

Office of Special Needs EFMP Podcast— Exceptional Family Member Program Standardization – Respite Care Enhancements

Office of Special Needs

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the Office of Special Needs EFMP podcast, brought to you by the Defense Department. I'm Bruce Moody, and we're continuing our coverage of a new policy that standardizes EFMP support across the services. Joining us to continue this discussion is Tomeshia Barnes who leads the Defense Department's Office of Special Needs.

Tomeshia, always great to have you on the podcast. Welcome back.

Tomeshia Barnes:

Thank you, Bruce. Glad to be back.

Bruce Moody:

So we've been talking about recent enhancements to the Exceptional Family Member Program. Today's EFMP respite care is on the agenda, specifically how respite care has been standardized across the services and what it means for families. So before we dive into that part of the discussion, just go ahead and explain what respite care is, what's its purpose, and how does it benefit primary caregivers?

Tomeshia Barnes:

EFMP respite care is a program benefit that provides temporary relief to family members responsible for regular care of eligible dependents with disabilities ranging from moderate to profound. And for EFMP respite care, the terms moderate to profound is used to indicate the level of support required for the family member to perform the activities of daily living. The terms are not associated with disability categories, and I wanted to make sure that was explained to families. Respite care enables the caregiver to take a break, to rest, to engage with others or do the activities that they truly desire. So it's one of those benefits that allow caregivers to get some of that me time and just the opportunity to do other things and other activities as they see fit.

Bruce Moody:

Would you describe the revisions made to the EFMP respite care program and why they were made?

Tomeshia Barnes:

One of the concerns that we frequently heard regarding the provision of EFMP respite care was the inconsistency in the number of hours by military service as well as the inconsistency in determining eligibility. When we looked at standardizing EFMP respite care, those were two of our main focus areas. One, establishing a standard number of hours, and then two, establishing a mechanism to determine eligibility for respite care across the department.

As we work through standardization, we recognized that families have diverse needs and it's not always a one-size-fits-all situation. And so we did establish a mechanism to provide additional respite care support to families that may need that level of support. Why we really looked at standardizing EFMP respite care is that we wanted to offer an equitable experience for families and we wanted to create a standard EFMP respite care benefit and a standard mechanism for determining eligibility based on the holistic needs of a dependent and that level of care that a caregiver's providing and not to have a benefit that is specific to a diagnosis.

Bruce Moody:

What is the standard mechanism that's now in place for determining eligibility for respite care across the services, and how has this streamlined the process?

Tomeshia Barnes:

Great question, Bruce. One of the first components in standardizing the EFMP respite care benefit was to establish a standard process for determining eligibility. When we looked at the standardization process, we sought to utilize and leverage best practices implemented by the military services. Particularly in this area, the United States Marine Corps had established a process where they used EFMP respite care level of need rubrics to determine eligibility for respite care, and we leveraged those rubrics and created that standard mechanism across the department. Something that's very important to note about the rubrics, the rubrics focus on the holistic needs of the dependent and not the diagnosis.

Bruce Moody:

How does the updated policy cover adult dependents who were previously not eligible for respite care and what led to this change in coverage?

Tomeshia Barnes:

So one of the things when we talked about the reasons for standardizing EFMP respite care, we talked about the variability in how the program benefit was being provided. And one of those variabilities was across the department, dependent upon the service, adults may not be eligible for EFMP respite care. One of the things that's very important to note about the EFMP is that it's not a child-only program. And importantly, caregivers supporting adults also need support. They need time to relax, they need time to engage with others, they need that time to do what they need to do for their own health and wellness. And so it's very important to us that we ensure that caregivers serving adults receive support as well. And that's why we updated the policy language to ensure that that's a common practice across the department.

Bruce Moody:

How will the consistent number of respite hours, which is 20 or 32 hours per month, how will that be determined for each family? What are the factors that influence the allocation of these hours?

Tomeshia Barnes:

So earlier in our conversation, we talked about the standard mechanism for determining eligibility. That standard mechanism, the EFMP respite care level of need rubrics is also the mechanism that determines the number of hours for each family. So the standard allotment of hours will be offered monthly per family based on eligibility categories defined by those level of need rubrics.

Dependent scored as Level of Need 3, that family is eligible for 20 hours per month. Dependent scored as Level of Need 4 are eligible for 32 hours per month, and dependents with the Level of Need 1 or 2 are not eligible for respite care services. And when we're looking at Levels of Need 3 and 4, those are dependents that have a higher level of need. And when I say higher level of need, they're requiring a higher level of assistance with their activities of daily living and just overarching needs that a caregiver is supporting.

Each level of need rubric outlines the standard eligibility criteria, and that is what determines a dependent level of need and concludes a family's eligibility for EFMP respite care. And just a couple of quick things about the level of need rubric that I think will be important to share, is that the level of need rubric is organizing categories such as activities of daily living, educational needs and behavior and safety among others. And it's really meant to provide a comprehensive and holistic view of the dependent's unique needs, inclusive of any and all diagnosis and conditions.

Bruce Moody:

Will families experience a change in respite hours and what would be the reasoning behind these variations?

Tomeshia Barnes:

The answer to that question, Bruce, is yes, some military families will experience a change in the number of EFMP respite care hours they receive. For some families, it will be an increase and for some families it will be a decrease. And the reason why there is variation is because the EFMP respite care benefit was not standard across the department. And with standardizing the number of hours, it will result in a change. And one of the ways we're addressing that change is a phased-in approach to implementation of the standard benefit so that we can ensure that we're communicating the change to our families and we're also working through those changes as well.

Bruce Moody:

How can a service member request additional EFMP respite care services if needed?

Tomeshia Barnes:

So Bruce, one of the things we talked about earlier is just that we recognize that it may not be a one-size-fits-all, and we know that the needs of families will vary. And so within the policy, we did create a mechanism that service members and/or caregivers may request a provision of additional support if they're experiencing an exceptional circumstance or temporary hardship.

Request for additional care will be reviewed and approved by the military service on a case-by-case basis. And the final determination of what, if any additional support will be offered is up to the military service. EFMP will review the request within 30 days and notify the family of the determination. And again, we know that the needs of families will vary, and so we definitely felt it was important to have a mechanism in place for a family that requires some additional support and that mechanism is in place.

Bruce Moody:

How does this updated policy address the impact of external respite care on family eligibility for EFMP respite care?

Tomeshia Barnes:

We want families to receive and benefit from all available services. So within the updated policy was very important to us that we ensure that families are not limited on the availability of EFMP respite care if they're receiving external respite care services. And so we put a clause within the DODI that indicates we will not limit the availability of EFMP respite care. We will not limit the number of hours we provide because a family is receiving respite care from an external source, and that could be TRICARE, ECHO respite care services or any other respite care services. We want families to receive all that's available to them, and so we wanted to make sure that we were not limiting in any way.

Bruce Moody:

Thanks, Tomeshia. How will the phased approach be implemented to ensure each family's needs are met during the changes to the respite care program?

Tomeshia Barnes:

Wow, Bruce, that is a great question. The phased-in approach is designed to support our families. We do know with implementation of the EFMP standard respite care benefit, there will be families that will experience an increase of services. There'll be some families that may experience a decrease in services, and there are some families that may not be eligible for respite care.

The phased-in approach is a gap period, and that gap is between notification and implementation. And it's designed to make sure that we provide sufficient time to families to plan for the change in services, but also that we support them in securing other options that they need.

Bruce Moody:

Tomeshia, we're really grateful that you're with us and can really speak to this policy and the various aspects of it. We're going to put some links in the program notes, but just give us an idea of where people can go to find support, additional information, just general information even about the Exceptional Family Member Program.

Tomeshia Barnes:

One of the greatest places to seek help, support, to learn more about the EFMP is your EFMP Family Support office. And if you don't know where that office is or who to contact, there's a wonderful online tool called MilitaryINSTALLATIONS. And that tool will provide you with the contact information for your EFMP Family Support office.

I like to say the EFMP Family Support office is there to support families as they access and navigate the services that they need. So again, that's the one place that I would recommend all families either contact, become familiar with, because they're there to help you.

Another great resource to assist families with information about EFMP and a wealth of other information that a family may need is Military OneSource. Service members and families can contact Military OneSource directly by phone or set up a live chat as well.

Bruce Moody:

Tomeshia Barnes, always great to have you on the podcast. We appreciate you being with us through this series of episodes where we break down this new DOD policy that standardizes EFMP support across the services. Thank you so much for continuing to walk us through this new policy.

Tomeshia Barnes:

Thank you for having us, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

And thanks for joining us for this episode of the Office of Special Needs EFMP Podcast, brought to you by the Defense Department. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to your podcast because we're covering all the EFMP standardization enhancements that you need to know about. And of course, share your feedback about this podcast, questions you have. And as always, you can contact militaryonesource.mil for support anytime.

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