

*“Man has two supreme loyalties – to country and to family...So long as their families are safe, they will defend their country, believing that by their sacrifice they are safeguarding their families also. But even the bonds of patriotism, discipline, and comradeship are loosened when the family itself is threatened.”*

*- General William T. Sherman*

# Autism and its Impact on the Military Family





# Bottom Line Up Front

- 1 out of 88 children of active duty service members has a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder
- Military children with autism are not receiving adequate care and services
  - Impact on child's future
  - Impact on family unit (mental and physical health)
  - Impact on combat readiness
  - Retention issue
- Continuity of care is a significant issue
  - Services vary significantly across state lines and school districts
  - Military children with autism are hitting bottom of Medicaid wait lists at each new duty station and rarely receiving effective intervention
- Access to prescribed care is limited
  - Less than 10% of the patient population is receiving some assistance through the TRI ECHO program
- TRICARE's financial cap on a child's treatment program is not sufficient to meet minimum standards outlined by American Academy of Pediatrics and the Navy and Army Surgeons General



# Impact on the Military Family

- Children with autism pose significant behavior and medical challenges to families. Military life further exacerbates these issues due to frequent moves, back to back war time deployments, inconsistent treatment, and limited finances.
- Failure to provide treatment for this vulnerable patient population is causing harm.
  - An early diagnosis is only good when treatment is received.
- Lack of appropriate medical treatment and support affects military readiness:
  - Not providing effective medical care for children impacts the war fighter overseas
  - **Mental health** of family (parents and siblings) is significant concern
  - Retention issue
  - Families incur large out of pocket expenses to obtain adequate care
    - Average cost of comprehensive treatment programs range from \$6,000-8,000 a month
  - Most families receive no intervention at all...long term consequences are devastating
- Identifying funding and fighting for appropriate services for a child with autism is a full time job
  - This places an undue burden on an already stressed family
- Divorce rate among families with autistic children is estimated at 80%
- Delays and limits in coverage are causing harm...families are in crisis!!!!



# Action Required

- Legislation and National Medical Policy Organizations to recognize medical necessity of autism treatments (ABA and other structured behavior programs)
  - State legislative efforts and Obama Federal Mandate will not help our military children
  - Authorize services based on medical need (up to 40 hours / week as recommended by the Navy and Army Surgeons General)
- Study warranted to investigate why military children are at greater risk for autism:
  - Environmental triggers? Vaccination safety? Other?
  - Impact autism has on the readiness and quality of an all volunteer force
- How do we improve access to autism treatments for military children?
  - DoD policy can provide the model for a national standard of care
- Other federal solutions to provide a continuum of care across duty stations
  - Medicaid state reciprocity
  - Funding of IDEA
  - Program to expand provider base to deliver treatment services
  - National certification process for line therapists



# Point of Contact

Karen Driscoll – Marine Corps wife, mother of 3

Parent of a child with autism

[PII redacted]

“There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers.  
We must have the courage to do what we know is morally right.”

- President Ronald Reagan