

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Redesigned health and wellness course aims to improve physical, mental, spiritual, social, and financial well-being

Posted on Friday, Jul 17, 2020

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FORT MCCOY, Wis. — The Wisconsin National Guard's Comprehensive Health and Wellness course at Fort McCoy is helping transform Soldiers and Airmen and promote readiness for the Guard's state and federal mission.

The newly redesigned course which launched its first edition June 14-19 with a second iteration July 14-17, focused on the five pillars of health: physical, mental, spiritual, social, and financial wellness, and while many perceive the course to be nonstop workouts for service members struggling to meet the military's physical fitness standards, the new and improved course serves a much greater purpose.

Intense workouts remain a key component of the Comprehensive Health and Wellness course, and those included high intensity interval training workouts, partner workouts, card workouts, Olympic athlete workouts, bodyweight exercises, and even fitness memory games. The workouts also included different types of running ranging from speed work to distance runs with senior Wisconsin National Guard leadership, as well as running with differently-abled athletes as well as breathing exercises, morning yoga, daily stretching, and meditation.

All the different types of workouts, held outside or under a pavilion, or in a large high-ceilinged room, reflected the shifting gears that the Comprehensive Health and Wellness team had to do in order to run their latest class amidst the COVID-19 crisis.

Typically the course includes various running workouts, high intensity interval training workouts, and physical fitness test preparation along with introducing service members to other types of workouts including aquatic exercises, cycling classes, weight lifting or the new Army Combat Fitness Test prep, yoga and meditation. The course continues to evolve with a focus on creating sustainable behavior change for all who attend.

“My expectations were that this was going to be a “fat camp” where we only focus on physical health, and do not care about anything else, just to pass the PT test”, said Spc. Erin Hayden, a mechanic and electrician with the Madison, Wisconsin-based 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation. “My biggest takeaway was how quickly we became a team to help everyone better themselves.

“We may have focused on our own self but we still concentrated on everyone else while doing so,” Hayden said. “If you are considering taking the course, don’t hesitate. You can have knowledge of a lot of things as far as health, but I promise you will learn more.”

This year’s course had more than 20 guest speakers providing information, resources and quality content for the Soldiers and Airmen in attendance. The speakers came from a variety of backgrounds that included senior Wisconsin National Guard leadership ranging from the adjutant general, and the senior commanders and senior enlisted advisors for both the Army and Air Guard – to directors of psychological health, financial counselors, a certified dietician, chaplain corps representatives, and sexual assault response coordinators. There were also guest speakers, running specialists, and a past graduate of the course who has since found success in her physical fitness and her military career as a result. Additionally, due to COVID restrictions there were virtual shoe fits, virtual briefings with health coaches from Military One Source, and a virtual discussion from an ultra-marathoner and world record holder.

The two week Comprehensive Health and Wellness course is a behavior-change course focused on the five pillars of health, which is why there is such an emphasis on providing various resources that the Soldiers and Airmen, may need while in attendance, said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Aaron Hunnel, the course manager and a facilitator in the Master Reliance Training schoolhouse at the 426th Regional Training Institute at Fort McCoy.

“We provide lifestyle skills that can be applied inside and outside the military, as we

strategically support the students who come through and help them to show up as their best selves,” said Hunnel. “I don’t know of many courses that incorporate the Army and Air National Guard together. We are paving new ground and it will make the organization better as a result.”

The class size was smaller with social distancing guidelines due to COVID-19, and some of the activities that would have been available, such as aquatic exercise, or even the base’s fitness center, weren’t available. And while some of the briefings were virtual, the overall goal and need for this class was still the same for those who attended, said Hunnel.

“The cadre team that supported this class were incredible, they were effective and professional and they got stuff done,” he said. “The cadre set the tone by coming together as a team and giving it their all for the students in the course. This empowered students to reciprocate that effort so they can begin making and sustaining behavior change.”

Other cadre members were grateful for the opportunity to help facilitate the course.

“My expectations coming to this course, after having been an instructor in the past, is I would be given the opportunity to not only mentor fellow Soldiers and Airmen but grow as I challenge myself as a leader and non-commissioned officer as well,” said Staff Sgt. Kenneth Browne, a drill sergeant with the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s Recruiting and Retention Battalion, who returned to the course for his second year as cadre.

“My biggest take away from this course has always been the changes we can make in other’s lives when we just take time to know someone more,” he said. “I would encourage anyone and everyone to attend this course even if you are not struggling, as this course gives you a new set of skills that you can use yourself and may help you mentor and develop your Soldiers or Airmen. This course is not just a personal training failure course. It is a leadership development course for all levels and leadership starts with the individual.”

Each day the students wrote papers reflecting upon lessons learned from that day and one common theme shared was that many of them just appreciated knowing that they weren’t alone. Many were surprised to realize that the state’s senior leaders also struggled with making time for personal fitness, exercise, healthy eating and finding balance in life.

“As we had multiple higher ranking personnel come and speak to us, we were reminded by them that within our Army Warrior Ethos stands a quote that states, ‘I will never give up,’” said Spc Jeng Vang, a human resource specialist with the 1st Battalion, 128th Infantry. “It was reassuring to know the guest speakers who came to speak to us had also faced a time of darkness at some time in their military career. Most of these personnel also had faced similar challenges to mine, and they did not give up as they faced those challenges.”