

Communities and Wisconsin National Guard troops forge bonds amidst COVID-19 testing

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SOLON SPRINGS and ASHLAND, Wis. — On two sunny spring days in northern Wisconsin, Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard, working with public health and emergency management officials from Ashland County, stood-up two mobile COVID-19 specimen collections sites May 6 at Solon Springs, and May 7 in Ashland.

Each site collected samples for one day.

The Wisconsin National Guard has specimen collection teams supporting communities throughout Wisconsin, and some of those teams, like Task Force Charlie, Team 10, provide COVID-19 specimen collecting and testing to rural communities, outside of the state's major metropolitan areas. This capability fills a critical need in the area while also working to establish bonds between the Soldiers and Airmen serving in the community and local citizens.

The officer-in-charge of the Solon Springs site, Chief Warrant Officer, Pamela Rous said, "I think it's a wonderful opportunity to work with our counties and provide support, because all areas are important."

Spc. Justin Petersen, of River Falls, Wisconsin, underscored the tremendous opportunity that presented itself when working so close to his hometown and the privilege that goes with it.

"Some of us have been as close as 20 minutes to home," he said. "My team could end up in my hometown, so it's cool to be able to serve in the same communities we live in."

Many of the Soldiers and Airmen serving in support of the state's response have been away from their homes, employers, and families for the past couple months as the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

Spc. Vance Grimm spoke to the topic of the resiliency required to navigate those challenges.

"Being away from family—I have a wife and two kids, so that's challenging," he said. "But keeping my mindset on the focus of this is a mission, and it needs to be completed, has really helped me. Having the support of family—knowing that they're there—has helped substantially."

A little over an hour away in Ashland, at Lake Superior Elementary School, another 28-member team from Task Force Delta performed a COVID-19 specimen collection mission the day after the mission in Solon Springs.

For Spc. Heather Messing, this was the first National Guard mission she had ever done and said that "it's been eye-opening and really nice to serve your local community."

Messing spoke to the community supporting their morale, specifically, a local restaurant that catered them great food when the troops weren't expecting it.

The simple act of providing a meal served to further the bond between the Soldiers and Airmen conducting the COVID-19 testing mission and the community itself and showcasing the resilience of the communities the troops serve as well.

Senior Airman Alexandria Dallmann spoke to what resiliency means to her as an Airman and its importance to Wisconsin's future.

"Resiliency is staying strong, being able to bounce-back, and hopefully, we can do that to the best of our ability as a state," she said.

Sgt. Joe Galvan touched on the importance of testing sites throughout Wisconsin.

"I think this is going to create a much better picture of where we are as a state and give us a much better idea of what it's going to take to get everything running again," he said.

First Sergeant Cyle Coppinger, the site commander and normally a bassoon player in the 132nd Army Band, underscored the opportunity this mission provided him as a Soldier.

"First of all, there's a sense of pride for me," he said. "I joined to serve my country and community, and this is a great opportunity for me to actually do that."

Soldiers and Airmen from both teams touched on how the support of local communities and their families has strengthened bonds and their ability to be resilient through this pandemic.