

## **Military Family Centers – What are They and Are They Doing a Good Job? (An Insider’s View)**

By Anne Wight, GCDF, CFLE, and CCRR  
Military Spouse Corporate Career Network

Military family centers are authorized by the Department of Defense (DoD) and have been established over the years by all the military services. The official DoD Instruction (DoDI) that outlines military family programs can be found online at <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/text/i134222p.txt>. What are these family centers called? Why were they established? Are they doing a good job?

There has often been confusion about military family programs. Single military members might think they are only for married military members and their families. That is definitely not true! The programs and services are for everyone in the broader military family, including DoD civilians in certain programs and locations. Some might think that the programs and services are only for those who have problems. That is also definitely not true! Military family centers offer programs that inform and even educate, as in personal finance. Financial workshops and resources are offered that teach how to use credit wisely, how to buy a house or car, basics of investing, etc. In many military services, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is offered through the family center. For anyone leaving military service, TAP is an incredible resource. Military family centers also provide military spouses with employment assistance (especially needed in conjunction with relocation or at transition of the military member). Also, family centers serve as the location for the military relief societies to assist military members who have a true financial emergency need. They also refer eligible users to the best office or agency to assist with a problem or issue, routine or crisis, that is outside of their own programs.

Another source of confusion arises from what military family centers are called by each service. The Army established Army Community Services (ACS) to provide military family programs. The Navy provided Family Service Centers but now has Fleet and Family Support Centers while the Marine Corps has Marine Corps Community Services. The Air Force just recently changed from Family Support Centers to Airman and Family Readiness Centers. The Coast Guard has Family Resources Support and Transition and Relocation Assistance in their Work Life Division. The confusion goes even deeper when one looks at the specific family programs and services offered by each military branch. For example, the Exceptional Family Member and Family Advocacy programs are part of Army military family programs, but they are not in the Air Force. The Army’s TAP is not part of ACS, but the Air Force offers TAP through its Airman and Family Readiness Centers. Even the names of some programs are changing to reflect the current focus on readiness. Personal Financial Management might be called Personal Financial Readiness at your location and spouse employment programs might now be called Employment Readiness.

The readiness theme is highly appropriate for military members and their families. Military readiness is of key importance to commanders. Personal readiness is key to achieving a good quality of life, regardless of one’s career or position. Military family

centers work closely with commanders to ensure the men and women they are leading are well prepared and resilient so that problems are minimized and when the military member is on duty, his or her focus is on the job. While not on the job, the military member and his or her family can enjoy a good quality of life.

Indeed, military family programs were established so that military members and their families could achieve personal stability and a good quality of life and military commanders could have professionals who understood the military lifestyle to assist them in their leadership duties:

Family Centers assist commanders and DoD personnel and their families in managing the competing demands of the military mission and the family. They shall provide the information and family services necessary to support single and married DoD personnel and their family members in meeting the unique demands of the military lifestyle. Programs and services shall provide information to DoD personnel and their family members, improve skills for living by fostering competencies and coping skills, encourage self-sufficiency, and offer short-term support and assistance when necessary.  
(para 4.1 of DoDI 1342.22)

Installation and community family issues are the direct responsibility of commanding officers and installation commanders. Family Centers perform the critical roles of coordinating and integrating family support programs and policy among installation and community agencies.  
(para 4.4 of DoDI 1342.22)

Do users have to pay for these programs? No! The military family programs and services are absolutely free for all eligible ID card holders. Occasionally, a special workshop or presentation might be offered that involves a minimal charge, but these are very rare. Do users have to travel to a building to receive information? As a matter of fact, many of the programs and services offered by military family centers can now be reached online. Have online resource information and service delivery helped to strengthen the military family programs? Should personal contact with a family center professional be replaced by online and telephonic services? My answers to these last two questions are yes, they have helped and no, personal contact should never be eliminated from any human service program.

In recent years, some military programs and services have been supplemented by outsourced offerings. At the same time, DoD and the various military services have worked diligently to place family program information online to increase accessibility by military members and their families. The Family Readiness Toolkit can be found online at <http://www.dod.mil/ra/documents/toolkit/FamilyReadinessToolkit0308.pdf>. Page 41 of that Toolkit lists these primary military family websites:

<http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil>  
<http://www.myarmylifetoo.com>  
<http://www.lifelines.navy.mil>

<http://www.usmc-mccs.org/>  
<http://www.afcrossroads.com>  
<http://www.uscg.mil/reserve/>

Please add Military One Source to this listing – <http://www.militaryonesource.com>. The one caution about Military One Source is that they do not offer services to civilians (except for family center staff) or to retirees and their families. Another overall caution is to ask the provider of any outsourced program two key questions -- what their experience is with military families and what their professional background is. My personal bias is to prefer providers who have always supported military families through military spouse and transitioning military employment opportunities (before they were awarded any contract) and who have national certifications or academic degrees in the services they are providing. I also have a bias to value national nonprofit organizations who have worked tirelessly to help military families.

The key question, “Are military family centers doing a good job?” is answered by a resounding yes in my opinion. The years I spent as the Family Support Division Chief for the Army in Nuernberg, Germany introduced me to the hardest-working, highest caliber of professionals I have ever known. When I “retired” as a Family Support Specialist for the Air Mobility Command (Air Force) a few years ago, I was pleased to have met more truly dedicated, highly professional family center staff members throughout all services. Military family center staff members have struggled with diminishing budgets, changing terminology, reengineered personnel systems, expanded use of technology, results management, increased services, and increased demands for services. The family center programs continue to provide high quality, professional services to military commanders, military members, and military families. I am very pleased to continue my association with them through the Memoranda of Understanding that my current employer, the Military Spouse Corporate Career Network (online at <http://www.msccn.org/>), has with each branch of the military. I hope that all eligible users will become familiar with their local military family center and the professionals who work there. When time permits, browse through all the websites mentioned above to learn more about the military lifestyle and how military families can thrive while serving their country.