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Defense Primer: Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

Congress appropriates funds for military benefits and services to improve the quality of life for service members and their families. Military families face frequent moves around the globe, often causing disruptions to spousal employment, school or child care arrangements, and other challenges associated with establishing a household in a new location.

Military members who have a dependent (spouse, child, or dependent parent) with special needs may experience significant stress during these moves due to the need to find specialized health care providers, school systems with dedicated support services, and community support assistance. The military established the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) to ease these additional burdens of a move for such families.

Background

The U.S. Army started EFMP in 1979, with the other Services following its lead. Enrollment was voluntary and the program initially provided medical support to families with special needs in the U.S. and overseas locations.

As child advocacy groups raised concerns over the unique pressures of military service on families, Congress enacted the Military Family Act of 1985 as part of the Department of Defense Authorization Act, 1986 (P.L. 99-145 §§801-813). This act directed the Department of Defense (DOD) to create an Office of Family Policy to “coordinate programs and activities of the military departments as they relate to military families.”

After 20 years of high operational tempo and congressional hearings on strength, vitality, and sustainability of military family support programs, Congress created the Office of Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs in Section 563 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY2010 (P.L. 111-84). Later renamed the Office of Special Needs (OSN), its statutory mission is to develop DOD-level oversight of EFMP and “enhance and improve DOD support around the world for military families with special needs (whether medical or educational needs).”

OSN establishes overarching policy to support military families with special needs, while each Service (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force) is responsible for administering its own EFMP. While the degree of legal, educational, and training assistance provided varies by Service, OSN coordinates with each Service, the Defense Health Agency, and the DOD Education Activity in an effort to ensure EFMP adequately supports military families. OSN holds quarterly advisory panels with military families to assess program satisfaction and provides an annual report to Congress (10 U.S.C. §1781c(g)).

Eligibility and Enrollment

Active duty service members are required to enroll in EFMP if they have a family member with a qualifying special need. Members of the Reserve Component are not required to enroll in the EFMP, unless they are in an active duty status. DOD civil service employees selected for overseas assignments are also eligible for EFMP services on a space-available basis.

Service members may receive guidance on eligibility and completing enrollment in the program at their installation EFMP office. EFMP registration must be transferred when moving to a new duty station. While there are no costs to enroll in the program, certain costs may be associated with medical documentation required for enrollment. These costs may be reimbursed by their respective Service or through an insurance-like program known as TRICARE.

Criteria for EFMP Enrollment

(one or more of the following)

- Life-Threatening or Chronic Condition Requiring Special Care (e.g., follow-up from a primary care manager)
- Current and Chronic Mental Health Condition
- Asthma or Other Respiratory-Related Diagnosis
- Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Chronic Condition Requiring Adaptive Equipment, Assistive Technologies, or Environmental/Architectural Considerations
- Special Educational Needs

EFMP Services and Support

EFMP offices also assist with military assignment coordination and direct family support services. Dependents are eligible for support services once the service member has enrolled in the program.

EFMP offices validate educational and medical resource availability at the service member’s projected duty location, in partnership with the Services’ personnel organization. Assignments may be canceled or modified if specific services or resources are not available at the prospective location.

EFMP’s family support services identify local programs and resources to support individual needs. This includes connecting dependents with community support groups, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 101-476) early intervention, and special education services.

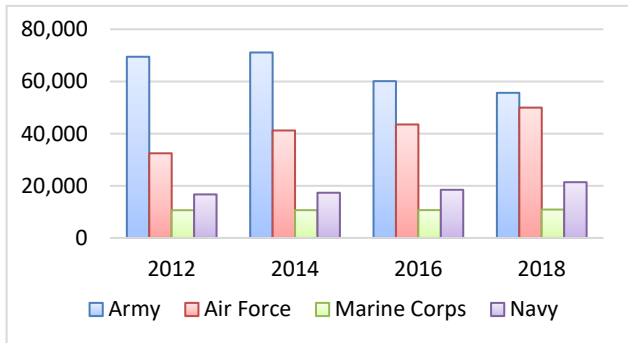
Military families supported by EFMP may also receive respite care. Eligibility, availability, and amount of monthly allotted hours varies by Service.

| EFMP Services and Support | |
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| Information and Referral for Military and Community Services | Education and Outreach to EFMP Families |
| Refer Families with Serious Complicated Medical Issues to the Military Health System | Provide Local School and Early Intervention Services Information |
| Provide Assistance Before, During, and After a Relocation | Collaboration with Military, Federal, State, and Local Agencies on Special Program Development |
| Develop and Maintain Individual Service Plans | Non-Clinical Case Management |

Active duty members and their families enrolled in EFMP may also be eligible to enroll in the TRICARE Extended Health Care Option program, which pays for additional services and supplies for those with special needs.

As of October 2018, approximately 8% (137,000) of military family members received support from EFMP. U.S. Army dependents were the largest share (40%) of those receiving EFMP support.

Figure 1. Total Military Family Members Receiving EFMP Support (as of October 2018)



Source: Communication from DOD Officials, 2018.

Current Challenges

Congress may consider legislation to address selected issues identified by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), DOD, and advocates of families with special needs.

Absence of Program Standardization

GAO’s studies in 2012 and 2018 found that EFMP implementation “var[ies] widely for each branch of Military Service,” and that the overall program lacks standardization. GAO recommended that 1) DOD assess and report to Congress how each Service provides support to its members; 2) develop a common set of performance metrics; and 3) evaluate the monitoring activities of each Service.

An October 2018 RAND study on *Enhancing Family Stability During a Permanent Change of Station (PCS)* identified similar findings. RAND found that “needs related to having a family member [in] EFMP [was] the most frequently mentioned negative aspect of PCS moves...” and that “the specific provisions vary across service branches.”

Variance in Services and Support to Dependents

In addition to the aforementioned variances in respite care, differences in legal services, development of service plans, training opportunities, relocation services, staffing levels of offices and frequency of contact with EFMP offices have been reported. The complexity of this situation may grow for military families at a *joint base*, where a Service different from the family leads the local organization.

EFMP Support to the Reserve Component

According to DOD policy, family support services for Reserve Component families depend on each Service, which has established different criteria for enrollment in EFMP. For example, the Air Force states Reserve Components family members may apply for services upon serving 30 days on active duty. In contrast, Army Reserve Component families may voluntarily enroll in EFMP before entering active duty status.

Congressional Oversight

DOD concurred with each GAO recommendation and must brief Congress on their status by March 1, 2019 (H.Rept. 115-676). The brief must include a plan to develop performance metrics for assignment coordination and family support, a method to monitor activities of the Services, and a review to determine the feasibility of creating interstate compacts for schools supporting EFMP students. Additionally, the brief may include an update on the pilot to measure satisfaction with support services and progress on the standardization of enrollment forms.

Relevant Statutes, Regulations, and Policies

Section 1781c of Title 10, U.S. Code – Office of Special Needs
DoD Instruction 1315.19 – The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

CRS Products

CRS Report R41833, *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B: Key Statutory and Regulatory Provisions*, by Kyrie E. Dragoo

CRS In Focus IF11002, *Defense Health Primer: TRICARE Extended Care Health Option (ECHO)*, by Bryce H. P. Mendez

CRS In Focus IF10530, *Defense Primer: Military Health System*, by Bryce H. P. Mendez

Other Resources

MilitaryOneSource, Office of Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs, <http://www.militaryonesource.com>

Government Accountability Office, GAO Report 18-348, *Military Personnel: DoD Should Improve Its Oversight of the Exceptional Family Member Program*, May 8, 2018

Government Accountability Office, GAO Report 12-680, *Better Oversight Needed to Improve Services for Children with Special Needs*, September 10, 2012

RAND, RR2304, *Enhancing Family Stability During a Permanent*

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