

Military OneSource Podcast — Where Military Families Can Go for Emergency Assistance

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. Today we're talking with Donna Huffman. She is with the Air Force's Personnel Center, where she is the chief of Airmen and Family Readiness Operations Division. We'll talk about how military personnel can be more prepared for emergencies by educating themselves on how to get assistance if they're impacted by a disaster, or about to be. Donna, welcome to the podcast.

Donna Huffman:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me today, Bruce, and for that great introduction.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you. Glad to have you with us. Let's begin by getting you to tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you do.

Donna Huffman:

Yeah, perfect. So as you shared, I'm fortunately able to lead a great team of folks across the military and family readiness world. We have many, many legislative program areas, 15 to be exact. And, of course, emergency assistance being one of those is critical, as you can imagine, the impact that we can have on our military members and their families. So for the past 20 years I've been involved in the emergency assistance arena. It's quite a passion. People laugh at me, but I am not kidding you, I often refer to myself as a crisis junkie, not because it's good stuff, but it is good stuff when you get to really assist and support those members and families who are impacted by natural or man-made disaster events. We get to connect people and guide folks at their greatest time of need, so I'm really passionate about that and our prevention efforts at an operational level.

We do a lot of training, we provide a lot of guidance and execution plans to the field. When I say the field, I mean our military and family readiness centers across the world really to help to develop skills that develop resiliency and ensure that folks are ready when they need to be.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, that's fantastic. Well, clearly we're talking with the right person. So Donna, you do work with the Air Force, but can we say that the things that we're going to be talking about today are found across the services, that it's basically purple? It's not just Air Force.

Donna Huffman:

Absolutely. You're absolutely correct. Even when we look at systems, we still have a few stovepipes, but it's no man left behind. When folks come into our centers in need, we're there to support them. And the good thing is our family centers cross-collaborate a lot, so they know who to reach out to best support you. If we need to engage with the Navy or the Army or the Marine Corps, we have our POCs, we're all well connected, so it absolutely can be considered a purple form.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, that's right. And you guys are all connected. There's family support centers, and they're at all the different services, and they go by different names. And probably families know them because that's where you go for help during the time of a move or if you're getting ready for a deployment. If spouses are working on their career goals, they do a lot of stuff. Maybe lesser known among the things that they do is emergency family assistance, hence the podcast. So just a general high level why we do it, what's the purpose of family support centers providing emergency family assistance?

Donna Huffman:

Excellent question and so timely, because we're in a season where we can see a lot of winter storms and impacts on folks, but really to just lay it out there what we really do is preparedness, support, sustainment, and get folks returned to their location, their home station if an evacuation had to occur. So I love this. We'll call this podcast part of our pre-training, pre-awareness, know what you need to know before you're hit with something adverse. So our military family readiness centers across the world, regardless of what the folks call them, what the services call them, they're there to promote short- and long-term recovery, all the way to get folks back to normal or a new normal if that's necessary. So the teams deliver a lot of pre-disaster and preparedness training. They're required to do that. They offer support during an event. And of course, after a natural or man-made disaster, everybody's standing by to help them in some way, shape or form.

Our centers have quite a role in making sure that everybody's offered those tools of resilience to cope and to know how to respond to things, sometimes traumatic or disruptive life events, and some of the real-world events that come to mind that you may be familiar with, Bruce, would be the different typhoons and hurricanes that often occur around the world. We've seen Hurricane

Michael was a big one down on the Florida coast, the panhandle of Florida, or maybe I've been fortunate but unfortunate enough to be part of a big event in Japan years ago where they were affected by a nuclear disaster, typhoon and tsunami all at the same time. We've had recent aircraft incidences. Crisis could be internal to the family. It could be a unit going through something could be that aircraft incident, or it could be a natural disaster. So at the end of the day, we just want to make sure that everyone has the training that they need and all the information and that they can have in their hip pocket so that they're ready to roll and know who's there to provide them support.

Bruce Moody:

That's a great term, have it in the hip pocket. So let's focus on the before. What do you do with families before a disaster?

Donna Huffman:

So we meet people where they are, but where we really like to get you is maybe at a newcomer's orientation where we start talking about maybe the kinds of things that impact that local area. If you're coming to join us in the Midwest, then you might want to know what kind of stuff you should or could have ready for tornado warnings. If you're going to join us in Okinawa, you might want to have some information about typhoon season. If you're at Keesler, you might want to know about the storms that rush through there. So just varying forms. So what we do here at operations is we provide some standardized training tools for our center staff at each installation to provide to their community members to know that if you're in the overseas locations, you might want to have a kit if you have to evacuate, or what do I need to have for paperwork to be ready to roll.

If I'm on the coast, I could potentially be impacted by a hurricane. What are the things that I can have to gather if we can't get to the store, if we can't get to the car? So food and items like that that need to be protected, maybe documents that are important to the family. So just how to be ready for the "in case it happens" rule. Anything that can reduce effects of a negative life-altering event, we want you to be ready for it. So we target them from the minute they get to the installation all the way through. We offer lots of workshops and planning sessions. We have unit military members that can support us in the effort and make sure that the families in the units are ready too. So we'll do whatever it takes to get it done. And I'd like to think that the training that we build and provide for execution is actually working, and I think it is.

Bruce Moody:

Once the training is complete, let's jump ahead to the disaster or an emergency of some sort. What does family support look like during a disaster?

Donna Huffman:

So during a disaster is a little bit crazy because it just depends on the level of a potential evacuation. So when you take a storm, usually there's a big evacuation order and folks leave the area, and that could in fact include our center staff. We do have some emergency-essential or

mission-essential folks that could potentially stay behind. Maybe the military members stay behind, our readiness NCOs, to assist folks that did have to remain in the area, mostly the military members. So during the event, it's a catch-22. But the great thing is they have us here at operations, so when people evacuate, if they have to evacuate, we tell them access the Air Force Personnel Accountability and Assessment System.

The Navy has this system. It's called something a little different. The Marine Corps does. The Army does. We all have these systems that really need to eventually interface, and I wholeheartedly believe that they will, but in the meantime, we use normal comms. And here at ops, we reach out to the family centers that are local to where families have evacuated to make sure they're getting what they need. They might not have housing at a safe haven location, they might need to access pet facilities or anything. We're there to help them find the resources they need in the areas that they've evacuated to.

Bruce Moody:

It's a really interesting point, and there's a lot of military-specific resources such as personal accountability. I use that name sort of a lowercase, personal accountability. We're going to put links in the program notes, but essentially, as you were alluding to, each service has their own accounting service, and it's your opportunity to tell your command, here's where I am, here are my needs, and through those kinds of systems they can coordinate support?

Donna Huffman:

That's a fact. Absolutely true.

Bruce Moody:

Now, let's talk about after a disaster. What does family assistance look like after a disaster?

Donna Huffman:

It runs the gamut. So many different things. Again, like I said earlier, we're going to meet folks where they are, but one of the key tools that wing commanders have or commanders at our installations is that they could stand up what's called an Emergency Family Assistance Center. So as folks come back to that new normal or try to get back to normal, this is a process where we bring all agencies pertaining to that event. Of course, an aircraft disaster is going to look a little bit different than a typhoon devastation, but we'll make sure that the right organizations are available for people to access Johnny on the spot. And, again, that AFPAAS system is critical. I think I talked a little bit about it, but our families knowing how to use that and access it, we can keep track of where they are.

So they update it, their safe haven location, I know when they come back to the local area, and then I can tell them about the EFAC, and that it has stood up by the wing commander, and to come on in. You get updates from public affairs, you'll get information about housing if that's required, how to access food if it's limited, water if it's limited. We saw this over the past year or two with an event we had on Oahu where the water was... What's the word I'm looking for?

Bruce Moody:

Not safe to drink.

Donna Huffman:

Definitely not safe to drink. So what do I do now? I have kids that need formula, I need to mix it with water. But yes, we have that EFAC tool, and always, always, always our community members should know to access the family readiness center on the installation.

Bruce Moody:

And just to draw out an acronym that you dropped in there, the EFAC, so that's the Emergency Family Assistance Center?

Donna Huffman:

That's correct.

Bruce Moody:

We actually did a whole podcast just on what those Emergency Family Assistance Centers are all about. We'll link it in the program notes. And this conversation's a broader look at all the work that we do. I want to switch gears for just a moment and get into a hypothetical. Let's say that today we learned that there's an Air Force installation on the Florida coast, and it's in the direct path of a powerful hurricane. So walk us through what the Air Force or other services, what they may do to gear up the support personnel who are going to then help military families with emergency family assistance.

Donna Huffman:

Yeah, absolutely. So my team here, we track it. We monitor on screens. Anytime there's an event, we pretty much know something's about to happen or could happen. So we reach out instantly to the local installation and we say, "Understand, you're probably having to evacuate..." If it was that situation that you just explained, Florida coast, and they need to get out of Dodge, so we'll contact the base and say, "Just know we're standing ready. Make sure your families have information about the personnel system, that they can provide a needs assessment in there. Tell us where they are." And then we stay connected with the base every step of the way. They have our personal phone calls, our government cell phone numbers, all the things that they need to be able to access us. And then even if the staff leaves, they know how to reach us.

In the meantime, we're preparing for the what ifs, what could potentially happen when they return to the base. And so we have a mobility center here at the personnel center who's also tracking these things with us, and they keep all leadership aware of what's happening, accountability of their military members, as well as assessment of the family members and where

they are. So we just stand ready with the rest of the leadership team. We make sure that the Emergency Family Assistance Center has been exercised. And if not, we can help by augmenting support to, in other words, maybe send other more experienced folks to the impacted area upon return or after the event. So just a lot of work that the Air Force does in support of that.

Bruce Moody:

So you guys are all set. Let's talk about military families now. So you've got a military family in a place that is going to be impacted by this hypothetical storm coming our way. So what is the family needing to do to set themselves up for success?

Donna Huffman:

Well, hopefully they did the pre-disaster training and they have a kit ready to roll, and they have all their paperwork in one location that they can grab. Of course, the commanders will dictate whether or not they're authorized departure or not. Most people leave the area. So once they leave the area, maybe they're civilian employees. They need to know to connect with the personnel folks at the location they're headed to, kids' things, medical needs, everything. It's that pre-disaster planning that really will make for a successful event during the event. A lot of times when I look at places in the South, where they hunker down right where they are, they have safe places where families can go. They need to know what those locations are, they need to know what the resources are that they have access to, keep those cell phones charged and stay connected to everybody, but being ready is critical, and I cannot express that enough. That pre-disaster training is so critical to a family success through a disaster event.

Bruce Moody:

You mentioned the cell phones needing to be charged, and I want to get into the kinds of disasters or emergencies where they just happen and you get out of town immediately. No warning, not a lot of preparation, you don't bring a lot of stuff with you. I think that we want to make the point about social media that the command is going to use to give information out, phone numbers. So if a person has to leave the area and find a safe place, there are ways that they can connect with their command and emergency family assistance?

Donna Huffman:

Absolutely. Staying connected is key. Those rosters that we give you, I'm not kidding you, I have a folder myself and I'm in South Central Texas, but when the need comes, I know I grab my folder and I go. I've got all the current resources that I need. Staying connected to leadership is so critical. I want to take this opportunity to talk about that PAAS system, Personnel Accountability and Assessment System. There's two sides to it. The first is the accountability that our military members are very good at. So if there's a requirement for them to account for themselves and or family members, it's important that they access the system themselves and do that. The second side of the system is that assessment piece where they and or family members can log into the system, you don't have to be military at this point, and put in what your immediate needs are.

We ask a lot of questions about various things depending on the event. Tell us where you are, we're going to go ahead and connect you with the center or the base local to you to make sure that you're OK. So keeping us posted, staying connected is so important, have those resources that we teach you about during pre-disaster, keep your rosters, your recall rosters. Commanders want to know where their folks are. They want to know that everybody is safe, because we want everybody back in one piece. And then we can absolutely track folks through the system or cell phones or any means necessary.

Bruce Moody:

Do you have any examples that you can share, real world examples, of emergency family assistance or Emergency Family Assistance Centers in action taking care of families?

Donna Huffman:

Oh my gosh, absolutely. A few examples that come to mind might be Typhoon Mawar was we stood up in EFAC at the Andersen Air Base where the wing commander decided to activate the EFAC. This was just June of '23 after the Typhoon hit. Largest one since 2002. And it did quite a number over Guam. So operations stood up, and communications were solid between the operations teams here, our program managers, and the Military and Family Readiness Center flight chief, the four support, squadron command leadership at the bases, the readiness cells all activated. The folks at the Pentagon were aware because we kept them connected and communicated about what was going on and what the numbers for accountability and needs looked like. Our centers local to those who opted to evacuate to a safe haven location were contacted immediately and provided the services that they needed.

That EFAC out there in Guam was well utilized, and they used it as walk-in clients. People came into the center. So it was impressive because people actually paid attention. I guess when you live in an area like that where you really want to be ready, you do take that pre-disaster training very serious, and they knew that the center was there to do whatever needed to be done to help them and realize that a lot of those folks are impacted themselves, the folks that work in these processes that stand up. So another one was that Hickam event, the Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, the water hazard that they had contamination across the whole area, the water was contaminated. And although we had limited military family readiness staff on Hickam at that time, the Navy has the lead and they did a bang-up job, and they supported over 3,500 family members through that EFAC, that Emergency Family Assistance Center, everybody was there to help.

It's amazing who comes out of the woodwork to support these things, from volunteers and providing food and water, we had clinicians out there, we had chaplains, legal services, the Red Cross came out, just a whole plethora of agencies that really wanted to help these folks, which was a good thing, because that EFAC stood up for 126 days, so we really needed a lot of support. And that's just a couple of examples. I could go on and on and on. This year alone, we have supported 13 events, small-scale and large, that we are writing after action reports on, and it's incredible the amount of support and the work that the family centers do out there. Even though they're impacted, they're true givers, true social scientists in the field that really want to make life better for people. So it's impressive.

Bruce Moody:

Wrapping up this conversation, I can't help but just sense the enthusiasm, the passion that people experience when they come together to help a community. Can you give us a sense of the mindset, the emotions that run through the folks who are providing support to military families?

Donna Huffman:

Oh, absolutely. The mindset is all hands on deck, no pun intended, Navy. But it's true, everybody is all hands in. The emotion goes high, but people get into action. They want to do what's right for people. We see this even outside the military, don't we? When a national event happens and everybody just comes together, communities come together to really help each other, and it's amazing. It's the stuff that we really want to know, that people have heart, that people have skills, people know how to provide information and referral resources to you. And I'll tell you, Bruce, I've been exposed and worked many overseas and US crises, and just based on that experience, my advice to every single DOD member and their family is to gain immediate information on being prepared, tap into those Department of the Air Force experts and know what they have to offer, know what's available.

Because I think when families are faced with crisis, they have more confidence, they feel more comfortable about the "what next," what happens while we're gone, what happens when and if we get to return. So I recommend that, like me, everybody visit their local military family readiness center, get the resources and get information they need, because those people are truly passionate and ready to help you. We will get you there. So everybody's standing by to help.

Bruce Moody:

This has been a really interesting conversation. I thank you so much for joining us today.

Donna Huffman:

Thank you. It's been great. I appreciate the opportunity.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. Our pleasure. Donna Huffman is with the Air Force's Personnel Center. And want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. Send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode, and be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because we cover a wide variety of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.