



# On Their Side

## Exceptional Family Member Program Eases Strain on Marine Families

By Sara W. Bock

It's no secret that the challenges of military life can take their toll on Marine Corps families.

From deployments and family separations to frequent relocations, the demands placed on Marines, their spouses, and children often induce stress and anxiety. And for those who have a family member—or members—with special medical

or educational needs, these challenges are often magnified, and without proper support can have a detrimental effect on the readiness of the servicemembers, their units, their families, and the Marine Corps as a whole.

In an effort to improve quality of life for families who require significant support, as well as to ensure that operational needs are met, the Marine Corps in the early 1990s established the Exceptional

Family Member Program, commonly referred to as EFMP, which was mandated by the Department of Defense for all branches of the Armed Forces. Since the program's inception, Marines have been required to enroll in EFMP if their spouse or dependent child has a chronic condition, a requirement for specialty medical care, or if their child has educational special needs.

Qualifying families generally are iden-





**Left: A young participant competes in the long jump portion of a Special Olympics field meet hosted by EFMP at MCB Quantico, Va. Providing access to inclusive programs for Marine families who have children with special needs is central to the mission of the program.**

**Below: During the Special Olympics Young Athletes program at MCAS Cherry Point, N.C., a preschool-age child practices his throwing skills.**



COURTESY OF EFMP

**In 2007, as negative perceptions of the program became increasingly pervasive, the program conducted a functional analysis to assess the situation. The study was the impetus for a complete transformation.**

tified by medical providers at Military Treatment Facilities (MTFs) or by Tricare network providers, and also may self-identify by filling out a DOD-wide standard enrollment form. School-age children who require special education or related services, as well as young children between birth and the age of 3 who are receiving early intervention services because of a developmental delay also qualify a family for the EFMP.

Initially, EFMP functioned solely as an assignment coordination program, assisting the Marine Corps Manpower Management assignment branch in determining which duty stations were a “match” for the enrolled servicemember based on the availability of services or specialty medical care in the local area, said Jennifer Stewart, the program manager for EFMP at Headquarters Marine Corps. A social worker by trade, Stewart, the spouse of a retired Marine, is keenly aware of the strain that qualifying families may feel because she’s been there herself. As the mother of a child with special needs,

her family was enrolled in the program in 1999.

“I didn’t know what EFMP was—I had never heard of it,” said Stewart, adding that her family was “flagged” and enrolled in the program when they were in the process of an overseas medical screening after receiving orders to Japan.

But after being enrolled, said Stewart, she never was contacted by anyone from the program, and the family’s EFMP status was utilized by the Marine Corps solely to make assignment decisions.

For many EFMP families at the time, said Stewart, enrollment in the program was widely viewed within the Marine Corps community as having a negative impact on a Marine’s career. If a Marine was restricted from taking a set of orders based on a family member’s needs, many feared that the EFMP label would prevent them from getting promoted or progressing in their careers. As a result, many qualifying families tried to avoid enrollment.

In 2007, as negative perceptions of the program became increasingly pervasive,

**Abigail Chaney, 10, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy as a baby when her dual active-duty parents were stationed in Okinawa, Japan. The family has relied heavily on the support of EFMP as they have navigated military life with the added challenge of having a child with special medical needs.**



COURTESY OF THE CHANEY FAMILY



the program conducted a functional analysis to assess the situation. The results were staggering: 70 percent of respondents expressed their belief that there was a negative impact on the careers of Marines who were enrolled in EFMP.

The study was the impetus for a complete transformation.

“The focus really became about customer service; it became about case management for families,” said Stewart, whose family, still enrolled in the program at the time, was assigned a family caseworker and began receiving phone calls and offers of various avenues of support.

Over a four-year period, EFMP grew from an assignment review program in which families were assigned to one of four categories depending on the degree of the qualifying need, to a provider of direct support to families at all times. The four categories were eliminated, and each family’s case is now viewed individually.

“It used to be if you were Category 4 you could never go overseas,” said

Stewart, referring to those families with the most complex needs. “Well, of course that felt like, ‘I’m not going to progress in my career, I’m never going to get that billet that I need.’ So we transformed how we do assignments. Every Marine in EFMP is eligible to go anywhere in the world as long as we can just match what you need with what’s available in that location.”

Stewart, who joined the EFMP staff as an assignment case manager in 2009 and became the program manager in 2010, oversees its operations at the Headquarters Marine Corps level, where enrollment and assignment coordination is handled for all qualifying Marines. Her team of 12 individuals includes nurses, assignment case managers, family support specialists and other specialists who work closely with the monitors in the Enlisted and Officer Assignment branches.

“Monitors select the location based on where they need that Marine and career progression for the Marine, and then the

orders get funneled to our office,” said Stewart, emphasizing that EFMP does not make assignment decisions for the Marine Corps. “We make a recommendation after we conduct the review,” she added, emphasizing that the focus is on getting Marines to locations where their families have access to care.

The HQMC team also oversees and equips the family support offices located at each Marine Corps installation, where caseworkers work at the grassroots level to assist and advocate for the EFMP families in the local area. They provide support before, during and after permanent change of station (PCS) moves, particularly when it comes to getting connected to the right specialists, therapists, schools or other resources that will help ensure continuity of care during a time of transition.

“Some of these challenges get kind of magnified during PCS moves,” said Stewart, who emphasized that the family support offices at different installations communicate with each other to help ensure that families have a consistent experience as they transition from the care of one office to another.

Through EFMP, certain families may be deemed eligible for priority military housing on the installation, reducing or eliminating their wait time, or for specific

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SGT TREYON PERACCA, USMC

During a 2014 EFMP beach event at MCB Camp Pendleton, Calif., a volunteer and a young child with special needs enjoy time in the ocean. Organized activities for EFMP-enrolled families provide social interaction and networking in a safe, welcoming and inclusive setting.



**Right: Two participants in an EFMP Special Olympics field meet held at MCB Quantico, Va., encourage each other to try their best.**

housing accommodations such as one-story homes. Prior to the overhaul of the program, all families grouped in Category 4 were given priority for housing. Now, said Stewart, a new approach uses a rubric that takes into consideration the whole scope of the impact of the need that the family member has and examines the benefit that housing priority would have in order to make a determination.

EFMP also provides deployment support services, networking opportunities and social events, information and referral services, and case management, including attending individualized education program (IEP) meetings at schools at a parent's request to advocate for children who qualify for special education. IEPs are individualized legal documents based on students' needs that help ensure they receive a quality education despite their disabilities.

The program also provides respite care, allowing qualifying caregivers of children with certain special needs to have designated periods of time to take breaks to relax and recharge. And for those families who need legal services, two attorneys employed by EFMP are able to assist and advise on matters of disability-related law, landlord-tenant issues and the creation of special need trusts.

And by offering a training and education program for family members, Stewart believes that EFMP is uniquely positioned to help Marines and their spouses become advocates for themselves and for their children.

"We should help families become such great advocates that they won't need us anymore," said Stewart. "We'll always be there, of course, but we want them to build that skill, so we do a lot of education."

The drastic transformation of the program, said Stewart, paid off. By 2011, the 70 percent who cited negative perceptions of EFMP had reduced to around 30 percent, according to an audit conducted by the Naval Audit Service—and enrollment has nearly doubled.

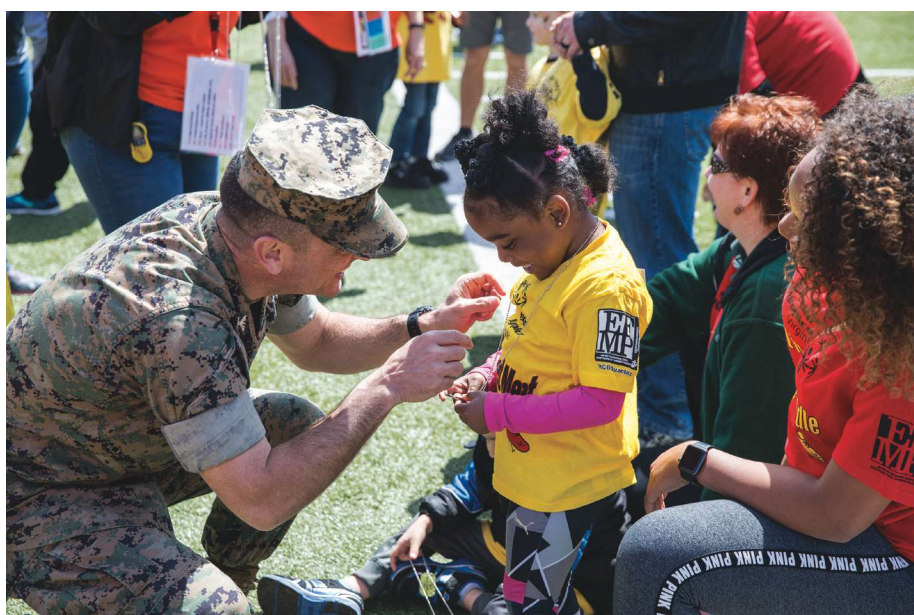
As of January 2020, there were 8,900 sponsors enrolled in EFMP, with a total of 11,300 family members with either a medical or educational need, or both.

"I think when families came to understand what we could do for them, they didn't feel so alone," Stewart said.

She's particularly excited about a partnership between EFMP and the Special Olympics Young Athletes program that began in 2018. The inclusive, parent-par-



COURTESY OF EFMP



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**An active-duty Marine recognizes a participant in an EFMP Special Olympics field meet held at MCB Quantico, Va. In recent years, Marine Corps EFMP has worked to expand its mission from an assignment coordination program to a provider of support for enrolled families at all times.**



ticipation program, designed for children with and without special needs between the ages of 2 and 7, teaches kicking, catching, balancing, running and other “pre-sport” skills. Stewart sees it as a networking opportunity for families who perhaps aren’t as interested in or comfortable with other EFMP social events, which she describes as primarily “talk-based.”

“I’ve heard parents say ‘I didn’t think my kid would be able to do something like this, and here we are together as a family playing with kids with and without disabilities,’ ” said Stewart. “It’s just a really inspiring [...] and exciting way to see people get involved.”

The program is currently offered at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Calif., and Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., and will be coming to Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center Twenty-nine Palms, Calif., later in 2020.

Stewart urges families who qualify for EFMP to give the program a chance, citing a 20-year study conducted by the Marine Corps’ Operational Analysis Directorate, which looked at 20,000 Marines, grouped by similar age, rank, marital status and family makeup, and compared career progression within the peer groups over time.

“What they found is that there is no negative impact to the enrolled population versus the non-enrolled population,” said Stewart. “So it’s empirical evidence supporting that it’s not a career ender.”

Even more convincing that the research-based evidence, Stewart added, are the families who have benefited from the program themselves. Here are a few of their stories:



COURTESY OF THE ORTEGON FAMILY

**The Ortegon family, stationed at MCB Quantico, Va., has been enrolled in EFMP for nearly a decade and credits the program with helping them navigate life with two children diagnosed with autism.**

### **The Ortegon Family: “It’s Made Me a Better Marine”**

For Master Sergeant Juan Ortegon and his wife Mary Joy, receiving an autism diagnosis nearly a decade ago for their 3-year-old son, Juan Jr.—whom they call “J.R.”—was equal parts heartbreaking and overwhelming.

A few years later, they experienced the same feelings all over again when their youngest daughter, Saleya, also was diagnosed.

“EFMP really put me back together when I was in pieces,” said Mary Joy, describing the helplessness she felt during those times. The family was enrolled in the program after J.R.’s diagnosis, and

they’ve relied heavily on the support it has provided to them.

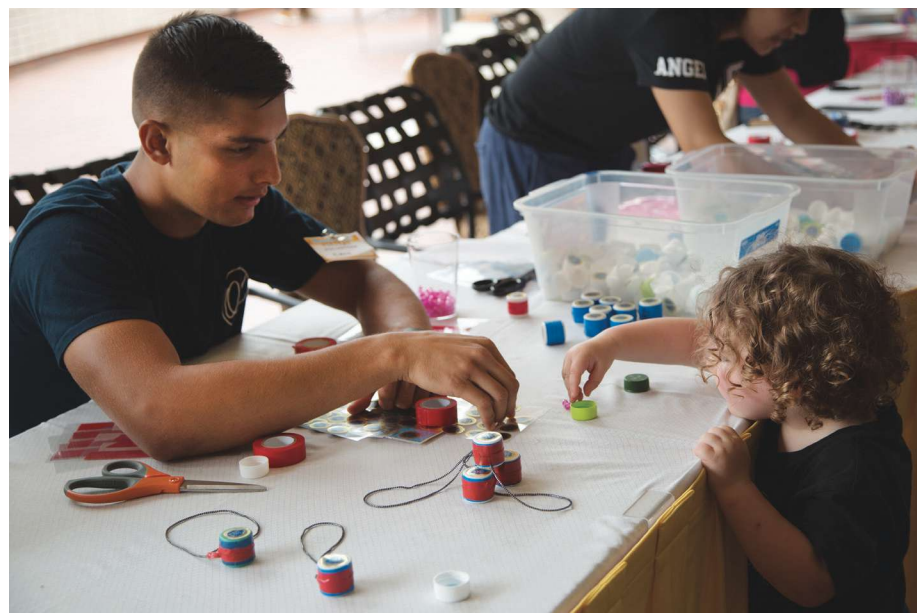
Through EFMP, the Ortegons, who also have an older daughter, now in college, have been given assistance in getting their youngest two children established with Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) providers and other therapies and services each time they’ve arrived at a new duty station. They also have greatly benefited from attending EFMP social events and connecting with other families who have children with autism or other special needs.

“When the EFMP has an event, I always go,” said Mary Joy. “It’s hard for us—we can’t really go out ... it’s very difficult in public,” she added, alluding to situations where people haven’t been able to understand or empathize with the challenges her family faces. But at the events sponsored by the EFMP Family Support Office at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., where MSgt Ortegon is on the staff of Wounded Warrior Regiment, the kids look forward to getting out of the house and socializing.

And it’s been equally beneficial for the parents.

“Sometimes, I’m frustrated and stressed, mentally drained, and I hear other families having to go through the same thing,” said Mary Joy. “We understand each other.”

For MSgt Ortegon, who hadn’t heard of EFMP prior to his family being enrolled—an occurrence that Stewart says was once very common but is less so now as the program continues to broaden its reach—the social events have allowed him the opportunity to meet and connect with other Marine dads in the program, whom



SGT JESSICA COLLINS, USMC

**PFC Chad Cruz helps a child make a miniature Japanese taiko drum during “Reach Out: A Celebration of Fun and Music,” hosted by EFMP at Camp Foster, MCB Camp Butler, Okinawa, Japan, in 2017.**



he says are always willing to talk and help each other out.

Being a parent to children with autism, said Ortegon, has been an adjustment for him, but he says it's had an overwhelmingly positive impact on his life.

"It's made me not just a better Marine, because I can now understand when younger Marines are going through these things, but a better husband and a better father," said Ortegon.

He calls the care and services that his children have received through EFMP a "godsend," saying that J.R., now 12 years old, was once nonverbal but now can carry on a full conversation.

Recently selected for master gunnery sergeant, Ortegon has been in the Marine Corps for 23 years. He's living proof that enrollment in the EFMP hasn't harmed his career; in fact, he credits the program for allowing him to stay focused on the mission at hand.

"What EFMP has allowed me to do is focus on my career more and help my wife more to take care of things when I'm not here," said Ortegon. "She's able to take care of it so that I can perform and do my job at the best of my abilities. I don't know if I could have done that without EFMP. I don't know if people would have understood or cared."

When J.R. was younger, said Mary Joy, he would occasionally unlock the front door of the family's home in military housing on Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., and walk into the street. The privatized housing company refused to allow the family to install locks on the top of the door to prevent him from getting out. Their EFMP caseworker advocated on their behalf and got the family permission to install the locks, ensuring safety and peace of mind.

Now that their children are school age, the challenges are different, but EFMP continues to step in and provide advocacy and support to ensure that they're receiving the services they need, such as occupational and ABA therapy, said Mary Joy. As the family prepares to relocate back to MCB Camp Lejeune this summer, they know they're in good hands during the transition.

"It's not a career ender if you join the EFMP. It's not going to hurt you," said MSgt Ortegon. "It's beneficial to your family, which is going to be beneficial to you."

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COURTESY OF THE WISER FAMILY

**Col Robert Wiser and his family are strong advocates of EFMP enrollment, having personally benefited from the support the program provides. Frequent relocations with a child with Down syndrome and other complex medical needs have been made easier thanks to the efforts of EFMP caseworkers.**

### **The Wiser Family: "It's Going to Help You"**

Just after their daughter, Madelyn, was born, Colonel Robert Wiser and his wife, Jennifer, enrolled in EFMP. Madelyn, who has Down syndrome and numerous other medical needs, required multiple heart surgeries shortly after birth.

"It was shaky there for the first couple of months," said Col Wiser, who is the commanding officer of Headquarters & Service Battalion, Henderson Hall in Arlington, Va. A major at the time of Madelyn's birth, Wiser was attending the one-year resident Command & Staff College at MCB Quantico, Va., which added to the family's uncertainty as he was expected to return to the fleet upon

completion of the program. They worried that their newborn daughter wouldn't have the continuity of care she needed between surgeries.

Today, the family has completed numerous PCS moves since Madelyn, now 11, was born, and the Wisers say that everywhere they have moved, they've taken the opportunity to engage with EFMP and get the resources they need to get her set up for success in a new place.

"Moving a kid like Madelyn is very labor intensive and stressful," said Jennifer Wiser. "We needed PT [physical therapy], OT [occupational therapy], speech; we needed a pediatrician, a cardiologist, and endocrinologist, an orthotist for her shoe inserts, we needed a gastroenterologist."

When they receive orders to a new duty station, one of their first phone calls is always to the new installation's family support office. Jennifer calls it "one-stop shopping," saying that the case managers are a wealth of local information and knowledge. It puts her at ease, she said, to

**“Moving from school district to school district, all the standards change. ... It’s such a comfort to go into these meetings knowing that yes, I’m advocating for my child, but here’s someone who’s more knowledgeable than me who is also advocating for my child.”**



**An EFMP staff member assists a young child with kicking a ball during a Special Olympics Young Athletes event at MCAS Miramar, Calif.**

know that they’re on her side and will help ensure that Madelyn is set up with new specialists before the family even arrives.

When the Wisers were stationed at Marine Corps Air Station New River, N.C., they saw a need in the surrounding community, and with the help of their EFMP caseworker, they started The Down Syndrome Network of Onslow and Carteret Counties, a local nonprofit for families who have a child with Down syndrome. The program has continued to thrive even after the family left the area.

Currently in a command billet in the Washington, D.C., area, Col Wiser often works extended hours, and the family has benefited from using respite care to help Jennifer get through the long days. They’ve also reached out to EFMP for sibling support for their 9-year-old son, hoping to connect him with other kids who have siblings with special needs.

“It’s so nice to connect, especially with other Marine families or other families who have children with Down syndrome,” said Jennifer.

For Col Wiser, having a child enrolled in EFMP has allowed him the opportunity to share his experiences with other families and encourage junior Marines who also have children with special needs.

“Sometimes Marines are afraid of it. They’re afraid that it could have some negative stipulations on their career,” said

Wiser. “It’s a resource that’s going to help you tremendously and you really need to take advantage of it. Just don’t abuse it or think that it’s going to get you out of doing something you don’t want to do. It’s not going to hurt you, it’s going to help you.”

### **The Chaney Family: “You Don’t Have to Shoulder This Yourself”**

Both Stefanie and Joshua Chaney were active-duty Marines stationed in Okinawa, Japan, in 2011, when their 1-year-old daughter, Abigail, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

It was a chaotic time in their lives. Joshua was deployed and Stefanie had just returned from supporting a disaster relief effort in the Pacific. And due to limited medical services in Okinawa, the family was granted a humanitarian transfer to Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., where Abigail could receive the medical care she needed.

“It was at that point that EFMP kind of stepped up to the plate,” recalled Stefanie. “We were kind of stumbling around blind. We had no idea what humanitarian orders were. We didn’t know where to go from there, and EFMP kind of stepped in and said, ‘We’ve got this.’ They are lifesavers.”

From providing initial housing support and contacts for medical care and therapies, EFMP has been an asset to the Chaney family since the very beginning.

As their daughter got older, caseworkers have regularly attended IEP meetings at her schools at different duty stations to advocate for her best interests and have connected the Chaney family with other families who have similar diagnoses.

Stefanie Chaney got out of the Marine Corps in 2013, and her husband, now a gunnery sergeant, is assigned to Fort Meade, Md. Since they’re located at an Army installation rather than a Marine Corps base or station, their EFMP support comes from the family support office at Henderson Hall in Arlington, Va. She says that both at Fort Meade and where they were previously stationed at Fort Belvoir, Va., the Marine Corps EFMP staff has gone out of their way to ensure that the family continues to be taken care of—and that their counterparts at the Army EFMP office have also provided assistance.

Abigail, now 10 years old, has benefited greatly from the advocacy that EFMP has offered in an educational setting.

“These school districts will try and make you feel guilty for trying to ask if your child might receive a little more help or therapy, and they want to tell you ‘This is all we’ll give you,’ ” said Stefanie. “To have a caseworker say, ‘No, I know these rules. This is what they rate.’ Moving from school district to school district, all the standards change. So to have somebody there who is familiar with the area and with the rules, it’s one of the greatest feelings. It’s such a comfort to go into these meetings knowing that yes, I’m advocating for my child, but here’s someone who’s more knowledgeable than me who is also advocating for my child.”

She emphasizes the importance of the crucial support the program has provided during moves and deployments. After three PCS moves since being enrolled in the program, she finds the process more predictable and is better equipped to prepare for “roadblocks and hurdles” in advance.

Having someone she can pick up the phone and call anytime, particularly when her husband is deployed, is invaluable.

“Even if they don’t know the answer right then and there, they’ll get that answer for you, and they’ve never failed to pull through for us,” Stefanie said. She’s also taken the opportunity to reach out to newly enrolled families and help ease their fears.

She encourages those parents to not be afraid to ask for help, to participate in the available networking opportunities and not to fear the “EFMP” label, which she says has been a lifeline for them—and she’s incredibly grateful.

Her message to families like hers is this: “We’re all in this together, so you don’t have to shoulder this yourself.”



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