

Dept. of Military Affairs: Bilingual Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers and Airmen assisting with COVID-19 results notification

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by 1st Lt. Meghan Skrepenski, Wisconsin National Guard Public Affairs

MADISON, Wis. — The National Guard as a whole is made up of many multi-faceted individuals, coming from many different backgrounds and offering many different types of skillsets where training and knowledge gained inside and outside of their military careers are often brought to enhance the fight.

The Wisconsin National Guard's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception, as Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard are using their diverse backgrounds and language skills to ensure they can translate COVID-19 testing results to Wisconsin residents of all backgrounds and languages at a state call center Guard members are staffing.

Delivering and providing interpretation for the results of COVID-19 testing is just one of the ways the Wisconsin National Guard members have answered the call for assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staffing the call center seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 7 pm, the 30 National Guard Soldiers and Airmen have been busy making calls, answering phones, and communicating with community

members who are anxiously awaiting results. Among them are 16 interpreters available to translate as needed in English, Spanish, and Hmong, as well as Portuguese, French, Mandarin Chinese, and German.

“If we only had English speaking personnel here, you wouldn’t be able to efficiently convey the message or let people know the information they needed to safely quarantine,” said Pfc. Daniel Rivera Nazario, a specialist with the Headquarters Company, 732nd Combat Support Sustainment Battalion.

Spc. Cameron Spencer, of the 1st Battalion, 121st Field Artillery Regiment, agreed.

“If not all of us are practicing the safety precautions we are suggesting due to a language barrier, it just takes that one person to keep it spreading, and that’s exactly what we’re fighting against,” Spencer, who’s serving as a Mandarin Chinese interpreter, said. “Especially knowing how diverse we are in America, it’s important we have interpreters here at this call center because we have one message to send out and one fight going on, but multiple people speaking different languages.”

Identifying as bilingual is just one life skill that may make these military members unique. This skill benefits both the service member and the service as the knowledge to speak another language fluently can positively impact both federal and state missions including the call center mission.

Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers and Airmen have been working alongside the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to provide call center support since their mission began on April 22. The Madison-based call center is staffed with approximately 30 Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers and Airmen who have been working long days to assist the Wisconsin Department of Health Services and local health departments and inform residents of their COVID-19 test results.

After specimens are collected from mobile testing sites, health departments receive results from labs and local health departments begin notifying individuals of their results. In many cases, local health departments shift some of that work to the National Guard call center to reduce some of the volume of test results, and Guard members place the phone calls to inform citizens of their results.

According to Capt. Kelly Seniuk, the Wisconsin National Guard’s Task Force Medical call center officer-in-charge, “On average the call center is making or answering 1,600 calls per day. The call center volumes reflect the specimen collection sites, so

if there are a lot of sites open at once, there are more test results to convey. The call center's calls range anywhere from 500 calls to 5,400 calls in a single day."

Results typically take between three to seven days to arrive after testing, though depending on the location where the test occurred, wait times could be longer. As of May 28, the state had collected more than 77,000 specimens. The Soldiers and Airmen have received and reviewed Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act training to ensure each patient's personal medical information stays protected.

Spc. Luke Herr, a motor transport operator said that being a part of this mission allows him to demonstrate his care for his state and community.

"This is different from the typical opportunities we have to support the military and our state," said Herr. "I am privileged to be able to speak another language, and being able to serve my county by translating and to give back is a great opportunity."

Spc. Erick Carranza, a transportation specialist from the Green Bay area, said it makes him feel good to be able to translate to ensure the state is reaching those who need it in all areas of the state, not just specific targeted areas.

"Being part of this mission for me is being part of the front lines, to help society gain peace of mind for the epidemic that is going on at this moment," he said. "Helping translate, I know plays a big part because I know we have a large Hispanic community in the state of Wisconsin."

Pfc. Leonel Barcenas Grandados, a specialist with the Headquarters Company, 732nd Combat Support Sustainment Battalion, has been in the Wisconsin Army National Guard for just over a year. Grandados speaks English as a second language and said it feels good to communicate negative COVID-19 test results to those to whom he translates.

Seniuk said she's been a Wisconsin resident for most of her life, but this is her first state emergency mission, and it's been enjoyable to help with such a broad mission that reaches across the state.

"It is a great honor to be a part of this mission," she said. "This my first assignment with a team of this size and it's been humbling to serve alongside these talented Guardsmen and women. I've been able to hop on the phone and make some calls

myself, which reinforced the importance of the call center mission. From the elderly residents to concerned parents, and all the other ages in-between, it's been a truly rewarding experience.”

Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard continue to fulfill a variety of roles in support of the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 1,400 troops are serving in direct support of these missions, and more than 500 Wisconsin Guard members remain deployed overseas in support of the Guard's federal mission in places like Afghanistan, the Middle East, and the Horn of Africa.