

Military OneSource Podcast — Introducing the EFMP Standardization Podcast Series

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. My guest today is Tomeshia Barnes. She leads the Defense Department's Office of Special Needs. The work that this office does is the subject of a podcast series we've created, and we call it the Office of Special Needs EFMP podcast, EFMP meaning the Exceptional Family Member Program.

Tomeshia Barnes:

Hi, Bruce. Thank you for having me.

Bruce Moody:

Well, it's good to have you, and people who tune into the EFMP podcast will hear a lot of you. And we're going to talk about that podcast, but let's talk about, well, the Exceptional Family Member Program. Why don't we just begin, and you just give me a general idea of what EFMP, the Exceptional Family Member Program, is and what it does?

Tomeshia Barnes:

So the Exceptional Family Member Program is a program designed to support military families that have dependents with medical or educational needs. It is comprised of three components, identification and enrollment, assignment coordination and Family Support. And when we look at assignment coordination, the biggest factor there that we want to remind families of is that assignment coordination is the process of conducting a review to determine the availability of services that is required for dependents to have quality of life and access to care that they need when a family's relocating to a new installation.

And when you look at EFMP Family Support, that is the provision of nonclinical case management, information and referral. When I think of EFMP Family Support, I think of having individuals that are there to support the families as they navigate the wealth of resources available to them within the government as well as available resources in their local community. So it's that person, that central office that can really help families access and navigate all the resources available to them. And that's what we're here for.

Bruce Moody:

Now, the Exceptional Family Member Program recently got a lift through a new policy which you and your team wrote. And this gets into a lot of the specific areas of what EFMP does. And I think the main theme with this new policy is the standardization of support from one service to the next. Can you talk through this new policy and what it does for families who are enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program?

Tomeshia Barnes:

So when we look at the new policy regarding the Exceptional Family Member Program, one of the things I like to point out is that it really is a revision to the previous policy. But importantly, it provides DOD-level guidance for the processes of the program.

When you look at the previous policy, there was not a lot of DOD-level guidance provided on how the EFMP would operate. And without having that level of guidance, one of the biggest things that I always say is if you're not clear and you don't provide clarity, it can lead to a lack of transparency and confusion in the implementation of the program, but ultimately confusion with our stakeholders and our families. And so the biggest piece in this DODI is that it does establish standard processes for identification and enrollment, for disenrollment, assignment coordination, as well as requirements within EFMP Family Support to include the standardization of EFMP respite care.

Bruce Moody:

So we don't want to get too deep into this new policy. What we want to do is let people know that we do have this EFMP podcast series. But let us nevertheless take a couple of minutes and get into some of the aspects of EFMP support that has been standardized, such as identification and enrollment. I'll let you tick through some of the rest that are featured in this new policy.

Tomeshia Barnes:

So one of the things when you look at the new policy and standardization, we wanted to establish a seamless experience for families regardless of their location and their service branch. And so when we look at identification and enrollment, a big piece there is exactly what should families expect. And it provides families not only with guidance on what to expect, but it also has a visual representation of the process so that as families look through the policy or they look at the map that's within the policy, it just provides clarity of what to expect. And the big piece there that I want to say is communication.

How do we help families, but also what are we communicating to them throughout this process? So again, it helps them hold us accountable, but also know this is what I should expect and this is what I should experience no matter where I go.

And that's the same thing for disenrollment. One of the things that we heard frequently is, what is the process for disenrollment? And a funny thing is sometimes people would say, "Well, we're doing what DOD says," but we didn't really have a process that was clear to the public, I mean clear to our stakeholders, especially our families, on what constitutes disenrollment. And how do I go about disenrolling from the program when I'm no longer eligible for the program or I no longer require the services? And so it provides, again, that level of transparency and clear communication to the family as well.

And then when we look at assignment coordination, it's just again, when we talk about that clarity, and I know we're going to go in depth in an additional podcast series, but I think the biggest piece there is transparent to families, what to expect, and communication of what decisions are made and why those decisions are made, and then an opportunity for the family to express a voice and an ability to discuss if there's some additional enhancements or additional needs of their families that need to be considered. So I definitely look forward to going more in depth on the changes within the program and how we created those changes to better support our families.

Bruce Moody:

We're definitely going to do that. And this is a work in progress. We created two seasons of episodes for this series. This, what we're talking about now, would be season Number 3, and we'll just keep on doing it. We'll provide as much information as the community needs on this topic.

But Tomeshia, I'd like you to touch on two things for me, because you mentioned family members having a voice. I think this would be a really important takeaway because I think this is the thing that families were asking for. And how are we set up to hear from military families with this new policy?

Tomeshia Barnes:

So one of the biggest things in standardizing the program and enhancing and improving the EFMP for families, of course, is having feedback from our families. So we're looking at feedback in three ways. One of the things that I always want to preface any conversation with is this DODI reflects phase one of the efforts, and there's more work to do to improve and enhance the program for families.

With that said, one way that we're obtaining information about the needs of families is engaging with our military support and veteran support organizations to hear directly from families utilizing different inputs that families share with them. And with that, not just some of the things that they're sharing, but we do know that families are working within our military support and veteran support organizations to share their experience. And so we're engaging with these organizations to hear the experiences, their needs, and what enhancements they'd like to see as we continue to work this effort.

We do know that there's multiple ways to reach families, so one additional way that we're utilizing to reach families to get feedback is the EFMP Family Support Feedback Tool. We know that the EFMP Family Support Feedback Tool is designed to provide information on a family's experience after they engage with the EFMP Family Support office, but the reason why families' input in completing that tool is so important is because it does give us information that we can use as we're looking to further enhance the provision of services and supports provided to families from the EFMP.

And another area that I would say is very integral to all of this is really utilizing the ability to provide feedback on Military OneSource. And so there is a mechanism on Military OneSource that enables families to provide us immediate feedback. And it doesn't have to be on the DODI. It could be on anything related to the EFMP that they may want to see or concerns that they may have. And we take all input and feedback seriously. And we really want to hear from families, so we encourage families to engage with us in one of those three aspects that I mentioned. But we also know that there's other mechanisms to engage with their service EFMP headquarters office to also get in contact with us to let us know where they like to see future enhancements, improvements, and also things that are working well. We'd love to hear that too.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. Tomeshia, thank you so much for joining us on this podcast. And you mentioned a couple of links. We're going to put them in the program notes. And I just invite any final words from you with regard to the support that we provide to military families.

Tomeshia Barnes:

So enhancing and improving the Exceptional Family Member Program to better support military families with medical and educational needs is a priority for the Office of Special Needs. As the needs of families change, we strive to be proactive in meeting those needs. And so we will continue to work to enhance and improve the program that you will see in policy changes, but also engaging with various stakeholders that also support our families.

We know that it takes us, but it takes a village. And we know that's one of those sayings that is used probably more than it should be, but it truly takes a village to support our families. So not only are we looking at how we enhance our program, but how do we partner with other agencies and other stakeholders that are serving our families so that we can have better gains and greater gains, rather, for our military families with medical and educational needs.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you very much for that. Again, if you want to hear lots more on the topic from Tomeshia Barnes and the rest of her team, it's the Office of Special Needs EFMP podcast. And we'll put links to that in the program notes. Tomeshia, thank you so much for joining us today.

Tomeshia Barnes:

Thank you, Bruce. I can't wait for the future editions.

Bruce Moody:

Same here. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you, so click on the link in the program notes, send us a note. Your comments, your questions may be 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 range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

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