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**PRESENTATION TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY**

**PERSONNEL**

**COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES**

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**STATEMENT OF**

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**AIR FORCE PERSONNEL CENTER**

**SUBJECT: THE EXCEPTIONAL FAMILY MEMBER PROGRAM**

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Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Kelly, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for your continued support of the Armed Services and interest in the Department of the Air Force's Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). It is an honor to speak on behalf of our Airmen. The Department of the Air Force's tri-component EFMP team consists of EFMP-Medical, EFMP-Family Support (EFMP-FS), and EFMP-Assignments, and is built on a foundation of collaborative coordination and care. We continue to expand our family support capabilities, address assignment and medical related challenges, and open the aperture for ongoing communication to improve the quality of life for our EFMP families.

Today, there are 33,181 active duty Airmen coded as EFMP sponsors and 50,987 family members enrolled in EFMP. When a family is identified as EFMP, the supporting installation Airman & Family Readiness Center EFMP-FS Coordinator connects them with appropriate information, assistance, and resources. The Air Force has 99 EFMP-FS Coordinator positions and four program management positions for a total of 103 personnel supporting 78 main operating installations and four satellite offices for a total of 82 locations to provide the community support functions that enhance quality of life of special needs family members. EFMP-FS Coordinators provide non-medical case management that includes assessing family needs, developing family services plans, and providing related workshops and support events in addition to assisting families in navigating community resources. Examples of these resources include federal, state and local programs; Military OneSource; respite services; and other non-profit organizational support such as Easterseals support services. In concert with our increase of 59 EFMP-FS Coordinators since 2017, the Air Force implemented a one-week in-person training course for newly assigned EFMP-FS staff to standardize the level of services provided to families. We also continue to offer quarterly parent focused training on topics such

as Applied Behavior Therapy, Medicaid, financial planning, individualized education program, and future life planning. These training opportunities help enhance the connection and knowledge of parents as they navigate resources for their special needs children. Additionally, the Air Force funded or hosted over 450 outreach events across our installations in fiscal year 2019, with 100 of those specifically addressing the increased number of special need adults as well as resilience support to caregivers.

The reassignment, or permanent change of station process, affords the military service member an opportunity to make informed elections regarding reassignments, and utilize options available to them. The Department of the Air Force appreciates the balancing act our Airmen must execute between career progression interests and making decisions that are appropriate for their families. Reassignment selection for all Airmen is based on eligibility and qualification factors, regardless of EFMP enrollment, to ensure a fair and equitable assignment selection process. As an improvement to assignment processes for officers, the Department of the Air Force decreased annual cycles from three to two in order to permit Airmen longer lead-times to prepare for assignments. We are pressing hard to do the same on the enlisted side, with multiple groups working through the limiting factors to prepare for the shift. Assignment process changes such as these benefit our EFMP families by allowing more time to accomplish assignment screening actions, learn more about resource availability at the projected new location, and ensure continuous care and support.

When an Airman is selected as the most eligible member for reassignment and coded as EFMP, the Airman and their families work with their local Special Needs Coordinator at the Military Treatment Facility to initiate the Family Member Travel Screening (FMTS). This process determines availability of services at the projected location and subsequent medical and

educational travel recommendations for the EFMP family member. To improve functionality and transparency of information/data between EFMP program areas involved in the travel screening processes, the EFMP-Medical program manager is co-locating to the Assignments Branch at the Air Force Personnel Center. This co-location is projected to improve and expedite the process of determining whether required EFMP services are available in the projected assignment area. If services are available, the Airman receives authenticated permanent change of station orders and proceeds on the assignment. However, when it is determined that services are not available, assignment considerations are offered to the EFMP-enrolled Airmen. Any request to change an assignment is always voluntary and initiated by the Airman. Allowing the Airman to have this type of voice in the assignment process is vital for mission readiness and retention.

Since every EFMP family presents its own unique medical and/or educational concerns, flexibility must be afforded to these families at a higher threshold than an Airman without an EFMP family member. Even so, we are mindful in ensuring fair and equal consideration for all Airmen as we balance mission requirements and family needs. This balancing becomes especially impactful when a final determination is made that remaining at the current assignment location is in the best interest of the Air Force and the member. Airmen remain eligible to request an assignment or deployment deferment during critical junctures in care, especially when the Airman's presence is essential to the success of care for an exceptional family member.

Within the EFMP-Assignments component, we found our greatest challenge remains ensuring our Airmen and families understand the array of options available to them during reassignment. The critical need for continuously educating our Airmen with EFMP families led to a 2019 increase of 3 additional EFMP-Assignment positions at the Air Force Personnel

Center. This increase followed a December 2017 EFMP- Assignments Component launch of its official Facebook page utilizing the platform to close the communication gap with spouses, caregivers and military sponsors. These efforts focus on the spouses and caregivers as they are primarily the individuals engaged daily in making appointments such as those for medical and therapy services and for Individual Education Plan meetings, and so forth. These individuals also carry the burden of gathering required documentation when reassignment occurs. Since Facebook page's inception, the EFMP-Assignment team has answered 2,494 direct messages from Airmen and their family members on a variety of inquiries that include how to process an EFMP reassignment request, where to find a local point of contact, and information on respite care. The current response time to Facebook inquiries is 24-hours.

As an additional synchronization of communication outreach, the Department of the Air Force EFMP tri-component functions launched annual and quarterly virtual events that expanded to Facebook Live webinars in order to provide on-going, continuous open-discussion forums for EFMP families. The popularity of these social media activities has significantly increased since inception and helps us further identify concerns or questions from our EFMP families. Our annual EFMP Virtual Facebook Live webinar in September 2019 reached a notable 27,000 participants and our quarterly Facebook live webinar in November 2019 reached 4,200 participants. The feedback to date has been invaluable as we apply continuous process improvement techniques to enhance the program and improve positive experiences for our customers.

As a precursor to senior leadership hosting the first EFMP summit 2017, the Department of the Air Force launched an EFMP Perceptions and Awareness Survey in 2016. The survey helped us to better focus our communication and feedback venues. We initiated summits

which are now annual events where EFMP families provide valuable feedback that helps improve program responsiveness, and ultimately customer service and care. The summit events are broadcast live with social media to ensure maximum awareness and participation, especially for those unable to travel in-person to the event. Feedback provided by families helped define the core competencies of our tri-component EFMP Orientation curriculum launched on 15 September 2019. Newly enrolled EFMP Airmen and families are introduced to local support providers and points of contact, services offered, and how to navigate EFMP to ensure available care meets family needs. The curriculum's goal is to set the stage for successful support of Airmen who have family members with special needs and to support retention efforts for all Airmen and their families.

In November 2019, the Department of the Air Force EFMP tri-component leads began working with the CareStarter Company. A contract was granted to pilot its "patient focused technology" at Travis Air Force Base and after meeting with the tri-component leads, they defined handoff points and triggers to customize a platform for member access on mobile devices. Some of the expansive care offered through this effort provides network of care ratings, pre-reassignment resources tailored to each family member by diagnosis and age, and an eighteen-month CareMap. These lines of effort provide transparency and program standardization to Airmen and families. We are excited about the possibility of eventually linking CareStarter to our Talent Marketplace platform, an extensive process to ensure we're a competitive "employer of choice," to provide EFMP-coded Airmen with the best possible solution to predictively navigate their career choices and care availability.

As for program disenrollment, upon improvement or changes in exceptional family member conditions, Airmen may request disenrollment by submitting documentation of the

change to the Special Needs Coordinator at the supporting Military Treatment Facility. The Special Needs Coordinator validates the change to ensure an enrollment criteria threshold is no longer met, and advises the supporting Military Personnel Section to update the Airman's personnel record accordingly, as long as no other family members are enrolled in the program. Disenrollment from EFMP may also occur through retirement or separation of the sponsor, when the identified child reaches majority age and no longer qualifies as a dependent, removal of custodial status, divorce of identified spouse, or the death of the identified family member.

We are aware of the perceived stigma associated with EFMP enrollment, which is why our marketing and outreach efforts are targeted at empowering Airmen, spouses and caregivers in utilizing available services and recognizing the benefits of enrollment for enhanced care of family members. As we work to enhance EFMP for Airmen and families, we will remain engaged in soliciting their feedback and developing solutions to issues that affect their quality of life, readiness, and wellbeing. We made strides in our EFMP program, but recognize we still have a ways to go and we remain focused on improving and delivering the highest quality service to our EFMP families. The importance of the EFMP program has visibility at the highest levels and progress on improvement is reviewed quarterly at the 3 and 4-star leadership level. Our team of professionals will continually assess our policies, processes, and communications, as we continuously listen to our customers, and remain relentless in working to ensure world-class care for our Airmen and families.

Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Kelly, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for this opportunity to represent our wonderful Airmen and their families. We are grateful for your unwavering support and dedication.