

Office of Special Needs EFMP Podcast — Exceptional Family Member Program Standardization Background and Summary

Office of Special Needs

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the Office of Special Needs EFMP podcast. This is an official podcast of the Defense Department. I'm Bruce Moody, glad to have you with us.

The Defense Department recently published a new policy that ensures support provided to families with special needs is consistent from service to service. We'll break that down in this episode. There's a lot going on here, so we brought in a colleague to help us through this. This is actually somebody who helped write this new policy. Jen Wong is with the department's Office of Special Needs. Jen, it's great to have you with the podcast.

Jen Wong:

Thanks for having me, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

Yes. So let's get right into it because there is indeed a lot going on here, but let's kind of look back. Give us a brief history. What is the background of the Exceptional Family Member Program?

Jen Wong:

Sure, no problem Bruce. I can give a quick rundown of what's EFMP and how we got to where we are today.

EFMP is the Defense Department program that supports military families with special medical or educational needs. And EFMP actually began primarily as an assignments program back in the day. The program's main function was to determine if specialty medical care was going to be available for active-duty family members at a gaining installation so the military could effectively move its service members where the mission needed them, while also taking into consideration the needs of the family. And we call this assignment coordination.

So you can imagine that naturally the next step was to ensure that along with assignment coordination, families were receiving the necessary family support, so that led to the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act, or the 2010 NDAA. And that required a policy and oversight office be stood up, and that's the Office of Special Needs. That's OSN where I work, and for family support services to be offered to meet families' unique needs.

Well each branch of service facilitated EFMP with some variances to meet their own service's unique mission and needs. And this could be confusing for families. So fast-forward to the NDAA of 2021, that then requires that EFMP become more standardized across the services. So OSN and leaders and subject matter experts from all branches of service worked together collaboratively to identify some of those pain points we've heard from families. Where are the significant variances? Where could there be more transparency? How can we drill down some specifics in the policy so when EFMP is carried out, families know what to expect and they encounter a more similar experience no matter where they are.

So from this work, the policy, which is DODI 131519, the DOD instruction, was updated, enhancements were made to EFMP, and the policy was reissued June 2023.

And so I would say families should know two things. The first thing is that those enhancements to EFMP, they're not going to happen overnight. It's a rolled-out approach, so we are trying to make this as seamless as possible for families. And number two, families should know that the work doesn't stop here. Standardization isn't a one-time thing, and then we're done. Standardization is a process of continuous improvement to meet families where they are. And Bruce, we're prepared to put that work out.

Bruce Moody:

So one of the things that we're going to revisit is the way it will feel to military families, this gradual change versus waking up and finding that a new policy has changed everything. It is a very gradual approach as you mentioned, but the areas of changes, I kind of want to tick through the general categories of changes with you, and let's start with identification and enrollment. Talk to us about those two issues and what this new policy brings to it.

Jen Wong:

Sure Bruce, I can give a quick highlight of some of the changes and enhancements. And I'll actually take a step further, I'll talk about enrollment and disenrollment hand in hand.

So enrollment into EFMP, or disenrollment from the program, for those two areas it was more about standardizing the processes. So both the enrollment and the disenrollment process are transparently laid out in visual process maps in the policy, in the DODI 131519, which I personally love. It's great to see that visual graphic to see where the process takes you through enrollment or disenrollment. And what this means for families is that these standard processes should result in a more consistent and streamlined experience for families who are enrolling or disenrolling from EFMP.

Bruce Moody:

OK, so let's move on to another thing, and this is really important for a lot of people. CONUS assignment coordination. And for those who don't know CONUS, it just simply means the Continental United States. So get into assignment coordination if you would.

Jen Wong:

Sure. And with CONUS assignment coordination, same thing. There's also a visual process map in the policy, and it will show the standard process across the services for that assignment coordination. And this is going to allow for greater visibility for families into the process. They'll see what the process is comprised of, they'll see the reason for possible travel nonrecommendations, and whether the PCS is recommended or not recommended, there is also a standard option to request a standard review.

Bruce Moody:

Got it, OK. And how about Family Support?

Jen Wong:

Yes. So Family Support was enhanced by clarifying the language so families know what to expect from Family Support and know that they'll be connected to an EFMP Family Support provider to assist their family with their concerns, goals or even a warm handoff to a gaining installation during a PCS.

Bruce Moody:

And finally, can you get into respite care?

Jen Wong:

EFMP Respite Care is now a standardized program across the services, and so there's been updates to how respite care eligibility is determined for each family, and also a standard number of allotted hours across the services.

Bruce Moody:

All right, so those are the changes, that's what the policy is bringing. But how do these changes improve the experience for families who are enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program?

Jen Wong:

So what we hope is that these enhancements to the program contribute towards families having a more positive experience with EFMP through transparency, communication, and a more standard user experience overall. Transparency built into the policy and built into the program means that families will know how things work and what they can expect from the program. And that communication is built in at various touch points in EFMP. So whether it's EFMP Family Support reaching out after families enroll in the program, or whether it's communication about a decision for assignments, there's various touch points of communication built in.

And on that, communication's also a two-way street, so it's not just EFMP reaching out to the service member to notify them of something, it's also situations like the service member having that conversation about a PCS decision, and requesting that second review so they can advocate for their family's needs. Or it's a family reaching out to their EFMP Family Support provider to discuss their family needs or goals, or maybe participate in a family needs assessment. So really we just want to ensure that families know what to expect. They have open channels of communication, they're connected with their Family Support providers, and they're equipped to advocate for their family, whether it's during a PCS, requesting respite care or whatever the family needs at the time.

Bruce Moody:

Now this, just to get into this a little bit more, this is a big change. This is really quite new for people. And to be honest this was a pain point that was addressed where families felt like EFMP was talking to them, not really listening. So what was the situation before and where are we now?

Jen Wong:

Absolutely. So it's been an evolution of the program, moving from assignments to incorporating family support, to then incorporating feedback about how the program can grow to meet families where they are. And so through the evolution of that process that sort of took us to where we are today to updating the policy, enhancing the program, and trying to make those positive changes for families. And it's a top priority and it's continuous. So like I said earlier, it doesn't just stop here.

What's great is that with some of these new program enhancements also came new opportunities to collect some data for monitoring, for oversight. That data is going to help us drive changes to continue to enhance the program and make sure we're effectively meeting families' needs. But honestly, it's not just about the data, we want to hear from families too. And so there's a variety of ways to provide feedback, whether it's through Military OneSource, or through your branch of service, or speaking with your local EFMP provider. So I do encourage listeners to continue on with this series, listen to each episode that goes into more detail, breaking down some of the program enhancements. And in that final episode we'll go more into a little bit about monitoring and oversight, which is family feedback and what's to come in the future.

Bruce Moody:

And talk a little bit about that. What is on the horizon, and how it is that you'll be bringing all this monitoring and feedback into the next iteration of support to military families.

Jen Wong:

So we want to keep transparency and communication at the forefront of our minds as we're looking at this incremental rolled-out approach to enhancing the program. And while we're enacting some of these current enhancements, we're already forward-thinking for the next enhancements. We're already thinking about OK, how can we listen to families? How can we find out how this is affecting families, and how can we do that continuous improvement to the program moving forward? So it's really cyclical and it's really us listening to families.

Bruce Moody:

Where can listeners find additional information or support about the Exceptional Family Member Program?

Jen Wong:

For more information or support, the first stop I would recommend is your installation EFMP Family Support provider. They are a go-to to ask any questions about the policy, about EFMP, and about support available to your family.

You can also contact Military OneSource directly by phone, or set up a live chat. And you can also visit the really helpful EFMP and Me digital tool that's on Military OneSource. And that's at efmpandme.militaryonesource.mil. And as I mentioned earlier Bruce, I would encourage listeners to tune back in, to listen to the other episodes in the Office of Special Needs EFMP podcast series, and that's on Military OneSource or on your favorite streaming app.

Bruce Moody:

Well Jen Wong, thank you so much for joining us today, and we'll be back to continue this conversation.

Jen Wong:

Absolutely. Thanks so much Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

And thank you. And you are listening to the Office of Special Needs EFMP podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening. We look forward to your feedback. We have a link in the program notes. You can send us your thoughts, questions, and be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.