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Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard medical company completes more than five months on orders for COVID-19 response, annual training

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A Wisconsin Army National Guard medical unit has shown great versatility, quickly transitioning from assisting since the early days of the state's COVID-19 response to conducting annual training, and preparing for potential federal deployment overseas.

The Waukesha-based 135th Area Support Medical Company was among the first troops mobilized to respond to requests for assistance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with their orders starting March 19. As the unit postured, leadership made sure Soldiers took the time to train and prepare to assist Wisconsin's communities.

"We got a chance to dig through our equipment, train every day, learn about COVID, start preparing, and then we got the orders to push out onto specimen collection teams," said Maj. Shawn Murphy, a physician's assistant with the 135th Medical Company.

Soldiers were sent out as part of specimen collection teams, taking samples from citizens in communities throughout the state. Approximately three quarters of the unit served on orders in response to COVID-19. In the initial stages of the response, Soldiers thought their orders would likely last a couple weeks.

“When I first got called up for COVID orders they told me it was going to be about two weeks, and here I am five months later still working and I’m still trying to stay upbeat,” said Spc. Julia Oelke, a combat medic with the 135th Medical Company who worked as a swabber at specimen collection sites. “I’m ready to keep going as long as they need me.”

Pfc. Nicole Atkinson, a combat medic with the 135th Medical Company who supported an isolation facility in Milwaukee, agreed, adding that she had to make arrangements for someone to care for her pets while she was on orders.

“I got called up, and I thought I was coming down for a couple weeks,” Atkinson said. “It turned into a couple months, which is fine because the community needed my help and I had the ability to help.”

Many Soldiers with the unit came off COVID-19 orders in late July. Those that did had about a week’s reprieve before immediately transitioning to their traditional annual training period in August at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin.

“We went from COVID orders where we helped Wisconsin recover from COVID then we had nine days to prepare and go right into [annual training],” said Capt. Steven Schoeny, commander of the 135th Medical Company. “We had a very short time to plan all this and that was tough for the leadership team. I think though we have done a good job preparing this training for our Soldiers.”

Nearly half of the unit is new to the company, which meant this year marked their first annual training together for many, according to Schoeny.

“I was impressed with their motivation,” Schoeny said. “Coming off of five months of COVID orders you would expect them to be tired and worn down and not excited to come out here to the field and sleep in tents and wear gear. I think their motivation is extremely high in spite of that because they’re excited to do the job they’re trained to do.”

Additionally, the 135th Medical Company is slated to deploy overseas in the spring, requiring the unit to quickly shift their focus from assisting the state in a domestic capacity, to now focusing on preparing for a federal overseas deployment.

“COVID orders are in our past and mobilization is in our future,” Schoeny said. “I want [my Soldiers] to understand that they need to reset their brains and focus on

medical training, medical treatment, medical evacuation."

Murphy also stressed the importance for Solders to transition their mindset from being a community resource and a response team, to focusing on their federal role as the primary combat reserve of the United States Army, serving as combat medics and training to treat casualties, stabilize people, and respond medically to events such as simulated IEDs.

"That's what this is all about, to hone those skills that I like to put into the category of a low frequency, high risk event as something we need to train to, because it doesn't happen very often, but when it does [the response] has to be right," Murphy said.

Murphy added that the training tempo keeps building, but many of the younger Soldiers have been stepping up to challenges, volunteering to do things junior NCOs would normally be doing.

"It's all about taking risks when you can," Murphy said. "Training is a time to take a risk, so then you learn your limits when you go to combat. Then we don't take risks."

Supporting communities on COVID-19 orders also helped members of the 135th Medical Company expand their Soldier and people skills.

"The most rewarding thing about being on orders is definitely being able to meet a bunch of people from across the state, civilian and Army," said Spc. Sara Hildebrandt, a combat medic with the 135th Medical Company who is serving in her second year as a member of the National Guard. Hildebrandt was an in-processor at specimen collection sites.

Oelke, who has also been in the National Guard for two years, said she has also grown.

"I've met a lot of new people from other units which I've never had to really work with before, and it's been a very interesting learning experience for me," Oelke said. "With dealing with other people who come from different [Military Occupational Specialties] with different backgrounds in different areas, I've learned some new medical skills and just people skills."

Those skills will serve the unit well as it transitions to a deployment mindset.

Soldiers with the 135th Medical Company remain motivated and stand ready to serve their communities, state, and country as members of the Wisconsin National Guard.

“Something that somebody should know about our mission out here and about the National Guard itself is that we are here to serve our community,” Oelke said.

“We’re here to help the people of Wisconsin, and we’re ready to be activated whenever we’re called upon.”

Schoeny added that the Wisconsin National Guard’s response to COVID-19 has been impressive, showcasing the organization’s ability to come together quickly and accomplish the mission.

“I want the people of Wisconsin to be proud and be aware that these Soldiers rose to the occasion to go on COVID orders, they went out to training on Fort McCoy, and they’re getting ready to go on this upcoming mobilization,” Schoeny said.

“I think their family and friends and state need to know that we have high quality individuals.”