

Wisconsin National Guard: Details plans to improve sexual assault and harassment response program in brief to Gov. Evers

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MADISON, Wis. — Gov. Tony Evers approved a plan Thursday developed by the Wisconsin National Guard to implement improvements recommended in a recent assessment conducted by the National Guard Bureau's Office of Complex Investigations.

In December, OCI completed an assessment that began in April 2019 and made 21 recommendations that would improve the Wisconsin National Guard's sexual assault and harassment reporting procedures, investigation protocols, and accountability measures.

The plan, developed in conjunction with National Guard Bureau, calls for strict compliance with federal regulations and guidance, supplemented by Wisconsin National Guard-developed processes that will ensure proper reporting, investigation, accountability, and support for survivors. Highlights of the plan include full Wisconsin National Guard implementation of National Guard Bureau and Department of Defense policies, regulations, and instructions including specific provisions that refer all allegations of sexual assault to local law enforcement and National Guard Bureau's judge advocate and the Office of Complex Investigations.

"We are grateful for National Guard Bureau's assessment of our program as well as the valuable feedback and recommendations it provided to the Wisconsin National Guard to improve our sexual assault and harassment response program," said Brig. Gen. Gary Ebben, Wisconsin's interim adjutant general. "The steering committee

assembled by the Wisconsin National Guard to review the OCI team's assessment and build this plan has worked tremendously hard on creating an executable plan that sets our organization up for success."

"The Wisconsin National Guard is 100 percent committed to ensuring a safe working environment for our 10,000 Soldiers and Airmen, and our primary concern is ensuring victims of sexual assault and harassment in our ranks have the care, support, and resources they need," Ebben added. "Sexual assault and sexual harassment have no place in the Wisconsin National Guard, because it runs contrary to the values we hold dear, and we will work continuously to improve our processes and better serve our most precious resources – our Soldiers and Airmen."

In addition, the Wisconsin National Guard will develop two new sets of program instructions as part of the plan – one focused on sexual assault reporting, investigation, and accountability, and another focused on sexual harassment reporting, investigation, and accountability. The plan also calls for the establishment of Case Management Groups established both at the wing and major subordinate command level and the state level. Chaired by senior commanders at the Air Guard's wing and Army Guard's major subordinate command level, and by the deputy adjutants general for Army and Air at the state level, the groups will include representatives from the inspector general, equal employment opportunity office, sexual assault response coordinators, the provost marshal's office, and staff judge advocates. The group will collectively provide monthly updates to leadership on current sexual assault cases and response coordination and address sexual harassment allegations, reprisal and retaliation complaints, and other misconduct. The group will also track and address key personnel vacancies, as well as training and certification deficiencies.

The Case Management Groups will then feed into the newly created Community Health Council chaired at the state level by the adjutant general, which will provide broad state level oversight and synchronization of areas such as sexual assault and harassment, equal opportunity, inspector general issues, diversity, recruitment, and retention. The Community Health Council will meet on a bi-monthly basis and discuss information fed to the council by the Case Management Groups.

A new Status of Discipline Process constitutes another major component and outlines a plan by which the Wisconsin National Guard's leadership will track and monitor misconduct, coordinate disciplinary actions, and disseminate information down the chain of command to individual Soldiers and Airmen, while ensuring

sensitivity to victims and that victim privacy remains the utmost priority. It includes a centralized tracking system that captures commander's updates on misconduct allegations and calls for commanders to incorporate routine Status of Discipline updates into command briefings to their troops and ensure updates are disseminated to all members of the unit. Those updates will consist of summarized and sanitized closed misconduct cases, so Soldiers and Airmen see the results of substantiated misconduct and know the outcomes. Regular Status of Discipline briefings will also provide a venue by which Soldiers and Airmen receive regular and routine training on matters of disciplinary importance like sexual assault, sexual harassment, command influence, fraternization, and more.

According to Ebben, the Status of Discipline Process coupled with the Case Management Groups and Community Health Council are intended to provide visibility and transparency to the force while reassuring and demonstrating to the troops that misconduct is not tolerated in the Guard's ranks.

"These initiatives will give our Soldiers and Airmen reassurance that the Wisconsin National Guard follows through with appropriate disciplinary measures when misconduct occurs," Ebben said. "Simultaneously, our commanders, junior leaders, and all our service members will have visibility on trends and issues across the force, and see that discipline is administered consistently and with transparency across the force."

Lastly, the plan calls for additional force structure and personnel assigned to the office of the staff judge advocate to provide more efficient and effective legal support across the full spectrum of legal services for the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs. It also will identify full-time and drill-status sexual assault prevention and response personnel and equal opportunity position vacancies and training deficiencies and ensure those positions are filled, and that funding and training slots for identified personnel are prioritized and expedited.

The National Guard Bureau assigned Brig. Gen. Laurie Farris of the New Hampshire National Guard to oversee the Wisconsin National Guard's corrective action plan required by Gov. Evers' Executive Order #62. Farris and her team have established working groups that will meet weekly to put plans into action.

"Taking care of Airmen and Soldiers is always our top priority, and since arriving in Wisconsin, I have met great people within the Wisconsin National Guard that are highly dedicated and truly care about the Airmen and Soldiers of this organization,"

Farris said. “Our team is focused to assist the Wisconsin National Guard with implementing the recommendations from the OCI report, and our aim is to develop and enact a plan that we feel is potentially a best practice model that could be implemented across the National Guard in all 54 states and territories.”

“It’s our privilege to advise and assist the implementation of this plan and to support the Soldiers and Airmen of the Wisconsin National Guard, the governor, and ultimately the people of this great state,” she added.

The plan will be implemented in four phases beginning immediately with an initiation phase that runs between now and March 31, followed by a validation phase that concludes May 31, an execution phase that concludes July 30, and a full implementation and reassessment phase that ends with a Wisconsin National Guard and National Guard Bureau validation that all 21 OCI assessment recommendations are satisfied no later than August 31. From that point on, the Wisconsin National Guard would continually reassess and refine its programs as needed.

In January, Gov. Evers announced that Lt. Col. Brian Bischoff would serve as an ombudsman for the Wisconsin National Guard to assist survivors and complainants in the review of allegations of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and retaliation within the organization. Current and former members of the Wisconsin National Guard may contact the office of the ombudsman at wing.ombudsman@mail.mil, or by calling (608) 267-7207.