

Military OneSource Podcast — Inside Military Family Support With Patricia Montes Barron

Podcast transcript

Introduction:

[Upbeat music plays briefly]

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 are pleased to welcome our guest, our boss, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Military Community and Family Policy, Patty Barron. Mrs. Barron, welcome to the podcast.

Patricia Montes Barron:

I'm so excited to be here, Bruce. Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

So we are having this discussion because within about a week you'll be leaving us after four years of serving in the Pentagon as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Military Community and Family Policy. So for the benefit of military families who don't speak Pentagon, what does your title mean to them?

Patricia Montes Barron:

You know, that's such a great question because if you think about what does it mean to them, it probably doesn't mean an awful lot. But what it does mean here within the Pentagon walls is that I am responsible for policy and oversight and advocacy of all community support and quality of life programs for our military families.

And that's a very, very important responsibility to have. But I am so blessed that I work with the most amazing group of people, passionate people who think about our military families every single day to make sure that the support that they need to live their best military life is available to them.

Bruce Moody:

So what we want to do today during this episode is look back over your four years with us, and I want to go through some of the specific things. There's a lot, but I want to go through some of the specific things that were accomplished over the last four years. But I do think it would be helpful to get a sense of who you are and what you brought to the job.

For example, when you arrived, you asked us to explore the art of the possible. So what does that phrase mean for an organization, especially when you're talking about an organization like the Department of Defense?

Patricia Montes Barron:

Yeah, that's another great question because to me, the art of the possible, which I stole that phrase from a friend of mine, means that we start to look at things a little bit differently than we have in the past. Everyone told me when you go to the Pentagon, things move very slow. People don't like to think outside the box. That's really not true at all. What you need is a leader who's going to allow you to have that flexibility to think outside the box.

Sometimes when you do that, you "find a way to yes," which is so amazing. But many times you also realize that there are obstacles in the way that will prevent you from getting to yes. So let's get rid of those obstacles where we can.

If we cannot get rid of those obstacles, it's super important to me that we explain why to our service members and families, because what I don't want is for folks to think that we don't care, because we care deeply in this building. We truly do, from the top all the way down.

What I do want is for them to know that we're always thinking about new, innovative ways to get after the challenges that they have.

Bruce Moody:

Another priority of yours was ensuring that spouses are heard. And so why is that important to you?

Patricia Montes Barron:

So I'm a military spouse and followed my soldier for 30 years. And Bruce, we were talking just earlier that when I was growing up in the military, the Pentagon was a very far away land. I didn't ever think about the Pentagon. I thought about our unit. I thought about our installation. I thought about the families and my friends. And so what I think is really important is that we don't forget to listen to the people that are living the life.

And the life that they're leading is not necessarily here at the Pentagon. It's at the installation level. It's the everyday work that happens at the installation level. And we

have to make sure that we hear our families as they move forward. Many of the same issues are here that I had when I was growing up. However, the expectation, the management, the ideas to solve those issues are different, and we have to make sure that we're listening to that.

Bruce Moody:

My next question is intentional because I want spouses to really understand that you really do listen to them and you are listening. So the question is that as you listen to spouses, what do you hear as being their reaction to being called resilient?

Patricia Montes Barron:

[Laughs] Thanks so much, Bruce, because resilient has become a word that we actually don't like at all. And the reason being is that, of course we're proud of being a military family member, of course we're proud to see our husband or wife wear that uniform, but it comes with challenges. It comes with pain. It comes with depression. It comes with just anxiety. Not all the time, of course not, but it does happen. And when you say, "Well, you're resilient, you can do it," you're really denying a person the opportunity to say, "Yeah, but I'm not OK. Sometimes I'm not OK."

Bruce Moody:

Now, you are also speaking from your background as a military spouse, so I want to make sure that people understand your connection to the military life because you are also a military spouse.

Patricia Montes Barron:

That's correct. I'm a very proud military spouse, very proud Army spouse, hooah. What I would tell you is that I met my husband at school, at University of San Francisco, and as an ROTC cadet. I fell in love with the uniform and just thought that was the coolest thing ever. When he asked me to marry him, I said yes because I was very much in love with him, but I had no idea what I was saying yes to.

Because it wasn't just yes, normal life, it was yes, military life. The first thing that we did was we moved from San Francisco, believe it or not, San Francisco all the way to Columbus, Georgia. A little bit different over there. I discovered the Piggly Wiggly and knew that they did not have good vegetables there. Sorry, Piggly Wiggly. And then we went from there to Germany.

And so right away my life was just so different, and I was doing it by myself because family and friends, they stayed in California. So, yes, after 30 years of following my soldier around, we moved 14 times. As a registered nurse, I have seven state licenses. Because every time we moved, I wanted to make sure I had an active license. And now my daughter, who is a veteran and I'm so proud of her, is a military spouse as well.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. Nice. Good to share that. You've also been a longtime advocate for military families. Talk about some of the roles you've had prior to coming to this organization.

Patricia Montes Barron:

Yeah, I always like to describe myself as a normal, regular military spouse. So what does that mean? I started out with a Bachelor of Science in nursing. I ended up getting a master's in community mental health, but it was hard to work in those fields, and so my career progression was very up and down, kind of like a roller coaster.

When I got to Washington, D.C., in 2001, I found the National Military Family Association, and I was invited to join the board. I saw that there was an opening. I applied, and I got the job. So my advocacy work started in 2003.

From there, I worked as the director of youth initiatives, and I oversaw the Operation Purple Camp program. But after a while, I was a little burnt out because a lot of camps out to go visit, and I was hired by Zero to Three, which is an amazing organization that focuses on babies, toddlers and their families.

And then about a year later, I got called to come and interview for the position of family readiness director at the Association of the United States Army, and I was at AUSA until I got here. So from 2003 to 2021, I was in the advocacy world, and I was very proud of it. I have a big mouth.

Bruce Moody:

[Laughs] And a busy calendar.

Patricia Montes Barron:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

Yes. So we all see your calendar. It's packed. None of us want a schedule like yours, but there it is. On any given week, you're on this panel. You're a keynote speaker over here. You're moving around talking to folks. Why is it so important for you to get out of the Pentagon and meet with these groups?

Patricia Montes Barron:

You know, my mom calls me Metida. Metida in Spanish means someone that's always having to see what's going on and wants to be a part of the conversation. So I'm a Metida. And what I can tell you is that I don't say no because I want to be a part of all of it. I do.

Bruce Moody:

We've seen that.

Patricia Montes Barron:

[Laughs] I bet you have. One of the things that I was told when I first got here is if you're going to meet with people, you've got to meet with everybody because you can't show favoritism. OK, then I have an open door policy. When folks want to come by and visit, tell me about something that they're working on or whatever, I'm very happy to do that.

And getting out there is so important. I don't need to do the everyday work. Amazing people do the everyday work. I need to make sure that I'm out there telling people about that amazing work and finding out whether or not it's fitting the need. I do that pretty well. I think that's one of my superpowers. So yeah, I know, I've got a very busy calendar.

Bruce Moody:

OK, let's capture your superpower for a moment here and talk to maybe a newer organization. What would be your advice to an organization that's either new or turning its focus toward taking care of military families?

Patricia Montes Barron:

Yeah, there are an awful lot of military service organizations out there. So many. Some are very firmly established and are seen as the organizations to follow. But if you're a new spouse thinking, "You know what? No one's talking about this or no one's talking about that," and you start to really gain some momentum there, I think that's a good thing.

What I would say is do your homework and not go into an area where there's an awful lot of other people doing the same thing because you're going to get lost in translation. What you want to do is find your niche. What is it exactly about that one thing that you can offer that you can think about?

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk about our work for military families and how it's accomplished through governmental and nongovernmental organizations really working as one team, each group bringing their best. There's a diversity of people on a team that are serving a diverse military family body out there. So talk to me about the value of diversity from the perspective of your background and how it shapes your views.

Patricia Montes Barron:

It's a very important word to me. It really is. I was born in another country. I was born in El Salvador, Central America. When I was 5 years old, my father died in a car accident.

Three months later, we were moving to the United States. My mom, a 28-year-old widow with three kids, I saw how hard she worked in this country to give my brothers and sister and I the very best possibilities. And look where I am. It's because of my mom. It really is.

And so I think about making sure that you don't prejudge folks because of whatever, that you look for the talents and skills that they bring to the table, different perspectives, different ideas, different life experiences. That makes us so much stronger. And so we need every aspect of diversity on our team because that diversity reflects the diversity of the population we're trying to serve. And that is incredibly empowering, and I know we do a great job. I'm really proud of that.

I'm proud of the Department of Defense and how Secretary Austin has really made that a priority for him. And obviously I'm very proud of the president. And speaking of the president, I want to thank both President Biden and Dr. Jill Biden for all the support and the focus that they provided to our military families. Their initiative, [Joining Forces](#), which brings federal agencies together in support of our military and military families specifically, has just been incredible.

Bruce Moody:

So let's turn the conversation at this point, and let's get into some of the specific areas where you gave your focus and your leadership. And you've done a lot, really so many areas, and we just don't have time to get into all of it. So I want to take a closer look at some of the initiatives that stem from the initiative from the secretary of defense, and that initiative is called [Taking Care of Our People](#). Let's start with talking about this initiative and what we are doing to support it.

Patricia Montes Barron:

Yes. Taking Care of Our People is a top priority for the Department of Defense because it's a top priority for the secretary of defense. Secretary Austin and Deputy Secretary Hicks, they have asked us to take actions when it comes to issues that are critical to the force, and many of those issues are around quality of life.

So we're looking at family stability. We're looking at making moves easier. We're looking at strengthening support for military families and a lot of the things that we do here in MC&FP.

But it's not just within MC&FP. It's over at Military Personnel Policy. It's over at Civilian Personnel Policy. It's across the board in the Department of Defense. And the reason why that is, is because Secretary Austin has said, "This is important to me. Therefore, it's going to be important to you."

Bruce Moody:

Got it. Tackling spouse employment is a big part of the Taking Care of Our People initiative, and it's been a priority from the day that you arrived. And you've kept it really as a focus throughout your time with us.

Patricia Montes Barron:

Yeah, I think it's one of the biggest issues that we as military spouses face. Those of us that would like to go to work, whether it's temporary, whether it's entry level, whether it's building a career, have a very difficult time doing that because we move so much. We absolutely do. As I mentioned before, I have a very much wiggly path to a career, but that's just part of the experience.

And so when I came on board, thinking about keeping that front and center, making sure that we continue to talk about the need to reduce the unemployment rate of military spouses, which hovers around 20-21%. We might not be able to reduce it an awful lot because, again, we move a lot and new spouses are coming in all the time, but we cannot keep our eyes off of the prize. We have to continue to chip away at it.

Bruce Moody:

So we have a program called Spouse Education and Career Opportunities. We call it [SECO](#). What are the goals of this program?

Patricia Montes Barron:

So I love the SECO program. It is such a great program. It's got three main parts to it. And I don't want to take up all of our time by going into detail, but we'll make sure we put a link on here so that you can explore it. So the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities starts out with the MyCAA [[My Career Advancement Account](#)], which is a \$4,000 scholarship that certain eligible spouses can get. And those \$4,000 can go towards a certification, towards continuing education credit, or towards getting an AAA [associate] degree.

Now, we really target junior enlisted and junior officer spouses for this scholarship because many times you come in and you're kind of starting out, this will help a little bit. So that's the one. The other that we have is the Military Spouse Employment Partnership, the [MSEP Partnership](#), and that is where industry have raised their hand and said, "We want to look for and hire military spouses, and we are going to pledge to the Department of Defense that we're going to do that."

That is a great program, and you can find it online in the SECO website. Again, we'll put the link on there. But why I love this program is that we've got over 800 industry partners that are saying, "Hey, find us. We're trying to find you." Now, it's really hard for a military spouse to say, "I'm going to self-identify as a military spouse. Because once I do, they might not hire me." In this case, they're looking for you.

So make sure you go to that MSEP website, fill out the profile, put in your resume, because people will find you. I can't say that enough. And then I would say that the third thing that we offer through SECO is, no kidding, real-life career coaches that are there to support your track to whatever it is that you want to do, whether it's starting all over again, whether it's trying to get into middle management, whether it's thinking about getting to a C suite. Those coaches will help you. I promise you that they will. So it's a great program.

Bruce Moody:

I wanted to circle back, if you don't mind, because you mentioned that there are some 800 companies — hiring organizations — that have pledged to support military spouses. But it's actually more than that. I mean, they are signing an agreement. And we hold them to it.

Patricia Montes Barron:

We absolutely do. We don't just let them come in and say, "Hey, look at how great we are. We work with DOD." Quarterly, each of those partners gets a coordinator that they work with, a DOD coordinator, and quarterly, we connect with them and we go through what we have more or less, a score list, a score sheet, if you will. How many times have you come and looked at the website to see who's applying? How many times have you reached out? How are you working with us in marketing?

I mean, there's many things that they look at. And if we find that partner just isn't doing as much as we hope that they're going to do, we ask them to take a pause. Just maybe they weren't ready to be a partner yet. Maybe they didn't realize how much they had to be involved. And so by taking the pause, it gives them the opportunity to either come back and be really strong or to say, "You know what? This wasn't a good fit and we're going to move on."

Bruce Moody:

It's the real deal to be part of that. They don't just get to the photo op.

Patricia Montes Barron:

The photo op is nice, but the work that comes after, that's the most important.

Bruce Moody:

Now, relating to that is something called the [Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot](#). So what is this program and what are we trying to achieve?

Patricia Montes Barron:

So for years, we have heard, “Gosh, why don’t spouses have a fellowship like SkillBridge? Why can’t we do that?” Well, you know what? We found a way to do it. And I have to thank Congress for providing us the opportunity and the funding to pilot this, and it’s been extremely successful. What it is, it’s a 12-week paid fellowship that a career-ready spouse enters into with an industry partner.

And it gives that business the opportunity to vet you as a possible employee. We have more than like 86% turnover from fellow to full employee. That’s phenomenal. Those are numbers that you just don’t see. So we know we’ve hit on something, and it’s been so successful — where we’ve placed more than 400 spouses in career-ready fields and fellowships — that we’ve expanded it to entry level as well.

So we’re giving the opportunity for new spouses to get in on this. And at the same time, we’ve been able to make it a program that’s not going to go away. And for that, I am so proud of the team that worked so hard to make sure that happened.

Bruce Moody:

So we’ll stop calling it a pilot. [Laughs]

Patricia Montes Barron:

Pretty soon you can stop calling it a pilot.

Bruce Moody:

Well, that’ll be nice. That’ll be nice. Now [changing topics], you’re a nurse.

Patricia Montes Barron:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

You’ve talked about that, and you’ve moved around a lot. And as a result, you have nursing licenses from seven states. So you have personal experiences with the challenges of maintaining licenses and certifications. Military spouses know this as they move from state to state. Talk about some of the strides that you’re able to oversee in this space.

Patricia Montes Barron:

Yeah, this is something that’s really super important. So one of the things that we learned is that occupational relicensing is a military spouse burden, and we have made it a priority to help lessen that burden. So the annual percent of military spouses that move across state lines is about 14.5% on a yearly basis. That’s compared to 1.1% for civilian spouses. We move around quite a bit.

As much as 34% of military spouses in the labor force are required to have a license or a certification of some sort, and 19% experience challenges with this. So the Defense-State Liaison Office, our [DSLO Office](#), which is incredible, they work very closely with states and state legislators, state governors offices, to help mitigate some of these burdens. And this type of challenge is something they have been focusing on for a while.

How they focus on it is by working on developing with the Council of State Governors an interstate compact for different career paths. And so we've got 10 interstate compacts that are out there right now that are being implemented in different states, and I would say at least 36 states have at least one compact that they have approved — and continuing to add more.

Bruce Moody:

So let me just jump in because you mentioned the DSLO, right? Since we're in the Pentagon, we're going to use acronyms, but that's the Defense-State Liaison Office. It's really, really interesting. So for people who don't know, which is most everybody, this is actually a bunch of people spread out across the entire country. They're literally in state capitals, and they're working with state organizations.

Patricia Montes Barron:

They are, and they're incredible, exceptional people who have a region, so they have more than one state that they're responsible for, but they do a marvelous job of making sure that they hit each state throughout the time that they're open for business, if you will, because state legislators are only open for business for a short period of time. And they educate the legislators on some of the challenges for spouse employment.

One of the things that we really try to get them to understand is the importance of interstate compacts. And interstate compacts for different career fields, what that means is if that state agrees to an interstate compact and another state has also agreed to the same thing, then spouses can travel across state lines and still continue to have their licenses without having to go through the rigmarole of getting a new one. That's super important. So the DSLO does a fantastic job of making sure that we do that.

Bruce Moody:

When we're talking about military spouses and their career pathways, what has been done for those who want to start their own business as an entrepreneur?

Patricia Montes Barron:

Spouses love to be entrepreneurs. Sometimes you just have to do what you need to do, and you have to work with the schedule that you have. And the creativity and the talent that spouses have, magic happens. Now, there are spouses out there that have, no kidding, businesses. I mean nuclear physics kind of businesses. And then there are spouses that have Etsy shops. It runs the gamut.

But if you're interested in becoming an entrepreneur or you need a little bit of help, the SECO program offers an entire entrepreneur [coaching package](#) that you really need to be a part of. It starts with an assessment and then it goes on to, "OK, now we know where your strengths are. Now we know what your interests are. How can we help you get to where you want to be?" And they will not leave you. It's not for a short period of time. They'll stick with you as long as you need them to — to get to the goals that you're looking for.

I also want to mention the U.S. Trade[mark] and Patent Office and the Small Business Administration. They have become amazing partners in helping us with spouse entrepreneurship. If you think about it, if you need something that's a trademark, they know how to do that, obviously, but they have a lot of other resources that you should check out. And the Small Business Administration can help you find funding for your new business. So, something to think about.

Bruce Moody:

There we go. We've had the Patent and Trademark Office [on the podcast](#). Really interesting bunch of people.

Moving on, there are other barriers that affect spouse employment, with one of them being the availability of child care. Talk about how child care is related to spouse employment.

Patricia Montes Barron:

You can't do one without the other. If you have young children at home, you need to have child care in order to go to work. What I'm really, really proud of is, again, listening to our families, listening to our spouses. What are we currently doing? What else can we be doing? We've got some pretty innovative things going on besides the fact that we've been able to reduce the wait list at CDCs [child development centers] across the nation.

Some of the areas are still hard-pressed to find space, but they're working on it so much. We also have something called the in-home fee assistance program [\[Child Care in Your Home Fee Assistance pilot program\]](#) where you can actually hire someone to come into your home. And many times if it's a nanny and sleeps overnight, we will pay up to 10 hours, I believe, of home care so that you are more or less paying what you would be paying if you were at the CDC. So that is a phenomenal, phenomenal program.

The other one that I'm really proud of is the [Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood-PLUS](#). What is that? When we were doing fee assistance before, we only worked with centers outside the gate that were nationally accredited. Not as many out there as you would think. So we had to start thinking about something else. We learned that states have programs called the Quality Rating and Improvement System where they elevate the standard for care.

Once we found that out, we started working with the states, and to date, we've got 16 states on board that have joined us. We are able to provide fee assistance through this QRIS program, and we have been able to open up the aperture so that there's at least 7,000 more kids that are getting care and growing because of Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood-PLUS, which is amazing.

Bruce Moody:

Let's turn our support to families with special needs. Under your leadership, the Defense Department enacted changes to ensure consistency across the service branches for military families with special needs. So what does that mean for military families?

Patricia Montes Barron:

What I can tell you is a month into my tenure, a month into my tenure, I was still trying to figure out where the bathrooms were. There was a call with staffers on the Hill. And the very first thing they said to me was, "How are you going to fix EFMP [the Exceptional Family Member Program]?" That was a surprise. They are so passionate about making sure that we're doing things better. That's hard. And we were already working on it, but we really accelerated trying to get to where they wanted us to be.

They wanted us to standardize four areas: enrollment, disenrollment, assignment coordination, and respite care. We did that. Now, as we were doing that, we were also fielding our very first EFMP survey because we wanted to hear from our families, and we had never done a survey to the families before. And so we fielded the survey. We got an awful lot of information back.

The beauty of the fact that we've standardized things through what we call the Department of Defense instruction, or DODI — the [EFMP DODI](#) — is that you don't stop once you've got it done. Based on that feedback, we've gone back to the DODI and we're doing tweaks here, we're doing tweaks there. There's an awful lot of good in that instruction that I think families are going to be pleased with. For example, if your assignment was declined, you're able to find out why.

You're able to protest it and see if you can get that changed. You're able to connect with the EFMP coordinator at the installation when you get there, but they are now required to touch base with you at least once a year to make sure that all your needs are being met and that you're finding the resources that you need. Lots of goodness there. Still more things to do. We have an amazing associate director that's in charge of the EFMP program, and I know it's just going to continue to get better and better.

Bruce Moody:

There's a lot going on. A lot was accomplished. We can't get into all of it. I would love to be able to talk more about all the things that we've done, but we're already running long, and I don't mind. So let's talk more about you. [Laughs] All right? How would you

summarize the work that has been done over the past years within Military Community and Family Policy?

Patricia Montes Barron:

It's exceptional. Being able to come into this building and understand how things work, how challenging it can be to get things done, but how much passion and effort is behind everything that comes out of this building has just been the most incredible eye-opener for me. I would tell you that whenever people talk about civilian employees, I think about you.

I think about our front office. I think about all of the different directorates that we have. And I know and hear the conversations that we've had. The [conversations such as], "Don't worry, ma'am, we'll get to it" and "OK, here's an idea. What do you think?" I mean, it's just exceptional work, and it's been such an honor to have a little bit of connection to it.

Bruce Moody:

Now, for military families, as we know, because we were talking about this earlier, life is what happens on the installation. So what would be your advice to families, especially those new to the military? How can they get the most of what the military has to offer, particularly at their installation or at their command so that they can deal with the challenges of military life?

Patricia Montes Barron:

Get involved. Get involved as much as you can or as little as you can. Find a way to get involved. Seventy percent of our families live off the installation. That means that the military that I grew up in where most people lived on is basically gone. We were always about our unit and the installation. Not so much anymore. However, there are ways to get involved. Youth services, for instance, and you have all the youth sports.

Bring the kids on base to be a part of the soccer team. That's how you get to meet some of the other moms. What about some of the new baby support groups that might be there? Maybe the spouses club is something that you would be interested in. Whatever your interest is, you'll find it on the installation and get involved.

Bruce Moody:

What do you want families to know about having their voices heard in the Pentagon? What can they do?

Patricia Montes Barron:

So if you go on Military OneSource, there's a little box there that says, "Tell us how we're doing" or "What would you like us to know?" Give us the [feedback](#). We need the feedback. It's very important to us.

Bruce Moody:

This has been such a joy. As we wrap up our time together, what's next?

Patricia Montes Barron:

I don't think anything can top this. [Laughs] Bruce, this has been, like I said, the honor of my life. Just thinking about the work and the things that we've been able to do together, the highs and the lows, the camaraderie, the teamwork, the tears and laughter, all of this has been so amazing. I'm going to take a little bit of time to go to the doctor and make sure that I'm good. Not that there's anything wrong with me, but I don't think I've been to the doctor in four years.

And I'm hoping to continue to serve. It's part of my heart. I just don't see turning it off in any way. So I'll be looking for opportunities. But for right now, I'm here to the very end, going through the tape. I'm a Day 1 appointee. Very proud of that. I've been here for four years, and I've been lucky enough to work with people like you. And I'm just so, so honored to have had this opportunity.

Bruce Moody:

Well, on behalf of everybody at this organization, we are so grateful for your time with us. And thank you for spending some time with us today.

Patricia Montes Barron:

It's been an honor.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you.

[Outro music plays]

And I'm going to do my readout, but I want to say that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. And we always like to hear from you. So we have a link in the program notes and you can send us a question or a comment.

And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.