

## Military OneSource Podcast — EFMP Support Through Podcasts

**Program title:** Office of Special Needs

**Podcast 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](https://militaryonesource.mil).

**Bruce Moody:**

Hi. I'm Bruce Moody, and welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Today, we're going to talk about a different podcast series. One that we produced. We really want to focus on this in today's episode because it's dedicated, this series is dedicated to military families who have a family member with special needs. So, the title of the series is The Office of Special Needs EFMP podcast series.

So, with me today to talk about this series is Jen Wong. She's with the Defense Department's Office of Special Needs, also a colleague, and joining us also is Jonathan Alexander. Jonathan is a retired Marine Corps gunnery sergeant and was a guest on some of the episodes. So, welcome to the both of you. So glad to have you with us.

**Jen Wong:**

Thank you for having me, Bruce.

**Jonathan Alexander:**

Thank you very much.

**Bruce Moody:**

My pleasure. My pleasure. As we say, it is a series about EFMP, but it really is something for all members of the military community to benefit from. So Jen, if you could just lead off and tell us about this podcast series, what's in it, who it's for, what we can look forward to by listening to this series?

**Jen Wong:**

Sure, Bruce, I'd love to, and you're exactly right. This series is great for everyone, service members, family members, folks enrolled or not enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program. It's also great for providers and leaders. And these podcasts can be found on Military OneSource and other streaming services as well, such as Spotify, or

Apple, or other streaming platforms. And there are two series of the Office of Special Needs EFMP podcasts. And there's a total of 12 episodes on a variety of topics.

Just to name a few, there's EFMP enrollment, special education, financial and legal planning, deployment, caregiving, you name it. So, I think that one of the best ways to learn and grow is through experiencing and sharing. And so, these podcasts include conversations with experts who are sharing, really, what they've learned works through their experience. And so the goal is that, hopefully, their insights will help listeners connect, know what they're experiencing is normal, and gain some resources to guide them in their journey no matter what stage of mil life they're in.

**Bruce Moody:**

And you raise a really interesting point because far from a dry recitation of policy and resources, it is a lot of stories. It's a lot of sharing personal experiences so that people can really get a sense of what is there for them. And I think that that really is a big strength to this podcast. It makes it very, very compelling. Jonathan, if you would talk to us about your journey through the Marine Corps, and with retirement, and with your family, and where you are now. Can you share that with us?

**Jonathan Alexander:**

Yes, I can. And so, with all of our jobs in the military, one of the things that we all have in common is that we know nothing when we begin, and we're built from the ground up. As those years accumulate, our experience grows, our knowledge grows, and we become comfortable enough to eventually become a mentor. And throughout my military experience, I enlisted in 2004, and I was stationed at Marine Barracks, Washington D.C., on assignment with Commandant's Own, the United States Marine Drum and Bugle Corps. I was blessed to have my entire career there. And during that span, I had four children. And at one point, our two younger children were enrolled in EFMP. Throughout that journey, we experienced a lot of learning, a lot of not getting things right, but trying again. And that was a lot of what our experience was.

And my experience was in the military. I retired in 2017, and our family moved to Hawaii, where I had the opportunity to go to Hawaii Pacific University to get my master's in social work, and my focus and concentration was on military and veteran programs. And now, I'm fortunate enough to be working on my Ph.D. in exceptionalities, which is special education here in Hawaii, and my big focus is families and advocacy. And so, learning everything that I learned while I was in the military through trial and error, I feel, has better prepared me for whatever this next journey is that I'm on.

**Bruce Moody:**

And Jen, you feature prominently in this podcast series and it includes conversations with Jonathan. And can you recall some of them and what you feel that brings to the series?

**Jen Wong:**

Absolutely. As you mentioned earlier, Bruce, what's really great about these episodes is, they're conversational. Where you don't have to sit there and take notes. On Military OneSource, they have all the resources available. And so, I remember in the episode, while I was having a conversation with Jonathan, the episode title is Advocating for Yourself and Others. And I really felt like I was along for the journey with him. He was talking about how he really started his learning, and growth and advocacy watching his wife excel at advocating for the family.

And then he went down through that journey, and I really loved hearing his growth and how he learned along the way, and really that, what Jonathan mentioned earlier, we all start somewhere, and it's not always rosy and rainbows. You trip a little along the way, one step back, two steps forward. And it's a learning experience all along the way, and he talks about his journey and everyone who was there to support him along the way. And that really speaks to the military community, especially when it comes to that support.

**Bruce Moody:**

And Jonathan, if you could share with us this podcast series. Share with us your thoughts on this series and, as a resource to military families, what it will mean for them to listen to the series.

**Jonathan Alexander:**

So, one of the things that I can say about it is that when you have children that have special health care needs or a dependent that needs a little additional care at a military treatment facility, you tend to become isolated. It's not always bad that that happens. But what ends up happening is that you become hyper-focused on making sure that their needs are met, and when that happens, you tend to withdraw from your community. And one of the things that EFMP did was help reestablish a new community for us. And some of the ways that they did that was having monthly outreach events. We got to hang out as family members, as colleagues, and our children were able to go play. We were able to engage with service dogs. We were able to sit down and have a barbecue and relax, and it's nice to be around people who just get it sometimes, and EFMP was one of those places where they just got it.

They understood. They were very empathetic to our needs. And perhaps, the best story I have is one actually built on tradition. So, in the Marine Corps, one of the biggest events for us every year is the Marine Corps birthday. We have birthday ceremonies, birthday balls, all over the United States, all over the world. We're cutting cake, we're reading General Lejeune's birthday message. And these events are pretty family-friendly.

However, those of us that have children that may not behave typically, we tend to either not go to the ceremony or I would go by myself, and then I couldn't enjoy that event with my family. And so what EFMP did is that they had an EFMP birthday ball

ceremony for us. We had the Commanding Officer come. They read the birthday message. We got to cut cake. We all got to dress up and have a good time and dance to music. Enjoy comradery. And in the Marine Corps, being able to celebrate that, it's one of the most important things we do, and EFMP allowed that to be a family affair for us. And that's probably my greatest memory was that I could have my entire family at this ceremony to enjoy something that's very important to me.

**Bruce Moody:**

And important to the whole family, too. And it really illustrates beautifully, I think, just how much more EFMP is. It's so much more than say, detailing orders. Jen, if you would just sketch out for us the sort of support that you would get from the Exceptional Family Member Program.

**Jen Wong:**

Sure. Absolutely. I joined the Office of Special Needs, I came from the field, so I was working EFMP at the installation. And Jonathan, I know you can't speak to this because you weren't there, but I will bring up a story of another event where you were unable to be there. You had actually injured yourself. I believe you were in the hospital, and your wife still came to an EFMP event and carted all the kids over there because it was a Halloween event, and what you spoke to, it's very specialized. It's a welcoming environment, a supportive environment. It's something that she could take the kids to, and it wasn't overwhelming. It wasn't the middle of the night. They could dress up. And so, I remember her still showing up to that, and I just thought, wow, this must be really awesome for the kids. And it was. It was so much fun.

But along with the support of those opportunities of outreach, where families can meet one another, feel included, being in an environment that's less stressful for their family members. Those Family Support providers at the installation are doing so, so much. It's so great that they can check in on families, provide information and referral, help when something new is going on. Maybe it's a new diagnosis or something you're not familiar with, or especially during PCS season. So, PCSing is always a new adjustment for all military families, but especially military families with special needs.

That means starting over medical care, or starting a new school, or starting new services somewhere where you need to build that community all over again. And a good place to start that community is with your family support provider. And you can reach out to that provider even before you PCS and participate in what's called a warm handoff. So, we know you're leaving one installation. You're going to be arriving at the next. Let's help you with that transition from point A to point B throughout the whole ride. And so, I really, really encourage listeners, get to know your Family Support provider. They're not this mysterious person behind the computer sending you an email or whatnot. They're this person who really wants to be involved with your family, get to know you, and support you in any way possible.

**Bruce Moody:**

And there's two items I'd like for you to touch on. One is EFMP is not this permanent moniker that stays with you the entirety once you enroll. You can actually be enrolled for a short period of time. There may be a special need that you have, and then that need comes to an end for whatever the reason. And the other thing is that the EFMP program is for adults as well as children. It's for families. Jen, if you could speak to both of those issues for us.

**Jen Wong:**

Sure. Absolutely. So, I would definitely encourage listeners to refer back to the policy and see what enrollment criteria is. As long as you meet the enrollment criteria, whether it's a medical, or a mental health, or an educational need, while that need is still there, you'll be enrolled in the program. We want to make sure wherever you go with the military that you have that support you need. But you're right, Bruce, sometimes it isn't long.

I can give an example. When I was working at the installation, there was a family where, unfortunately, they were involved in a car accident, and the spouse was really banged up and had to go to a rehab facility. And I remember the first sergeant was walking that service member around the Family Support center. And, hey, let's check in with child and youth and help out with child care with your other kids. Let's check in with the financial advisor and see what we can do to assist. Let's check in at behavioral health, make sure you're fully supported.

And to be honest, they walked past EFMP because we all have a different idea of what that special need is. Or maybe we didn't realize it could be something somewhat short term. So, in this scenario, yes, that spouse needed specialized care. That specialized care was going to last awhile. It's not like it was a sprained wrist, and it's going to go away in a couple of weeks, but it required significant care.

And so, we were able to help that service member get enrolled and provide that family with that one-on-one support while they were going through this time. If at any point the family does not meet enrollment criteria based upon the policy, then yeah, there's a disenrollment process with that as well. And as you mentioned, it's a program not just for children. We do have adults who are enrolled. We have children with special needs who grow up, and now they're transitioning to post-secondary education or independent living, or maybe the workforce, and we can support spouses. So there's a lot of benefit to enrolling in the program.

**Bruce Moody:**

As we wrap up, I'd like to get any final thoughts from you, Jonathan, about either the program or this series.

**Jonathan Alexander:**

Yeah. I think that for those who have family enrolled at EFMP, for those future leaders in the military, or current leaders, commanding officers, senior enlisted, these podcasts are beneficial to help mentor, train and guide your younger soldiers, Marines, airmen or sailors, and use it as a learning tool. We don't know what we don't know. And by providing these conversations on these podcasts, like we have, it takes a pretty big topic and makes it easier to digest. And with that, I think that there can be a lot of beneficial use to using this resource as a leadership tool.

**Bruce Moody:**

Thanks for that. And what we're going to do is make sure that we have links to the Office of Special Needs EFMP podcast series in the program notes. You can click straight into it. We're also going to make sure that there's a link in there to Military OneSource. Military OneSource, our call center, or our website, it's a great way to get your first bit of information. No commitment. Just have a look at the website or give our call center a ring, or look up any information you want about the Exceptional Family Member Program. Jen Wong, Jonathan Alexander, thank you to the both of you so very much for being with us today.

**Jen Wong:**

It was great. Thank you, Bruce.

**Jonathan Alexander:**

Thank you very much for inviting me on the podcast today.

**Bruce Moody:**

Oh, my pleasure. My pleasure. So, the Military OneSource podcast, this is an official program of the Defense Department and we've got tools, and websites, and apps, and a call center, and a podcast now. And we are here to help military families as they navigate military life.

Subscribe to this podcast because as you see, we cover a wide range of topics for military families. I'm Bruce Moody, and thanks for listening. Bye-bye.