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Military helps families find care for special-needs kids

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When her husband, a Marine Corps colonel, was transferred last summer from the Pentagon to a base in southern California, Karen Driscoll was forced to confront her autistic child's new school district and the intricacies of federal special education law.

The Poway Unified School District near San Diego offered Driscoll's 11-year-old, Paul, the support of an aide for 10 hours a week -- fewer than half the 21 hours Fairfax County had provided and said he deserved under federal law.

"They slashed his services in half and said, 'We believe this is comparable,' " Driscoll said.

Until recently, Driscoll would have had to fight the school district alone. But under a new Marine Corps initiative, she had reinforcements: a caseworker and a special education attorney, provided by the military, to accompany her to meetings with school officials and, if need be, to court.

That initiative is part of a larger military effort, led by the Marines and the Army, to address the medical, educational and emotional challenges faced by special-needs families.

"The Marine Corps is really standing behind our military families and saying, 'We will take care of you and help you through this process,' " Driscoll said. With the U.S. military in the room, she said, the Poway school district seemed more willing to negotiate. Without setting foot in a courtroom, Paul was assigned a full-time aide.

The Defense Department says that about 220,000 active-duty and reserve service members have dependents with special needs, but only 90,000 are enrolled in the military's main program to serve them. For the past two decades, the program has ensured that families are transferred only to bases that have doctors available to address their needs. That has prompted concern among service members that it will interfere with promotions and has caused the program to be underutilized.

But in 2007, the Army began offering as much as 40 hours a month of free respite care for soldiers who have dependents with disabilities. The Marine Corps followed suit in 2008 and then went further, creating about 60 new positions at installations across the country to help Marines and their families make the transition from place to place more smoothly.

Each Marine Corps family is assigned a caseworker who helps them understand each state's differing disability regulations and navigate the bewildering process of accessing special education services. Three staff attorneys have been designated to help parents with legal issues related to disabilities, including pressing school districts for those services.

"They needed to do something so that service members could deploy without worrying," said Joyce Raezer, executive director of the Alexandria-based National Military Family Association.

Negotiating with school districts over special education services is particularly difficult, families said. Federal law guarantees a free, appropriate public education for students with disabilities, but what that means is a matter of interpretation and varies widely. When parents want something other than what the district offers, there's little recourse without going to court -- a lengthy and expensive proposition for a family that likely will move again in fewer than three years.

"Special education, the way it's set up right now, it's very hard for parents to hold school systems accountable," said Air Force spouse Jeremy Hilton, who has moved five times with Kate, his 7-year-old daughter with special medical and educational needs.

Driscoll said that in her case, Poway agreed to devise a behavior plan and have a psychiatrist at Paul's school but offered only the 10 hours per week of direct service. "I said, 'No, wait a minute. A piece of paper stuck in a file is not a replacement for direct services,'" she said.

The new measures are encouraging servicemen and women to ask for help addressing dependents' disabilities rather than hiding them, officials said. Enrollment in the Marines' program for special-needs families, which is required to access the new services, is up 40 percent since 2007.

"We are in the midst of a transformation," said Rhondavena Laporte, a former Spotsylvania County special-education administrator who now leads the Marine Corps' efforts to serve special-needs families.

The Army is developing a pilot program to deliver similar individualized support. It will start at five bases in the next six months, said Sharon Fields, who is in charge of the program.

The 2010 Defense Authorization Act, which President Obama signed in October, calls for a new Defense Department office of support for families with special needs. It will ensure consistency among the military's branches, according to the legislation, and monitor whether military families have fair access to state and federal programs.

"Everything for me ties into readiness," Fields said. "If we can provide that cushion of support for the family, the soldier is mission-ready to do his job or her job."

The changes are partly the result of lobbying by military families who point to the experiences of spouses such as Kyla Doyle.

Doyle fought a years-long legal battle with a California school district to keep her autistic daughter, Kate, out of a classroom for severely disabled children, where she would have been one of the only children able to speak. Legal fees and the cost of Kate's therapy forced Doyle to move with her children into her parents' home. In the midst of it all, Doyle's husband, a master sergeant in the Marine Corps, was shot by a sniper in Iraq.

He recovered and deployed for a fifth overseas tour this summer. Doyle eventually won her battle with the school district, but managing alone was overwhelming, she said.

"It relieves so much stress to know that someone hears you and understands you and is willing to stand up for your child," Doyle said.

In other branches of the military, parents still shoulder that burden alone. When Air Force Lt. Col. Elizabeth Schuchs-Gopaul transferred from Alabama's Maxwell Air Force Base to the Pentagon this summer, she was surprised to discover that speech therapy for her son, which had been free in Alabama, cost \$100 an hour in Virginia. Federal law gives states wide latitude in determining eligibility for, and the cost of, disability services.

"I was in a panic," said Schuchs-Gopaul, whose 2-year-old son, Evan, spent the first half of his life unable to hear and is just now learning to speak. She haggled with the military's health insurance for months before receiving payment. Now Evan needs occupational therapy, and she is again arguing for coverage.

The Air Force has launched an effort to bolster its services, said Maj. Richelle Dowdell, a spokeswoman. For Schuchs-Gopaul, whose son said "Mama" for the first time six weeks ago, at age 2 1/2, that's welcome news.

"I don't expect them to take my hand and do this for me," she said. "But I would like some help."

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