

Supporting Families with Special Needs

By Elaine Sanchez

About a year ago, Air Force Maj. Nicholas Sabula received word of an upcoming assignment following his deployment in Afghanistan.

He became concerned, however, when he learned that his new duty station and the local area didn't have adequate services for his son, who was diagnosed with autism in 2006. But shortly after, based on a recommendation from his Exceptional Family Member Program coordinator, Sabula's assignment was cancelled and he moved here instead.

"The benefit to our son was tremendous," he said. "It showed the availability of services at one location versus another can make an incredible impact on that child.

"Knowing that EFMP took care of my family, that was critical to me," he added.

Ensuring military families with special medical and educational needs receive the best care and support possible is the goal of the Exceptional Family Member Program, said Rebecca Posante, deputy director of the department's office of community support for military families with special needs.

The program assists these families with everything from assignments, as in Sabula's case, to referrals for military and community resources, Posante said, with a focus on three key areas: identification and enrollment, assignment coordination and family support.

Family members — whether a spouse, child or dependent adult — with a chronic medical condition or special educational requirement are eligible to enroll, Posante explained. Conditions run the gamut, she noted, covering everything from asthma and allergies to autism and Alzheimer's disease.

"If you've got something that requires you to see someone beyond your family doctor, you probably should come and see if you need to be enrolled," she advised.

An enrollment referral can come from several sources, Posante explained, including a military treatment facility or school, or from the service or family member. A program coordinator at the local military treatment facility handles the enrollment process, she added.

Once enrolled, the service member's records would include a "flag," Posante explained, which serves as an alert that the member's family may need special consideration when up for an assignment, whether stateside or overseas. This ensures a family member's special needs are considered in the assignment process, she added.

"There may be places where if a family member has a particular issue, it may not be advisable for you to go to this area," she noted, citing asthma as an example. The condition might be fine at one location, but exacerbated at another, she explained. Or, a child or spouse may need a specialized orthopedic program that's only offered in limited locations.

The program also helps to avoid treatment disruptions, Posante noted. If a cancer patient is undergoing treatment at one base, a program coordinator can recommend that patient not be moved until therapy is completed.

"We're saying, 'Let's take this into consideration before we put you into an untenable situation,'" she said. "We're looking only at medical and educational needs to be met where they're going."

When notified of a move or upon arrival, Posante recommended families contact their local installation family support providers. The program recently added these providers, she explained, and they're now situated in family centers at every installation.

These providers help families identify and access programs and services, both on base and within the community. Their services include

information and referrals for military and community services, local school information, referral to other family center providers, and education and training about issues related to the special need. The support providers also provide a "warm handoff" to the gaining installation, she said, by sending information, with the family's permission, to the program contact there.

Families with special needs often feel like they're starting from scratch at a new duty station, Posante noted, as they work to enroll in new programs and ensure education plans are up-to-date. "If I'm getting ready to move, it's helpful to have one person I can contact for information and points of contact," she said. "They can help navigate these systems."

Military families who aren't near an installation, including those of the National Guard and Reserve, can call a Military OneSource consultant for support and to discuss special-needs concerns. Families can receive 12 free consultations per year by calling 1-800-342-9647 or by visiting the OneSource website.

Posante said her office is planning to host a panel in September during which active and reserve service members with special needs family members — from children to adults — will explain what challenges they face and offer suggestions to improve the program. This information will help shape the program in the years ahead, she added.

More than 120,000 military families with special needs are enrolled in the program, but Posante said there could be twice that many with enrollable conditions, ranging from the minor to the severe. She'd like to see more service members enroll so they can receive the care and support their families need. "It's in their benefit, their family's benefit, to be enrolled," she said. ●

Elaine Sanchez writes for the American Forces Press Service