

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Emergency Management uses technology to coordinate fight against COVID-19

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MADISON, Wis. — As the state has moved to a virtual response to COVID-19 along with the rest of the country, Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) has adapted as well. Several staff members have transitioned out of the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) to work from the safety of their homes.

“As we staff the SEOC 24 hours a day, we continue to put the safety of all Wisconsinites and those who are leading and coordinating the response first,” said Dr. Darrell L. Williams, Wisconsin Emergency Management administrator. “Our team is working tirelessly with all state agencies to help the citizens of Wisconsin through this pandemic and back on the road to recovery.”

Remote work has been phased in over the last several weeks to reduce risk within the SEOC and Joint Force Headquarters (JFHQ), located in the same building. SEOC Planning, Operations, and Mission Support Section staff took the initiative to help WEM and other responding agencies start utilizing Microsoft Teams, a chat-based collaboration tool to share information via a common space. Drew Werner, Critical Infrastructure Planning specialist, took a leading role in guiding staff through this transition.

“The amount of coordination that has gone on both inside and outside of the State Emergency Operations Center is staggering,” Werner said. “While we still have a footprint within Joint Force Headquarters, it’s significantly reduced from the early days of the response.”

Werner also serves on the Department of Military Affairs Continuity of Operations (COOP) Committee, which ensures that essential functions continue to be performed in the event of a disaster or terrorist attack.

“We quickly realized we would need a large portion of the staff to ‘go remote’ to both reduce the risk to those working in the JFHQ by limiting the number of people reporting to work physically, and to provide a backup option should a large number of staff start to show symptoms and require self-quarantine,” Werner said.

There are nine task forces coordinating the state’s response through the SEOC.

“In some ways, this type of communication has improved our ability to collaborate more efficiently,” said Kevin Wernet. Wernet is a WEM Exercise and Training officer, but he’s been called upon to lead the Mortuary Affairs Task Force for the COVID-19 response. “When we have a difficult problem to tackle, we can quickly assemble people from around the state and Midwest that need to be a part of the discussion.”

The scope of remote-based work goes far beyond task force members. Task force leaders are calling twice daily into the SEOC for webinar briefings in collaboration with the remaining staff inside the SEOC, with county and tribal leaders and other stakeholders participating from their regions.

The complexity of this response is not limited to working remotely, as WEM staff is collaborating with several agency responders at a time. This activation has been an adjustment for WEM as several new agencies that typically do not join a disaster response for flooding or tornados, for example, are playing a crucial role in this pandemic.

The unique nature of the response to COVID-19, however, could prove to be valuable moving forward. The virtual aspect of this activation will likely hone the flexibility of preparedness in the future.

“I commend WEM with the ability to transition more positions in the SEOC to virtual,” said Kelsey Brown, Wisconsin Disaster Fund coordinator. “The ability could be extremely useful for future events, because it may be used to show how work productivity can remain at the same level when teleworking.”

There are currently anywhere from six to 10 WEM staff members working inside the SEOC. Typically, 50 WEM staff work at JFHQ.

“I want everyone at home and those working so hard on this response to be encouraged knowing that tough times don’t last, but tough people do,” Williams said.