys were scheduled to receive autism services in just a few weeks. So, again, it's all about the connections, asking for help and just knowing what resources are available.

- **[Jen Wong]** That makes me so happy to hear, Erika. I think that story really reaffirms who the EFMP ROC special needs consultants are, that they're an extension of Family Support, and they work as a team with the EFMP Family Support providers on the

installation and other providers, like how you mentioned, at TRICARE. So you're right, there's a lot going on during a PCS, there's a lot going on for military families with special needs, especially during that PCS. Moving is chaotic and stressful, but you know there are things you just have to put in place. You just have to. There's setting up medical care, there's setting up schools, childcare, you name it. But there's some great resources out there to help — EFMP & Me has checklists.

- **[Jen Wong]** I love checklists. I always feel like I know I'm going to forget something when there's so much going on. That's me. And so a checklist is so great. It's better than the Post-It notes I have all over my kitchen table. The checklist will really help you stay organized, and also on Military OneSource, there's an Education Directory for Children With Special Needs, and you can look up the special education resources where you are now or where you're moving to, and there's also a helpful article on Military OneSource about advanced enrollment.

- **[Jen Wong]** So, that's where several states have signed on to let military families enroll their children in school, in advance, without having that proof of residency yet, and that's particularly really important for military families if they have children with individualized education programs or IEPs, to be able to make sure there's a smooth transition of those special education services. And for sure, those EFMP Family Support providers, they're rocking it, they're rocking it at the installation.

- **[Jen Wong]** If the family wants, they can reach out to their EFMP Family Support provider and ask for help during that move, just, "Hey, we know we have these orders. This is where we're going," and they can work together with that provider for PCS transition assistance in the form of a warm handoff to the gaining installation. And so they're going to get connected with the professionals like the next EFMP Family Support provider, maybe the school liaison, or the professionals who are on the ground to provide that information and support about child care or employment. It's so great to be able to start setting that up in advance and know you're already making those connections and building that team before you even get there.

- **[Erika Slaton]** Mm-hmm (affirmative). Jen, my goodness, I mean, we just talked about so many different resources. There's so much out there, and I will tell you, one of the biggest hurdles that we need to overcome is really getting the word out about these various resources that are available to military family members.

- **[Jen Wong]** Right.

- **[Erika Slaton]** We found that families who learn about systems in place and take advantage of them, they really are thriving in military life, and so there really is help available for every stage of military life. So again, we've got to get this word out, Jen, and it just really, again, thank you so much for this opportunity to be a part of this, to talk about those resources.

- **[Jen Wong]** Right, right. Absolutely. And it's like the donut guy I mentioned earlier. I love that he got his Marines in the door. Now the next step is it's on you to keep it up. Sign up for those email lists, follow on social media, read the eNewsletter, or stop by

again because I've noticed the programs are constantly evolving. So you don't want to miss out on new program enhancements, connections or opportunities, even EFMP has evolved. I was talking to Jonathan in just the last episode of this podcast series, and he mentioned how his family experience with EFMP changed over the years.

- **[Jen Wong]** He saw the program evolve and his experience changed, and he talked about building that relationship, showing up and talking about his family. And he mentioned how his two youngest were enrolled in the program, but it's not like he only talked about them and only talked about their appointments. He talked about his injury and how he had a medical retirement coming up, and just things that were going on in his military life. And so EFMP was able to provide a warm handoff to where he was going to move to for retirement and connect him to those resources that maybe he hadn't considered because there was just so much going on for him and his family at the time.

- **[Erika Slaton]** Yeah. Oh my goodness. Talk about so much going on with regard to transition out of the military. I remember when my husband came to me and said, "I just dropped my retirement papers," and I was like, "What, what, what, what? Hold on a second. What are you talking about? I'm just now really in a groove and-"

- **[Jen Wong]** I got it now.

- **[Erika Slaton]** "I got these resources, and now you tell me you're getting out? What's going on here?" Boy, but that transition is never too early to start planning. In fact, many experts suggest that you start planning for a transition when you enter the military and keep updating your plan throughout your service just because of what you said, things continue to evolve, and your programs and services continue to evolve, and if you are a family who's enrolled in EFMP, future planning may be even more important. And so now when you're just out a couple years from your transition, we encourage you, start talking to people and exploring transition resources to help you firm up your plan, and please don't forget, Military OneSource is still available to support our military families up to one year after transition.

- **[Jen Wong]** That's perfect advice, Erika. And we actually get to talk with Melinda in the next episode, and I know we'll delve into separation and retirement transition even further, and there's definitely more information with those checklists on EFMP & Me, too. And so Erika, this has been a great discussion. That was an awesome ride. I definitely learned something new as we followed your journey joining the military spouse community, and then I don't want to say leaving the military spouse community because you never really leave it. Those connections are forever, but I'll say transitioning to a new civilian lifestyle.

- **[Erika Slaton]** Yes, absolutely. We've come full circle, Jen.

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely. Erika, this has been a great discussion. And again, thank you for joining me today and just sharing your knowledge and your resources and your firsthand experience of military life. I'm sure many of our listeners can definitely relate.

- **[Erika Slaton]** Jen, I hope so. And again, thank you so much for the opportunity. We talked about so many different resources as a part of this podcast, and I just want to remind those who are listening that Military OneSource is available 24/7, no matter what the need is. If you don't even know where to start, you can certainly start with Military OneSource, and we'll get you connected, whether that's to the installation, or maybe that's a resource that's available in the local community, but it starts with just the ask, and you know what? We'll answer, Jen. So again, thank you so much for the opportunity.

- **[Jen Wong]** Absolutely. And that's a great parting piece of advice. I highly recommend going on Military OneSource and even checking out EFMP & Me because there are some great checklists to visit for more information related to today's topics, and that includes checklists about advocating on behalf of your child, building a support system, organizing for success, getting assistance, and what is EFMP and how can it help? So there's so many checklists on EFMP & Me. Please go check those out.

- **[Jen Wong]** I want to thank our listeners for tuning in today. Please continue to grow your village, connect with others, and share resources like this podcast to those you think may benefit. And make sure to connect with your EFMP Family Support provider to make those connections and grow that village. Again, I want to thank Erika for being such a fabulous guest in today's episode, and please tune in next time.

- **[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 Preparing for Separation or Retirement. I'm Jen Wong. Thanks for listening.