

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard conducting mobile testing at sites around the state

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Eleven specimen collection teams from the Wisconsin National Guard are operating across Wisconsin supporting local health departments and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to increase the state's COVID-19 testing capacity.

The teams, comprised of more than 300 Citizen Soldiers and Airmen in total, established mobile testing sites at locations ranging from correctional facilities and health clinics, to private businesses, and community-based testing sites.

A number of specimen collection sites have ongoing operations including multiple sites in Milwaukee County that began the week of April 20. Additionally, another team established a collection site at the Kenosha County Detention Center April 28.

In Brown County two teams are on site at a food processing facility and prepared to potentially take on additional missions there.

A community-based mobile testing site began operations today in Baraboo, Wisconsin, and another team is slated to assist in Buffalo County beginning later this week in support of local officials. The Guard anticipates additional requests for assistance elsewhere around the state in the coming days and weeks.

From April 24-27, a Guard specimen collection team tested more than 1,000 staff and inmates at the Dane County Jail in Madison, Wisconsin. The Guard also completed two separate specimen collection missions April 25 at a senior living facility in Lancaster, Wisconsin, and a seasonal staff dormitory in Lake Delton, Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin National Guard initially had three specimen collection teams operating before mobilizing an additional eight teams and 225 troops last week to increase testing capacity.

Guard teams completed specimen collection missions earlier this month at a senior living facility in Sheboygan County, where they collected more than 150 specimens from staff and residents. Another team conducted testing at the Milwaukee County House of Corrections where it tested more than 950 staff and inmates.

Carol Schwartz, the administrator at the Orchard Manor senior living facility in Grant County was grateful for the Wisconsin National Guard's support and the specimen collection team that assisted at her facility in Lancaster April 25.

"Today we're fortunate to have the National Guard here to assist us with a blanket testing of all our staff and residents that still need to be tested," she said. "Orchard Manor wants to be proactive and ensure that we have all protections in place in addition to all the safeguards we've already got in place."

"It's been great," she added. "We're just extremely pleased to have the help, because it's more than our staff can handle all at once while caring for the residents."

Pfc. Alexander Spring, of the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 457th Chemical Company and a member of the specimen collection team that assisted in Grant County, was glad to assist.

"It's definitely a good feeling to not only be able to do my job, but to help people who really do need it," he said.

"I trust every single person here," Spring, an Appleton, Wisconsin resident, said. "I know we're all here to do our jobs to the best of our abilities and really help people who genuinely need our help here. I know everyone has the best mindset coming here, and we're fully trained to do this task as well as keep everyone as safe as possible."

The officer-in-charge of the mission in Grant County - 2nd Lt. Nate Hitchcock - said his team established a drive-thru lane to conduct swabbing for staff members, while most of the residents at the facility used a walk-thru testing lane.

Likewise, he was honored to be assisting his fellow citizens in his own state.

“It feels great,” Hitchcock said. “I’ve deployed (overseas) once, and that was in support of a different country’s mission. It feels good honestly to do a mission for my hometown or home state at least.”

He said his troops were eager to assist and excited to have the opportunity to help other Wisconsinites as Citizen Soldiers.

“I’m excited to be here,” he said. “I can tell that the morale of my troops is pretty high, so they’re pretty excited to be here too.”

Sondra Mixdorf, the director of nurses at the facility, was appreciative of the Guard’s efforts.

“We just appreciate their service,” she said. “We appreciate them being here. It’s kind of a daunting task, and to think about doing that without your support would have just been a lot.”

As of April 28, Wisconsin National Guard teams had collected nearly 3,200 specimens statewide.

Maj. Matthew Wunderlin contributed to this report.