

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4704

October 1, 2024

The Honorable Ashish S. Vazirani
Assistant Secretary of Defense
Personnel and Readiness
4000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Assistant Secretary Vazirani:

I write to express the importance of the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) to the men and women of our armed services. Approximately 40,000 families are part of the EFMP, which supports families with children or adult dependents with special medical or educational needs. The Army first created this program in 1979; however, 2022 was the first year the Department of Defense (DoD) did a formal survey to gather family input about their experience, feedback on what should be improved, and insights into the adequacy of the resources provided. We must ensure that the DoD is upholding its promise to care for all of our servicemembers and their families, including the ones with children with special needs.

In June 2023, your office released the DoD Instruction 1315.19¹ on the EFMP. The instruction directs the Service Secretaries to establish a single EFMP office located at the military services' headquarters to oversee program implementation and to coordinate identification, enrollment, assignment coordination, and family support services, along with an EFMP office at each military installation with non-clinical case managers to help enrolled families develop a family services plan to address their needs. I am pleased the Army announced earlier this year the establishment of a central office for the Army EFMP to improve the stationing process for families who have members with special medical or educational needs. While this is an important step for the Army, I believe we must ensure military families are aware of and feel supported by this office and that DoD and all services are implementing the directives in the DoD Instruction 1315.19.

In Washington state, we are fortunate to have the Center for Autism Resources, Education, and Services (CARES) at Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM). The CARES program attracts many families and children through the various services of the EFMP and proudly supports servicemember families who rely on these resources for their children's needs. It is a vital program, however, most installations do not have the same level of support from a program like CARES when caring for these exceptional family members, including other bases in Washington state.

¹ <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/131519.pdf>

Child care for children with special needs often requires employees with additional expertise, yet many Child Development Centers have no additional allocated resources for skilled professionals to assist in training staff and caring for these children. JBLM ranks third highest in population of EFMP families across all Army installations, with over 4,000 families enrolled in the program. Clover Park School district alone, which supports JBLM, enrolls 4,249 children of servicemembers, 672 of which have disabilities (15.8 percent). After hearing from several installations in Washington, it is clear that additional EFMP coordinators are needed to assist the staff and children in Child Development Centers to ensure these children are enrolled in the appropriate programs and connected to available resources for their particular needs.

In order to address the concerns outlined above, I request responses to the following questions in order to better understand the actions the DoD and services are taking to ensure the EFMP is supporting our servicemembers and their families.

1. What criteria does the DoD use to determine the number of EFMP coordinators, and what is the total number per-base?
2. Are more EFMP coordinators assigned to bases where Impact Aid funding for children with disabilities is most needed?
3. How do the EFMP coordinators work with Child Development Centers and parents to ensure they have the resources they need to support children with disabilities in the centers?
4. What steps has the DoD and the military services taken to implement DoD Instruction 1315.19 on the EFMP?
5. What is the status of the single EFMP office at each services' headquarters, and the EFMP office at each military installation?
6. Are you aware of anything the services need to complete the establishment of the central offices?
7. Has DoD reviewed the services' internal process for creating the central offices? Does DoD plan to?
8. How is DoD supporting the servicemembers and families with children with exceptional needs who are OCONUS?
9. What specific actions can Congress take to support the EFMP?

I remain committed to supporting our servicemembers and their families who rely upon the EFMP in Washington state and across the country. Please direct communications regarding this letter to Olivia Elkins (Olivia_Elkins@murray.senate.gov). Thank you again for your time and attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Patty Murray
United States Senator