

Military OneSource Podcast — Five Truths About How EFMP Supports Military Careers

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

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:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. Managing the care and services for a family member with special needs, whether it's a spouse, a child or a dependent adult, it's a lot easier with the right support. And the best place to start is to enroll them in the Exceptional Family Member Program. Now that care and support that you get extends to your military career. And that's what we're going to talk about today with our guest.

Col. Erik Herrmann is the commanding officer at Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar, which is just north of downtown San Diego. We'll get his leadership perspective on this program, which and I'm going to lean in to say this, has changed dramatically over the last few years. So I encourage you to share this episode with somebody who you know who would benefit from it. We're on all the major podcast apps, including YouTube. Just go there, search for Military OneSource. Of course, we want you to subscribe to this podcast and we want to hear from you. Use the link, it's in the program notes. Let us know what you think about today's conversation or if you have any questions.

All right. Colonel Erik Herrmann, welcome to the podcast.

Col. Erik Herrmann:

Thank you, Bruce. I appreciate you having me here today.

Bruce Moody:

And we appreciate you being with us today. Let's just begin by hearing a little bit about you and your background.

Col. Erik Herrmann:

Sure thing. So I commissioned in the Marine Corps in 2000. I'll hit my 25-year anniversary next month. Came in unmarried, went to flight school. My military occupational specialty is as a naval flight officer, and I was assigned to the EA-6B

Prowler. That airplane no longer exists, but I had about 19 years flying that airplane, which was a lot of fun.

I got married about seven years into my time in the Marine Corps, and then we brought a son, Andrew, into the world in 2009. The EFMP program is near and dear to my heart because Andrew was born with a rare genetic disorder. It took about two years to finally diagnose him with his condition.

As a young officer looking at what would be hopefully at that time, a promising career and vast opportunities, I definitely had concern about my family's well-being and places that the Marine Corps would potentially move me.

By making the rank of colonel, obviously being enrolled in the EFMP program didn't hinder that career progression. I'm incredibly happy with what I've been able to do. My son, since his birth has moved, I think now six times, five of those were coast-to-coast moves. And each time we felt very supported by the Exceptional Family Member Program, both at headquarters Marine Corps and at the various installations that we lived on, which included Annapolis, Maryland; Yuma, Arizona; Cherry Point, North Carolina; and Miramar, California.

And so, I ended up taking O5 command here in Miramar. And as a commander, I knew who my exceptional family members were because the office here on base does a monthly kind of update on people's paperwork and needs, and they work directly with the commander for that. And then, coming back last summer to take command of the installation, now the local Exceptional Family Member Program falls under my purview. And again, trying to make sure that Marines, sailors and other service members in the area are supported is of high interest to me.

Bruce Moody:

See, this is why we're having this conversation. This is wonderful. I really appreciate the perspective that you're bringing this conversation. So let's talk about the Exceptional Family Member Program, the EFMP, from your perspective over the years and as the commander. To just kind of begin, maybe why is EFMP so critical to military families?

Col. Erik Herrmann:

So the Marine Corps likes to say, "Taking care of Marines." And I certainly believe that that is not just a bumper sticker answer of taking care of Marines. And the Exceptional Family Member Program is one facet of that.

When you're a special needs parent, there is a lot of stress that falls on you just in your normal day-to-day life. Getting kids ready for school, getting them to doctors' appointments, getting them to ... just normal routine that you go through is different than a family that does not have children with special needs. It may require more effort, more work, more support.

Factor in moving every about three years as a service member, you're constantly resetting those doctors and those resources and support networks everywhere that you go. And so, the importance of EFMP is having another resource outlet so that before you even move, they can connect you with some of the resources that exist in your new duty station.

When we left Annapolis, Maryland, the folks in Yuma, Arizona had already reached out to me. They knew we were coming. They knew what my son's needs were. And while they didn't necessarily have all of the answers, they gave us a great jumping-off point.

Bruce Moody:

Talk about EFMP as a mandatory program and really what we're trying to achieve by requiring enrollment.

Col. Erik Herrmann:

So it is a Marine Corps order, a 1754.4C, that is the EFMP governing document for the Marine Corps, and it's a mandatory program. And the reason is they want to make sure that the quality of life for service members and their families is improved no matter where they go and no matter what assignment that they're sent to.

They support the assignments and they make sure that the services exist so that we don't assign somebody to a location where they wouldn't get support and it creates more stress on that family, which consequently the service member will take to work and hold onto that stress.

And so, we don't want to put somebody in that environment. And by knowing what is going on with your family and what resources are required for that family member, we can do a better job as a Marine Corps in assigning people to jobs and locations where they're best and most fully supported.

Bruce Moody:

Well, obviously a parent is going to want to do all that they can, but there's some things that they can't do. They can't affect the assignment process to the degree that they would like unless they're in the EFMP. And so, let's take a little bit of time and talk about that connection between a service member, their career and the EFMP.

Col. Erik Herrmann:

Absolutely. So my job prior to coming out here and being the installation commander was as the aviation colonel monitor in Quantico, Virginia. And the headquarters for Marine Corps EFMP is one floor above us, and so we had great liaison with the folks that worked in that part of the building.

As far as the assignment goes, anytime that a service member sits down with their monitor and talks about the future, the monitor's intention is to put that service member into an assignment that will keep them on a career track for career progression — so, promotion, command or premier billets. And so, that's kind of the monitor's position, is, “How do we continue to move this individual through their road map of career progression?” The member that is discussing with the monitor what they want to do, where they see themselves going, they may have a different view of what they want to do and where they want to go. The daylight that exists between what a service member wants to do and where the monitor wants to put them is really, really a small amount of daylight. A lot of times, at least from my experience, we were able to align the similar objectives and goals.

Now, if that service member had an EFMP family member and the service member and I agreed, “Hey, I'm going to send you to this location.” I see that you're enrolled in EFMP. As a monitor, I don't know the details unless that service member tells me what those details are. But then, that order's assignment after we've kind of agreed on something, I would send that over to the EFMP office. The EFMP office has, from the service member, a document that basically summarizes the educational needs and the medical needs of that family member in the program.

Those talented individuals, many of them former nurses and case workers, they're looking at those cases and they're saying, “OK, your monitor wants to send you to pick a duty location. And then, I see that your family needs something very, very specific.” Maybe it's a pediatric cardiologist, maybe it's a pediatric neurosurgeon or some type of support system that may not exist in some of our duty locations that are kind of remote. Think Guam, think Hawaii, think Barstow or Albany, Georgia. Those resources may not exist.

And so, EFMP will look at that medical summary and say, “OK, I see that your family member receives this service at this frequency, weekly, monthly, semi-annually, et cetera.” And so, as the caseworker's looking at it, they don't want to assign somebody to a location where you have to drive 150 miles weekly for a treatment. So they'll kick it back to the monitor and say, “Hey, for EFMP reasons, we don't recommend this assignment. Here's why.” And then, that monitor would have another conversation with the service member. And at all times, the service member who's being talked about can reach out to the EFMP offices and have a more pointed conversation.

In my own experience, I was curious going into the lieutenant colonel command board where I could be assigned. And there were some assignments in Hawaii. And so, I reached out to the Headquarters Marine Corps office and said, “Hey, are there any prohibitions of my family moving if we get accepted for command in Hawaii? Would I not be able to go?” And they did a review and a week or so later, they said, “Hey, based off of these needs and these requirements for Andrew, we would not recommend that assignment.” I said, “OK, that's great.” So that informed me to not put those commands on my survey because I didn't want to get selected for something that I couldn't do.

Bruce Moody:

This is such valuable information, and I would say that when I was referencing earlier the changes that have happened to the Exceptional Family Member Program, one of them is a standardization policy. So a lot of what we're discussing here today exists across the services, from service to service. So this is a very, very useful conversation. I appreciate your perspective on this.

And getting back to the assignment coordination process, if there's a non-recommendation for an assignment, what are the next steps? Is there a second review? Is there an appeal process? Or if there's an assignment that a service member is particularly interested in, what review opportunities do they have available to them?

Col. Erik Herrmann:

Bruce, that's a great question and I can actually shed light on this because it happened to me. As far as standardization, I kind of want to just make the point that part of the changes I think stem from the Marine Corps really leading the way on how we did EFMP, and if a service member got assigned to a joint base, you might have different language or different processes. And so, I think a lot of it is from a standardization standpoint.

When we send a service member to maybe they're a Marine and it's an Army base, or they're a sailor and they go to an Air Force base. Everybody kind of understands the same language. And really, they've put family members in a level of need based on their circumstance, not based on the diagnosis of that exceptional family member. And so, that can provide more opportunities for the duty stations that exist.

My personal example, I was a major at the time, and I was invited to go be an instructor at Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron in Yuma, Arizona. Yuma is a relatively small town. Medical resources at the time, this is 2012, not robust like San Diego or Virginia Beach or Washington D.C., just not a pediatric hospital nearby. And so, they said, "We would not normally," we being EFMP, "would not normally recommend your assignment to Yuma, Arizona based off your son's needs."

And so, we had a follow-on conversation about his needs and where he could benefit from. We did a little bit of research of what existed in Yuma. We knew that San Diego was about a less than three-hour drive to the pediatric hospital in San Diego. And so, we talked to the command and got their support, the command in Yuma, to allow me the ability to accept those orders.

And so, I don't know if that was special treatment or anything, but it started with a conversation to say, "OK, you're saying no. Can we explore that a little bit more? And can we do some research to come to some agreement?" Now, I will tell you that responsibility of taking my son to San Diego periodically fell on my wife largely. We had a very strong and robust support network with some family in San Diego, which made that a lot easier. I will tell you, if they come back and say, "Hey, we wouldn't recommend you for this assignment, and here's why ..." the why is usually very, very

detailed and clear. And then, some accommodations or some discussions can be made about can the service member go by themselves to that duty station because it's so important, or are there some compromises that exist?

Bruce Moody:

Let's move forward with the process. Orders are in hand, we're at a new installation. What sort of support is being provided from the Exceptional Family Member Program once the family relocates?

Col. Erik Herrmann:

Bruce, I think that the process starts even before the family moves. Leaving Quantico, Virginia this most recent time, we were probably two months from leaving Quantico, and the EFMP caseworker there in Quantico put me on an email with our Exceptional Family Member caseworker out here in San Diego. I got a wonderful, "Hey, welcome. Here's some initial resources to get you started. "Now I had familiarity with Miramar, so I kind of knew what I was getting back into.

Every time that I've gone somewhere, the EFMP community has reached out and said, "This is your new caseworker and here's their contact information." And then, normally during a check-in process when you're running around base getting signatures on forms, EFMP would be one of those places that I would drop in, meet my caseworker face-to-face.

And they've usually seen my record, in my case, my son's record. And they will answer questions and talk to you about resources. And when you ask questions and they don't know the answer, my experience has been that they will do their best to research. And they'll even reach out to other families that they know to inquire, "Hey, how did you get this going? And can we put you in touch with somebody to help them along?" Or tell us and then the caseworker will pass that to the family member that's coming in. And so, I think from a sponsorship form as somebody is in-boarding, it's a great program that allows you to connect very quickly and get the support and resources that your family member requires.

Bruce Moody:

That's so interesting. We often say that when there's a strong military family, there's a strong service member. What happens at home influences a warfighter's ability to focus on the mission. And that's really all about what we're talking about today. One of the aspects of support to a family is EFMP respite care. And I wonder if you have any thoughts about what that offers to a family?

Col. Erik Herrmann:

Yeah. So you have to be a Level of Need 3 or 4 to be able to take advantage of the respite program. Essentially, it provides reimbursed care at a rate that is determined by the location that you live in. And if you're a Level 3 case, you get 20 hours a month of reimbursed care. If you're a Level 4, you get 32 hours a month of reimbursed care. And then, you attend an orientation kind of, a "Hey, here's how respite works. Here's the qualities of a respite care individual that's going to come. Here's what they need to have," either licensing or credentialing or that type of thing. It could be as low as know CPR and first aid class. For my son, we are a Level 4 need, and so we have an RN that comes in and provides respite care.

It's an incredible service from the standpoint of last Saturday night, celebrating our anniversary, we were able to have our nurse come in at about 4 in the afternoon on a Saturday, which allowed my wife and I to go and just kind of focus on our marriage and not have to worry about who is taking care of our son. And so, that was kind of a nice chance to use that program to be able to connect. But it could be used for, say you want to go Christmas shopping and the service member is at work and the spouse is taking care of the kid and just needs three hours of peace and quiet to go and do something for themselves. That's another option.

The point is to prevent caregiver burnout. Caregiving takes a toll on the caregiver because it's a lot of added stress on their plate. And so, you strongly believe that you need those outlets to be able to regroup so that you can provide better care to that exceptional family member. And so, I think it's a great program.

I think years past, they supported with respite level 1s and 2s. It's a funding issue that I think really benefits the service member, because as you stated, if a service member has the stress of things at home with their exceptional family, they're going to take that to work. It's going to bleed into their work life at some point. And so, the more opportunities that we can avoid burnout or taking that burden to work and not being able to focus on what the Marine Corps is asking to focus on, those are great.

And so, I think being able to fund the respite care program appropriately is huge. I think in certain areas it's tough to find caregivers. It just depends on the region that you're in. For us in Yuma, it was very hard to find nurses that could support this. So it does take some effort on the family member to find the right person. But usually, and I know our EFMP office here is collecting names and information so that they can pass that along to EFMP family members that are looking for that respite care.

Bruce Moody:

Colonel, we really appreciate the information you're providing today and your personal perspective on this. What would be your message to leadership across the services about supporting EFMP families and encouraging open conversation around enrollment?

Col. Erik Herrmann:

So I firmly believe that EFMP contributes to mission readiness by allowing service members to focus on their job because they know that the EFMP offices have done the prescreening to make sure that the location that that person goes to is well-supported.

The caseworkers and keeping in contact with the caseworkers on a regular basis is paramount. And that takes both parties, both the caseworker and the service member of that exceptional family member. Updating the paperwork is also critical, because if things change in a family member's life, either medically or educational support related, and the caseworker doesn't know, they can't help you. And if the monitors don't know or the headquarters Marine Corps folks don't know, then you run the risk of potentially a mismatch on a future assignment.

Bruce Moody:

My last question to you is more directed to our service members who maybe are finding out, discovering that they have some special needs in their family. What would be their first steps in seeking out what the military can do for them? And along those lines, what is the importance of a service member really keeping their chain of command current with their life?

Col. Erik Herrmann:

So on the Marine Corps side, we do regular force preservation councils. These are, as a commander, I'll sit in with my XO, my sergeant major. I may have a chaplain in there, potentially my flight doctor in there as well as, I've had behavioral health folks sit in that council meeting. And a staff NCO or an OIC, Officer in Charge, will come in and brief their people that have some life events going on. It could be a new marriage, it could be a new baby, it could be somebody got in trouble and how they're recovering from that.

And as they're briefing what the chain of command is doing to help that individual, they're alerting the command and the commander on things that may be beyond that staff noncommission officer in charge or maybe beyond their knowledge base. And so, as a commander, you can look across the table at your behavioral health people or your chaplain or your flight doc and say, "Hey, don't you have a resource that would support this?"

And I understand people want to be guarded about their personal information. I totally understand that. But when they have faith and trust in the chain of command, and a young service member brings up an issue that is affecting them, the response should be, "OK, what resources can we provide or what assistance can we provide to help you get through that challenging time? Not solve the problem, but help you and prevent you from going worse or creating more problems?"

And so, I think for folks that have emerging issues, particularly as it relates to exceptional family member issues, maybe you're not enrolled and you just need to get

some more information, you'd be surprised. There are a lot of people that are enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program, and you potentially might not know it. They may have a dependent that has a medical need that you can't see.

And so, given the chain of command, the opportunity to help I think is critically important. But if a service member is reluctant, then they can walk into any EFMP office and say, "Hey, I just want to talk to somebody about an emerging issue. I'm not sure if this qualifies or not." And that caseworker or those individuals that work with Marine and Family Programs in those Exceptional Family Member Program offices are exceptional. They've been doing it oftentimes for years. And they've been in this space, maybe not on the government side, but in your local city councils or social work or you name it, so they can provide some guidance.

You can certainly always go to read the Marine Corps order, which I know nobody likes to go and read those things, but that's another way to get information. A lot of installations, Miramar included, do resource fairs and they'll advertise that through their marketing channels. And sometimes just going to a resource fair and stop at the EFMP table and just getting some information is a great way to do it.

As a commander, I got a monthly update of whose paperwork was expiring or expired, and that forced an engagement to ask that individual like, "Hey, how are you doing? Do you need help? Are you having problems getting this paperwork done?" Oftentimes it was just, "Oh, yeah, I meant to get that done. I haven't done it yet." So it wasn't willful negligence, it was just they didn't prioritize it. And so, I think there's a number of avenues where an individual is facing something challenging can get help through multiple mediums.

Bruce Moody:

Colonel, we really appreciate you joining us today and sharing your perspectives with the Exceptional Family Member Program.

Col. Erik Herrmann:

Well, thank you for having me, Bruce. I love talking about this because I've had such an incredible experience with the folks that work in the Exceptional Family Member Program offices at various locations. And I think that the better that we can help our service members that are struggling with some of these things, the more that we positively impact mission readiness and allow service members to do what we're asking them to do. And if they know their family is supported, they're going to work so hard.

And I just want to put a plug in that Manpower and Reserve Affairs at Headquarters of Marine Corps did a study back in 2016, 2017 looking at retention among EFMP families, and it was actually higher for EFMP families than it was for non-EFMP families. So I think once people get into the program and they experience the resources that exist, I think

they feel like the Marine Corps is taking care of them. And I just think that's a great message for everybody.

Bruce Moody:

It's definitely worth noting that we take care of our families. You go out in town and try to find a company that will do this, and well, good luck to that. We really do take care of our families and our service members. Colonel, thank you for joining us today.

Col. Erik Herrmann:

Thank you, Bruce. It was great to be a part of this. Thank you so much.

Bruce Moody:

And thank you very much. Col. Erik Herrmann is commanding officer at Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar just outside downtown San Diego. And I want to remind you all that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. There's a link in the program note. Send us a question, a comment about what you heard today, maybe an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, which includes YouTube, 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.