

# **Dept. of Military Affairs: Citizen Soldiers and Airmen in Wisconsin Guard's COVID task force continue to grow personally and professionally while mobilized for pandemic response**

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For the Wisconsin National Guard, one theme has consistently shined through in a year filled with changes and adaptation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic - growth.

Since March, the Wisconsin National Guard has been supporting the state's COVID-19 response efforts.

A mission that started with approximately 30 Guardsmen to transport cruise ship passengers home grew to more than 1,400 Citizen Soldiers and Airmen serving in direct support roles at the peak of the Wisconsin National Guard's response earlier this year.

Troops supported a multitude of missions ranging from specimen collection and working at a call center, to conducting a warehousing mission, to staffing voluntary self-isolation facilities and supporting mortuary affairs operations.

Nearly 700 Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard are currently serving in direct support of the state's response to COVID-19 in a variety of statuses, with the majority supporting the specimen collection mission and others

lending a helping hand in the initial stages of distributing the COVID-19 vaccine.

“We have really grown this mission, and like all the other hospitals and facilities around here, started from scratch and developed a plan and refined it, and have been able to really complete this testing mission with a high degree of accuracy and throughput,” said Maj. Gretel Weiskopf, commander of Task Force Delta which operates the Guard’s specimen collection mission.

As the Wisconsin National Guard’s COVID-19 response mission has grown and adapted over the past 9 months, so have the Soldiers and Airmen supporting the mission.

“The best part has been watching our service members grow, and, of course, stumble at times, but then at the end of the day get where they need to be to accomplish the mission,” Weiskopf said.

Many service members supporting the COVID-19 response have also taken the time to advance their military careers and develop their teamwork and leadership skills.

Sgt. Spencer Hall, a radar operator with Headquarters Battery, 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery, was promoted to sergeant shortly after volunteering for the mission in late April.

“It gives me a lot of pride to be able to help out and be a service to the community even though I’m from the Eau Claire area and I’m down here in Brookfield,” Hall said. “The state of Wisconsin is still my community from Superior all the way down to Racine.”

Hall volunteered to serve as the main supply sergeant for the team he serves on, overseeing three squads and providing behind-the-scenes logistical support.

“I know every day when I get up if I don’t do my job correctly, there’s potential that our community doesn’t have the resources they need to get tested and be safe,” Hall said. “For me I always try to keep the bigger picture in mind and just think about the community.”

In the COVID response mission, it has not been uncommon for Soldiers and Airmen to volunteer to take on new roles.

Master Sgt. Emily Decker, a dental technician with the 115th Medical Group, part of

the Madison-based 115th Fighter Wing, volunteered to be put on orders in March.

“I work in healthcare, and I’m a helper by nature, so when this whole pandemic dropped, working in healthcare I was like ‘how can I help? What can I do?’” Decker said. “So when I got the call from my unit, it was ‘yes, 100 percent, use me in whatever capacity you see necessary.’”

Initially Decker believed she would be serving on state active duty for a month. As the pandemic continued to impact Wisconsin and months passed, instead of retiring from the Air Guard in July, she decided she had to see the mission through.

“The more I got to learn about how the National Guard was going to help in the capacity they did, the more I really wanted to stay on mission, and I pretty much begged to be put on a swab team because that sounded really intriguing to me,” Decker said. “After I did get on that swab team, that’s what really motivated me to want to not retire.”

Decker has served as the officer in charge of a specimen collection team since June and has found it rewarding to serve alongside her Army counterparts in a joint task force supporting a domestic mission. She has grown while serving in a role that pushed her outside of her comfort zone.

“I’m kind of shy and awkward by nature and being put in this position with the rank that I had when they stood up the teams sort of made me get out of my own way and find a voice that I wouldn’t necessarily have had in front of a larger group of people,” Decker said. “I think it has made me stronger that way in that I’m not quite so shy anymore.”

Staff Sgt. Dylan Sessler, an infantryman with Company A, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry, served alongside Decker as the noncommissioned officer in charge of the same specimen collection team.

“She gave me the opportunity to really sit down with everyone and build the camaraderie, and build the connection between leadership and the Soldiers and what they needed,” Sessler said.

In September their team was recognized by a proclamation issued by the Fond du Lac County board of directors for their quick response and adaptability during a specimen collection mission.

“One thing that we always talked about is we’re here to help the people of the state to include emergency management and public health to make sure that they get what they need,” Sessler said. “We had nothing but professional, tactful, great response from everyone we worked with, because we knew we’re all in the fight together so let’s just make sure that we take care of each other, to include the people outside the team.”

In his down time, Sessler spent time writing a book which he hopes to publish early next year. The book shares his personal narrative and focuses on living a happy life and overcoming trauma. He has also built an online community helping individuals struggling with mental health issues.

“I am motivated by helping people in general,” Sessler said. “I’ve been through quite a bit in my life, and it’s brought me to a point where I see the same struggle that I’ve been through in other peoples’ lives, and because I’ve overcome that and because I’ve gotten through all of it, I think it’s my obligation to step out and speak for the people that don’t have a voice. So I do that as a leader, and I do that as a civilian, and I do that in all capacities that I can.”

Other Wisconsin Guardsmen have also remained motivated to attain goals in their personal lives while supporting the state’s COVID-19 response.

Spc. Talba Kabore, a chemical specialist with the 457th Chemical Company, was recently granted U.S. citizenship.

“You cannot explain it what it feels like,” Kabore said. “You are not part of it, and all of a sudden here you go, you are part of it. It’s just huge. You can’t explain it. You’re just part of the big family now. It’s so big. It means the world.”

Kabore came to the United States from Burkina Faso, Africa, in 2013. He dreamed of serving in the Army since he was little and enlisted in the Wisconsin Army National Guard on his birthday in 2018. He started his application for citizenship in November 2019.

“I got all my papers and sent it to Homeland Security, but when COVID started I just couldn’t get any appointment and it took a while,” Kabore said.

He was finally able to swear in as a U.S. citizen in late September. In the meantime, he volunteered in March to support the state’s COVID-19 response mission.

“It’s meant a lot to serve the community that we all love,” Kabore said. “We have some deployments, but at home is rare, except when we have natural disasters or something. Being there and seeing all the community members coming to get tested and thank you for your service, it’s really kind of giving you motivation to just keep going.”

Other service members continued advancing their civilian education while serving on orders.

Spc. Nickolas Rasimus, a truck driver with Company A, 132nd Brigade Support Battalion, and a senior at Marquette University, has been on orders since April.

“Something like this is kind of exactly why I joined,” Rasimus said. “I’m very loyal to Wisconsin and a very community-focused person.”

Since starting on orders, he finished his spring semester course online, took five classes online over the summer, and started his full-time fall semester classes online – all while serving on orders and studying for the Law School Admission Test on which he ultimately succeeded.

“If I ever needed some sort of accommodation – like I had an exam or I really needed to study something for an hour, I could go to my NCOs and usually they could help me work something out because they’re also understanding that I do have a civilian life outside of here and goals that can work around all this,” Rasimus said.

He said his leadership has been extremely supportive and has been proud of his accomplishments while also focusing on the mission at hand.

“They also expected the normal military bearing and responsibilities throughout the duty day,” Rasimus said. “The support has been great.”

While on orders, Rasimus said he has also learned a great deal about the Wisconsin National Guard and even about his job from his leadership. He, like the majority of the troops supporting the mission, plans to see it through to the end.

“Doing this during something that’s never really happened in living history in our country is kind of cool and it’s kind of why I stayed,” Rasimus said. “I’ve had opportunities to leave and to go back to in-person classes and go back to my full-time job but I thoroughly enjoy it here.”