

Dept. of Military Affairs: Longest activation of State Emergency Operations Center approaches 100 days

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MADISON, Wis. — This coming Sunday, Father's Day may be observed differently as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. June 21 is also significant for the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC), which will mark its 100th day of activation for coronavirus response — now the longest continuous SEOC activation in Wisconsin history.

"Your continuous selfless service and sacrifice alongside others over the past 100 days of this pandemic is more than commendable," Dr. Darrell Williams, Wisconsin Emergency Management administrator, said to workers in the SEOC. "Some may see 100 as just a number, but that would diminish the weight of all that's been accomplished by the people who've put their lives on hold, spending time away from their families to guide the state's response to COVID-19."

Gov. Tony Evers issued Executive Order 72 on March 12, declaring a public health emergency due to COVID-19, and directing the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to take all necessary and appropriate actions. Two days later, Evers instructed Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) to activate the SEOC. All cabinet secretaries or their top representatives were instructed to report to the SEOC — which elevated to Level 1, its highest level — March 16.

"We normally don't direct all cabinet secretaries or their number two staff member to the SEOC when we activate," said Paul Cooke, Wisconsin Emergency Management's director of the Bureau of Response and Recovery. "I was told this

wasn't going to be a normal activation and that we will essentially be running state government out of the SEOC for a while."

During the first few weeks of the state's COVID-19 response, agencies working from the SEOC stood up surge capacity and isolation facilities, implemented a procurement and distribution system for scarce but critical resources, and distributed guidance on a significant number of COVID-19 related topics. This complex response effort was an adjustment for veterans of past SEOC activations.

"The longest activation prior to this was the floods of 2008, which required 85 percent of our staff to be out in the field for almost three months working in disaster recovery centers and the joint field office in La Crosse, Wisconsin," said Anita Cornell, a 29-year WEM employee who serves as a recovery planner in the public assistance program. "For the COVID response, I worked in the SEOC that first weekend we were activated as the 24/7 duty officer and it just felt so surreal."

Cornell soon transitioned to working remotely, assisting with the FEMA public assistance declaration process and with the State Recovery Task Force. She relied heavily on Mission Support, or the Information Technology team, responsible for coordinating the technology response for COVID-19.

"This activation was different from anything we've had in the past," said Lisa Gustafson, WEM's Mission Support supervisor. "Dozens of agency staff brought their own laptops to the SEOC, and we worked with each individual to accommodate their needs. One of the biggest challenges with the additional staff was the stress put on the wireless network."

Technology — and more specifically, telecommuting — is the new normal in 2020, and plays a key role in keeping state government running during the pandemic.

"Mission support is proud of the way the SEOC performed from a technical standpoint," Gustafson said. "We have a battle rhythm now, and at day 100 things are relatively calm from an IT perspective."

Level 1 calls for 24-hour operations, but the overnight shift was eliminated April 24 with the duty officer providing SEOC coverage remotely. The night shift was reinstated May 30 for situational awareness and resource support in response to the civil unrest occurring in the state. Today, the SEOC is back to business hours, and weekend hours are covered by the duty officer. But WEM staff know the mission is

far from over.

“Going forward, our role will be to assist our state and local partners in adjusting to the ‘new normal’ of life with the threat of COVID-19 outbreaks a possibility,” Cooke said. “While the SEOC still receives and assigns requests for outbreak and community testing, and continues to distribute personal protective equipment, WEM will be shifting more resources towards long-term recovery. I can’t imagine what our review of this response will look like with all of our moving parts during the response!”

That’s very much on Gustafson’s mind as well.

“When the incident is over, Mission Support will have hours of work to get the SEOC back to the pre-incident state,” she said.

In the near future, Cornell will be working with 14 counties on the COVID-19 public assistance federal grant process. But this weekend, her mind is very much on her father.

“This response has changed our daily lives in many ways, both in the SEOC and with our families at home,” Cornell said. “Until this past week, I had not seen my 84-year-old father since I had lunch with him on March 10.”