

NMCP hosts military child autism conference

By MC2 Nikki Smith | Naval Medical Center Portsmouth Public Affairs

PORSTMOUTH- Naval Medical Center Portsmouth (NMCP) hosted the Autism and the Military Child Conference, Sept. 13 - 14, in Portsmouth.

The two-day conference was aimed at providing information and tools to military families with children who have autism, as well as the medical providers who may treat military children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Fifteen speakers came to hold sessions for the more than 450 attendees.

"A parent worrying about their child directly impacts their military performance," said Cmdr. Rees L. Lee, NMCP pediatric department head. "We want to give you, the military families, the information you need for your autistic children. We are caring for the children of heroes and we want to educate and invigorate so our military is ready for the mission and not worried about what's going on back home."

Dr. Maria Barkmeier, from the Office of Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs, provided the keynote speech to kick off the conference. In her address, she emphasized empowering military families with special needs members and wanted to raise awareness for the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

EFMP can help military members who have family with any special needs, not only families with children who have ASD. Once enrolled in the program, the military family can receive assistance with assignment coordination, identifying community resources to help with their special needs and assist families during the transition to new locations when relocating.

"There's a great amount of family support available through EFMP," said Barkmeier. "We're dealing with exceptional families' needs and they need and deserve exceptional service. There are more than 200,000 active duty families coping with special needs family members." We want these families to know that there are resources for them: Fleet and Family Support, Military OneSource and EFMP are outlets they can explore to get the help they need," Barkmeier added. "These military members are giving so much and we need to make sure they are getting what they need so they can be focused on their mission."

During the symposium, breakout sessions were offered so attendees were able to choose the presentations and information they wanted to learn more about. The breakout sessions offered lessons on topics ranging from Applied Behavioral Analysis, sensory issues and the autism spectrum and navigating Virginia Medicaid waivers. Along with the breakout lessons and full attendee sessions, the conference offered about a dozen exhibits like the Autism Society of Tidewater and TRICARE Multi-Market Office offering informational materials and support to attendees.

Day two of the conference featured a military family experienced in autism in the military setting. The panel of three encouraged the audience to learn from their experiences and ask them questions. The panel's objective was to help everyone gain understanding about the unique issues that affect military families with children diagnosed with autism.

Glenda Lewis-Fleming, Management Analyst and Disability Consultant at NMCP, helped to coordinate the event and moderated many of the sessions. Due to increasing numbers of military families asking for information about autism, Fleming and other NMCP employees recognized the need to hold the conference for the first time since 2007. Knowing the need for information was acute, Fleming worked for the past year to help organize and plan it.

"As soon as I was able to see all the families who attended – and being able to talk to them about what they need – that made all the hours of planning worth it," said Fleming. "Our military families go beyond the call of duty. They make such great sacrifices for our country and it is so very satisfying to be able to help and support them through this difficult journey they are traveling with their special needs family members."

Audience reaction was equally positive.

"I've learned a lot during this conference," said Rose Sutton, a military spouse and mother of two children with ASD. "It's been very interesting to learn more about the tools available on the military side for kids with autism. It was really great to hear from people who work in the special needs field and I was happy that they were able to hear from us as well. I enjoyed being able to talk with people who are going through a similar situation I am and it was invaluable to get advice on things that I will be encountering with my children in the future."