

# ANNUAL REPORT TO THE CONGRESSIONAL DEFENSE COMMITTEES

on the Activities of the Office of Special Needs —2020

Pursuant to 10 U.S.C., § 1781c(h)



May 2021

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## **Introduction**

The Office of Special Needs (OSN) provides the 2020 annual report as required by section 1781c(h) of title 10, United States Code. This report describes actions taken during Fiscal Year 2020 to address gaps in services and identified areas of needed improvement or increased oversight in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP).

The past year presented both unique challenges and opportunities for the EFMP as installations responded to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Amid the tumult of the pandemic, OSN continued building upon multiple efforts in four focus areas: standardization, systemic oversight, strategic communication, and process improvement. OSN emphasized instituting measures to improve the operational structure and improve performance and evaluation metrics of activities conducted across the enterprise. In addition, OSN focused on increasing direct family feedback and addressing family support staffing concerns. These efforts demonstrate a commitment to continuing forward momentum toward program improvements and addressing the recommendations of the May 2018 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study entitled “DoD Should Improve Its Oversight of the Exceptional Family Member Program”.<sup>1</sup>

## **Standardization**

The Department focused on several key areas in order to continue standardization efforts and enhance continuous improvement across the enterprise. OSN established an EFMP work group comprised of representatives from all the Military Departments, the DoD Education Activity (DoDEA), Health Affairs (HA), Military Personnel Policy, and the Defense Health Agency (DHA). The work group is focused on three essential components: process standardization, process automation, and policy revisions. The primary goal of the work group is to establish transparent, standard EFMP procedures to improve the support and services provided to military families with special medical and educational needs. The secondary goal of the work group is to develop and deploy an automation system for data collection and case management.

As noted in the 2019 annual report, the standardized Family Member Travel Screening (FMTS) forms are complete and approved by the Office of Management and Budget. HA is the proponent for family member travel screening policy; the policy is still under development. Nonetheless, in preparation for implementing the FMTS Department of Defense forms and processes, the FMTS staff began using a new standardized template to collect baseline demographic and process information for family travel. OSN, in collaboration with the Military Departments, also designed an interactive FMTS e-learning curriculum.

OSN continued the two-year long joint-Military Service pilot designed to assess staffing requirements at the installation level by analyzing EFMP Family Support staff workload. The pilot assessed and validated the EFMP Family Support Case Management and Staffing Tool

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<sup>1</sup> GAO 18-348, “DoD Should Improve Its Oversight of the Exceptional Family Member Program,” <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-348>, (May 8, 2018).

developed by Auburn University and initiated in 2018. Throughout the year, pilot participants tracked their daily activities and submitted data to OSN on a bi-weekly basis. OSN also utilized monthly phone conversations with the participating installation EFMP Family Support pilot staff to obtain qualitative data, adding context to the quantitative data. The pandemic forced an assessment of the delivery model, as providing face-to-face services to families was no longer viable. Installation programs shifted to providing services through virtual modes of service delivery in compliance with COVID-19 safety precautions. This shift in service delivery allowed for a more accurate analysis of the amount of time service providers were providing support to families. Preliminary data shows noticeable variations in the way the Military Departments deliver EFMP family supportive services.

OSN continued to collect and review data from the Military Departments on the use of the EFMP Family Needs Assessment (FNA) with families who request EFMP family support services. Programs utilizing the standard DD Form provide a more consistent experience for Service member families regardless of their location and Military Service affiliation. The EFMP FNA has three components: 1) the Family Needs Assessment; 2) the Family Services Plan; and 3) the Inter-Services Transfer Summary.<sup>2</sup> The EFMP Family Support staff, in partnership with the family, assesses, prioritizes, and documents the unique needs of the family on the FNA. Once completed, the family determines if they wish to complete an Individualized Services Plan to further document goals, the way forward, and progress in addressing the family's identified needs. Across the DoD, 66 percent of families offered a Family Needs Assessment voluntarily completed one with the assistance of Family Support staff, and 25 percent of families developed goals and objectives documented on a Family Services Plan. Eight percent of the families offered an Inter-Services Transfer Summary chose to complete the process in preparation for their move to a sister-Service installation.

The EFMP Family Support Core Competency Training Curriculum supports a consistent programmatic knowledge base, increases standardization, and improves the provision of Family Support services across the DoD. Developed for installation EFMP Family Support staff, the curriculum includes selected webinars on the Military Families Learning Network<sup>3</sup> and training videos on the MilLife Learning<sup>4</sup> site delivered via Military OneSource. Training videos were developed in collaboration with the Military Departments and content was targeted to address Military Department-identified staff training needs. During 2020, there were a total of 428 enrollments for the EFMP-specific training videos for service providers on MilLife Learning. New training modules were added to guide new and experienced EFMP Family Support staff through steps to build and enhance their program.

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<sup>2</sup> Descriptions for the three FNA components are as follows: 1) The Family Needs Assessment organizes family information and contains open-ended questions to identify the needs of families; 2) The Family Services Plan outlines strengths-based and family-centered goals and strategies to help a family meet goals and objectives, as mandated by the NDAA 2010; 3) The Inter-Services Transfer Summary documents current needs and goals to enhance a warm hand-off with a gaining sister-Service EFMP Family Support office to maintain continuity of services.

<sup>3</sup> The MFLN engages Service member family providers and Cooperative Extension educators in the exchange of experiences and research to enhance professional impact and encourage professional growth. <https://militaryfamilieslearningnetwork.org/>

<sup>4</sup> MilLife Learning provides self-directed online courses for military families and providers, while managing and keeping track of their progress and performance. <https://millifelearning.militaryonesource.mil/>

## **Systemic Oversight**

OSN relies on data collected through the EFMP data repository and feedback from families to prioritize areas of focus for improvement. In 2020, OSN continued to work with the Military Departments and DoDEA to standardize the data terms collected through the data repository and to increase the accuracy of the data submitted. This coordination included the expansion of the existing problematic assignment data terms (Failure to Disclose, Screening Failure, and Other Reasons) to clearly differentiate the reasons for reassignments. Planning includes the further delineation of the “Other Reasons” category into more meaningful data terms such as: a new condition developed after the arrival at a location; the worsening of a condition after arrival; the loss of services at the installation after the arrival of the family. OSN also implemented a standardized process to receive education-related data from DoDEA points of contact, to publish the data to the EFMP Data Repository, and to report on the information to the Services. Other enhancements to the data repository included: 1) expanding the collection of EFMP Family Support data at the installation level; 2) adding the ability to track EFMP FNA data points (number completed and declined for each section); 3) adding the ability to upload, organize, and report data collected from the EFMP Family Support Feedback Tool; 4) developing system functionality to migrate, organize, and report on the FMTS processes; and 5) adding additional features to allow the Military Departments or OSN to include comments explaining changes in data trends and to run historical analyses using standard and dynamic reports for all EFMP Data Repository datasets.

Throughout 2020, OSN utilized data from the repository to identify potential gaps in services. For example, increased guidance from Headquarters EFMP Family Support staff and increased community awareness of available EFMP Family Support services helped explain an increase in family support services at select locations. Trends or anomalies in assignment coordination and problematic assignment data led to decisions to collect more granular data, as mentioned above.

At the end of the fourth quarter of Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, 89 percent of EFMP Data Dictionary data terms were collectible across the Military Departments. The table below (*Table I*) provides required information pursuant to section 1781c(f) of title 10, United States Code.

**Table 1, EFMP Enrollment Snapshot of Active Duty Families**

Approximately **105,400 Sponsors**<sup>1</sup> (**8 percent of Service members**<sup>2</sup> across the DoD) are enrolled in the EFMP

Approximately **143,100 family members**<sup>1</sup> (**9 percent of family members**<sup>2</sup> across the DoD) are enrolled in the EFMP

*Source:*<sup>1</sup> Data estimates reported from each of the Services to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (FY2020, Q4).

<sup>2</sup> Data estimates reported in the Military OneSource Demographics Report (FY2019).

*Note: The totals do not include Activated Reserve Component.*

## **Monitoring**

The Department relies on senior executive-level leadership to provide oversight of policies, programs, and support that impact Service members with special needs through the DoD Coordinating Committee for Military Families with Special Needs (the Coordinating Committee). The Coordinating Committee is actively engaged in advising the OSN, providing recommendations in several key areas, including the Staffing Pilot, the FMTS forms and processes, and the review of data collected through the EFMP Data Repository.

In addition to oversight from senior DoD leadership, OSN relies on input from the Subcommittee for Inter-Component Coordination, comprised of military medical department Educational and Developmental Intervention Services (EDIS) program managers, representatives from the DoDEA, and OSN. During the reporting period, the committee examined EDIS and DoDEA responses to COVID-19 shutdowns of schools and medical facilities, alternative methods for delivering services. The subcommittee also promoted increased collaboration between EDIS and DoDEA in shared responsibilities in areas such as child find initiatives, children transitioning from EDIS to DoDEA, and completing the revision of the early intervention compliance monitoring standards.

Installation EFMP Family Support programs are monitored and evaluated through the internal Military Department-level certification process. In-person certification visits were limited in 2020 due COVID-19 related travel restrictions; monitoring was conducted by HQ Family Support personnel through virtual inspections.

## **Family Feedback**

OSN launched the EFMP Family Support Feedback Tool in October 2020 via Military OneSource. This voluntary and confidential tool allows families to provide feedback about their recent experiences with their local EFMP Family Support services. Response data was collected at the Service level from October through December 2020 for distribution to the Military Departments in early 2021. Findings will be used to identify trends and possible gaps in services, and to track potential training needs within and among the Military Departments. To support the launch and continued marketing of the EFMP Family Support Feedback Tool, OSN developed standardized marketing materials for installations to use.

The Advisory Panel on Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs continues to meet quarterly. Each of the panel's seven members, representing all of the Military Departments, is appointed by their respective Military Department and each has a family member enrolled in EFMP. Topics of interest prioritized and discussed by panel members in 2020 included discussion of Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 1315.19, The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), medical warm-handoff, overall disaster preparedness in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, permanent change of station moves during extraordinary circumstances, as well as a discussion focused on providing the panel members with information about legal assistance to EFMP families and the EFMP & Me web application.

### **Strategic Communication**

OSN strengthened its collaborative relationship with Military OneSource by launching the online tool "EFMP & Me." The tool offers families enrolled in the EFMP 24/7 access to standardized information and resources through a tailored, streamlined, and supportive experience via online or mobile device (iOS or Android). Initially launched in June 2020 with content for family members, an additional module was launched in August 2020 with content specifically curated for Service members.

In its first six months, EFMP & Me registered 12,853 user sessions with 88 percent of users self-identified as Service members; this number increased 134 percent from 69 percent. These analytics indicate a steady number of monthly visits and a 68 percent increase in the average session's duration and a 42 percent increase in the number of pages visited. The tool contains ten broad categories of information, allowing users to focus on their current needs. The top three categories visited between June and December were "About EFMP and Enrollment," "Medical," and "Education."

The Exceptional Advocate quarterly e-newsletter remained a keystone in the OSN communication plan, providing regular EFMP updates and information. Total subscriptions increased by 4,278 to 22,878. Past editions of the Exceptional Advocate are archived on Military OneSource and linked for view and download.

The EFMP Resources, Options, and Consultations (ROC), available through Military OneSource, saw several changes during 2020. The special needs consultants completed over 1,100 one-on-one customized consultations, an increase of 10 percent from the previous year. EFMP ROC special needs consultants, together with OSN staff, meet monthly to conduct quality assurance reviews and assess for gaps and trends identified during consultation calls. The TRICARE liaison role continues to be a resource for the EFMP ROC and active duty and Reserve component families with special needs regarding concerns related to eligibility and enrollment for certain medical services, speech therapy, physical therapy, respite care services, telehealth, access to case management, and change of assignment resources.

EFMP eLearning courses, developed for families with special needs, are delivered via Military OneSource/MilLife Learning. These courses and video tutorials address special education topics (Early Intervention Services and EFMP Childhood Development Milestones and Identifying Delays), permanent change of station travel considerations, adults with special

needs, and Special Care Organization Record. Efforts to improve these online resources resulted in updating information and removing out-of-date content.

In June 2020, EFMP introduced a EFMP Brand Rollout Toolkit<sup>5</sup>, that included a new EFMP brand with related logos to use across the Military Departments and within all three EFMP component areas. The EFMP brand had remained unchanged for over ten years. The new brand reflects the continued evolution of EFMP and its commitment to improving services and service delivery to military families with special needs. EFMP was the first program to rebrand as part of a larger plan to visually link all DoD family programs together under the Military Community and Family Policy umbrella.

For the past year, OSN has held regular meetings with lead attorneys from each Military Department to discuss their development and implementation of enhanced installation educational law legal services for families with special needs. OSN and the Military Departments have worked together to promote increased communication and awareness of the community's needs and local challenges. OSN has used available communication tools such as the Exceptional Advocate, EFMP & Me, and social media to highlight and educate families of additional legal services as they have become available.

## **Conclusion**

Enhancing the services provided to military families with special needs is a priority of the Department, as evidenced by continual improvement and enhancement measures and efforts to standardize the process as outlined in this report. Challenges experienced by our military families with special needs continue to be addressed through intra-Service and cross-Service coordination and the provision of more effective and consistent services. The improvement and standardization of the EFMP is not optional – it is a strategic imperative to contribute to the family and mission readiness of the Joint Force. OSN looks forward to continuing the program's growth across the Department alongside the Services and their families.

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<sup>5</sup> The EFMP Brand Rollout Toolkit provides information and guidance on the new EFMP brand and logos. <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/media/toolkits/efmp-brand-rollout-toolkit/>