

September 24, 2009

Department of Defense Inspector General
The Honorable Gordon S. Heddell
The Pentagon
Washington D.C. 20301-1900

Dear Mr. Heddell:

The following signatories are Air Force active duty members and/or their spouses who have a child with a disability. These children have special medical and educational needs that range from limited to profound. We request that the DoD Inspector General investigate a number of serious discrepancies in the Air Force's implementation of its instructions related to the support it provides Air Force families. We additionally request the DoD IG investigate the significant differences in quality of support services for family members who have special needs provided by the Air Force as compared with the other services.

The Air Force implementing instruction for Special Needs Identification and Assignment Coordination is AFI 40-701. The POC for this instruction is LtCol Carol Copeland, the Program Manager for AF Programs for Families with Special Needs (AFMOA/SGHW). At the end of this letter, we have attached a list of various responsibilities and operating standards addressed in the instruction that are not accomplished. Listed also are a number of other aspects of the instruction that are accomplished in such a poor fashion as to be meaningless.

In addition to not following its own instruction, the Air Force does not provide enough support to family members who have special needs, particularly when compared to the other services. In particular, the Army and Marine Corps have implemented and executed a wide range of effective services for their special needs families. This discrepancy between the services offered for family members with disabilities should be investigated and rectified.

Based on statements made by the Secretary of the Air Force and the Air Force Chief of Staff, the Air Force leadership realizes its procedures and support programs are woefully inadequate. It is our understanding that the Air Force, over the last year, has been evaluating its programs for family members with special needs. However, families who have children with special needs cannot afford to wait while the Air Force studies the problem, forms working groups, and then attempts to find funding. This is especially so given that the problem has been studied for a year with no action either to solve the problem or to simply start complying with the Air Force instruction. Many of these families have significant

December 10, 2009

Page 2

hardships which require decisive leadership. This starts with first following the instructions in place. The next step should be implementation of an entirely new program to provide appropriate support services in line with what is already provided by the Army and Marine Corps. Just as critical will be the necessary follow-up. We would recommend whatever program is put in place be reviewable by the Air Force Inspector General and added as a special interest item Air Force-wide for the first two years of implementation. The current lack of compliance with AFI 40-701 is directly related to a lack of effective, independent oversight. Making this program a special interest item helps ensure future Air Force families do not have to deal with similar non compliance.

We appreciate your investigation of the above complaints. We look forward to providing the IG as much information as they need to investigate this issue. The following individuals are the complainants and may be contacted at the provided numbers.

Sincerely,
[Electronically signed]

Attachment

AFI40-701, 8 AUGUST 2008

This is a list of items that are not accomplished or accomplished so poorly as to be neglectful (highlighted in red) or accomplished in such an inadequate manner as not to be meaningful for family members or the Air Force (highlighted in yellow).

1.2.1. Special Needs Identification. The purpose of identifying sponsors and their family members with special needs is to determine the ongoing necessary medical and educational services required for family members based on specific conditions, to support access to specialized services at the current and projected duty assignment, and to protect federal rights and entitlements for mobile family members. Early identification and documentation of special needs in family members of active duty sponsors streamline the assignment process when relocation is initiated. The coordinated identification of special needs assists with the continuity of family member care through the sponsor's Permanent Change of Station (PCS) and Temporary Duty (TDY).

1.2.2. Family Member Relocation Clearances (FMRC). The SNIAC process implements Air Force responsibilities under Title 10, United States Code, for medical entitlements of military family members, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to support access to special education services, the Joint Federal Travel Regulation for family member travel allowances and household goods shipment, and DoDI 1315.19. The goals of the SNIAC FMRC process are to prevent active duty assignment failures due to unavailable resources for family members, to support DoD civilians through the provision of information about services availability OCONUS, and to enhance access to medical and educational resources for all family members through the relocation process. These actions support mission readiness. Successful relocation reduces stress for sponsors, family members, and units.

[Please note that the Air Force SNIAC process currently in place typically adds stress to service members and their families as we PCS]

1.3.1.1. Emphasize and coordinate the cross-functional processes of base agencies that identify and assist special needs family members... which promote access of sponsors and family members to community resources.

1.3.1.2. Identify the Community Action Information Board (CAIB) and Integrated Delivery System (IDS) as groups which can identify the community issues related to the quality of life for family members with special needs. Using the expertise of their representatives, CAIB and IDS can provide workable solutions to specific issues and may be able to influence policy above the local level.

2.2.2. The Program Manager, AF Programs for Families with Special Needs (AFMOA/SGHW):

2.2.2.7. Provides education, training, and program guidance to all personnel involved in the AF SNIAC process. Provides data and information in support of training or briefing development to MAJCOMs, to unit commanders, and to AFMOA-sanctioned entities upon request.

2.2.2.9. Provides consultation on the Air Force SNIAC to DoD and other officials. Contributes to the development of DoD Directives, Instructions, data requirements, and participates in DoD Integrated Process Teams. Interacts with US Army and US Navy Exceptional Family Member Program Managers and supports joint initiatives that enhance services to DoD families.

2.8. The Installation Commander

2.8.2. Ensures inter-agency, base-wide outreach and support activities to military personnel regarding the identification of special needs in family members, and referrals for needed services.

2.10. The Staff Judge Advocate (SJA).

2.10.1. As needed, provides legal assistance to active duty sponsors regarding government-sponsored family member travel and the legal rights of family members with special medical and/or educational conditions, IAW AFI 51-504, Legal Assistance, Notary, and Preventive Law Program.

2.13. The Installation Commander/Director of Force Support Squadron

2.13.3. Provides and manages nondiscriminatory recreation activities and club programs, including special needs group projects, for family members with special medical and/or educational needs. Ensures accessibility for family members with special needs to Services facilities in compliance with Public Law.

2.16. Medical Treatment Facility Commander (MTF/CC).

2.16.3.8. Ensures that services for special needs families are integrated with other MTF and installation IDS initiatives.

2.16.4.2. Provides office space, equipment and furnishings, operating supplies, utilities, maintenance, and other required resources. Ensures space is made available for family members with special needs that is accessible by those with mobility limitations, and that allows privacy of communication with the SNIAC staff and providers involved in the FMRC process. Ensures needed assistance is provided to family members with communication disabilities during the FMRC process.

2.17. Chief of the Medical Staff (SGH).

2.17.4.1.1. Consult with TRICARE to determine existent services in the local network and distances of such services when making determinations for travel recommendations.

2.17.6. Monitors and provides oversight to MTF staff to identify and refer family members of active duty sponsors eligible for Extended Care Health Options (ECHO) or other health benefits to the TRICARE/Health Benefits Advisor.

2.18. Special Needs Coordinator (SNC).

2.18.2.1. Establishes and maintains procedures to identify sponsors whose family members have special medical and educational needs in a timely manner. Uses a multi-disciplinary and collaborative approach with other key service providers, such as installation youth and childcare facilities, and officer and enlisted spouses groups, to ensure effective outreach and identification of special needs.

2.18.2.3.2. For inbound FDIs (active duty and civilian sponsors), the SNC works with the FMRC Coordinator and the SGH to ensure all medical and educational authorities that might be involved in the care of identified needs are consulted for service availability. Supports the SGH in providing written responses that either recommend or do not recommend travel for families of active duty members, or that outline potential limitations of services for families of civilian sponsors. Where necessary housing modifications are identified in the FDI package, ensures the base housing office is advised of the anticipated modification(s) during the 14-day relocation review period. Includes accessibility information provided by the housing office, where applicable, in the response to the losing installation.

2.18.2.3.4. With the FMRC Coordinator, the losing installation's SNC ensures all considerations about potential limitations, types of housing modifications possible, etc., that are submitted by the gaining installation via FDI response are provided to the sponsor and/or adult family member(s) upon receipt.

2.18.2.3.5. With the FMRC Coordinator, ensures sponsors receiving an initial recommendation against OCONUS family member travel are advised of the pinpoint process and of further MAJCOM consideration of OCONUS travel options.

2.18.2.9. Ensures that sponsors are provided all necessary documents for enrollment in TRICARE, Extended Health Care Options.

2.18.2.10. Coordinates with MTF TRICARE representatives to provide information to beneficiaries about community and national resources specific to the special needs population. Informs families of existing information and referral services such as Military One Source, Military Homefront, and Airman and Family Readiness Centers.

2.18.2.10.2. Through collaboration with IDS and other interagency forums, assists in providing families information and referrals to base and civilian agencies to enhance services to family members with special needs.

2.22. Commanders, First Sergeants, and Supervisors.

2.22.5. Educate active duty members periodically about the requirements of DoDI 1315.19, of requirements that pertain to family member relocation as specified in AF policy, and **of installation services available to family members with special needs.**

3.4.2. Requests to Reconsider Family Member Travel Denials (“Appeals”)

3.4.2.1. **Within 21 calendar days of family receipt of a recommendation against family member travel (“denial”), the family may submit additional new information for consideration through the losing base SNC.** The intention of this provision is to allow the submission of significant information that the family believes was not available at the time of the initial review and determination, consideration of which might substantially change the risk assessment for the identified family member.

[The ability for a sponsor to appeal is not widely known nor is it publicized or discussed by the EFMP Coordinator at the losing/gaining bases. This process should be mandatory to be briefed and the sponsor should be mandated to sign a document stating that they have been briefed on the appeal process to ensure the widest dissemination.]