

Wisconsin National Guard: In a first for Wisconsin National Guard, Citizen Soldiers and Airmen serve as poll workers across Wisconsin on election day

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MADISON, Wis. — More than 2,400 Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard mobilized to state active duty to serve as poll workers at polling stations across the state during Wisconsin's April 7 election.

The Guard members, dressed in civilian attire, served at polls in 71 of Wisconsin's 72 counties – all except Florence County – in support of the Wisconsin Elections Commission and clerks due to a critical shortage of poll workers resulting from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In accordance with state elections laws, most of the National Guard members served as poll workers in the counties in which they reside. They fulfilled the same roles and duties that a traditional civilian poll worker fulfills, and in many cases served alongside fellow civilian poll workers in communities across the state.

One of those Citizen Soldiers was Capt. Alicia Dorsett, a member of the Headquarters Battery of the 1st Battalion, 121st Field Artillery, based in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. She and her mother, Sheila Dorsett, staffed the polls together in Dorsett's hometown and residence of Poy Sippi, Wisconsin.

“This mission has provided a unique opportunity to serve our communities like we’ve never done before,” Dorsett said. “For me, serving my community became quite literal when I was assigned to report to the polling place in my hometown of Poy Sippi, Wisconsin.

“Not only am I serving in my own community, but I’m serving alongside the people who watched me grow up, to include my own mom,” she added. “Those voting today get to see a familiar face and feel safe with the hygienic practices implemented by people they know and trust.”

The Wisconsin National Guard has two core missions – serving in its federal role as the primary combat reserve of the Army and Air Force as well as serving the state during times of emergency, and while serving as poll workers is a unique and unprecedented mission for the Wisconsin National Guard, serving the state in a time of need is a familiar concept for the state’s Citizen Soldiers and Airmen.

“It was a good experience,” said Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Ard, a Green Bay, Wisconsin resident assigned as a public affairs noncommissioned officer in the Milwaukee-based 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade serving as a poll worker at the Allouez Village Hall. “There were many volunteers, some wearing masks, but the training was well planned by the village. They have a good plan and the Guard is here to provide support in any way we can.”

Others like Sgt. Monica Miggins, a fueler from Madison assigned to the Beloit, Wisconsin-based 1158th Transportation Company hoped the Guard’s efforts helped alleviate the burden on other poll workers.

“We’re making a positive impact because there a lot of people who volunteer who are elderly,” she said while working at a Fitchburg, Wisconsin polling station. “So this helps out with letting them avoid contact with people by letting younger Soldiers take their duties.”

Guard personnel fulfilled a variety of duties as poll workers throughout the day.

“I did a little of everything,” said Maj. Maria Garcia, a member of the 132nd Brigade Support Battalion and a Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, resident supporting the City of Wauwatosa and Milwaukee County. “I assisted with the ballots and polling book, feeding ballots into the machine, cleaning the polling location and directing traffic.”

Garcia said she received training from the Milwaukee County Elections Commission

and COVID-19 safety guidance prior to polls opening.

“Working with Wauwatosa was a very positive experience,” she added. “The Guard members ensured Wauwatosa could provide full election staffing for all its districts.”

Spc. Michael Clark, a truck driver from Mosinee, Wisconsin’s F Company, 132nd Brigade Support Battalion, said he was honored to serve his community at a polling station in Marshfield, Wisconsin.

“I think that as a Guardsman it is important to help out the community and nation in any way possible whether it is a very little things or a national emergency,” he said. “It is a great way to gain experience and meet interesting, new people and gain great new experiences.”

Staff Sgt. Alan Hughes, assigned to Madison’s 115th Fighter Wing, but also serving in Marshfield in support of Wood County was grateful for the opportunity to serve his neighbors.

“As a traditional status Guardsman drilling with an Air National Guard unit nearly two hours away from my home, it feels good to be able to support my own friends and neighbors and demonstrate to my local community that there are local Guardsman always willing and able to step up when the need arises, no matter what the situation may be,” Hughes said.

The Citizen Soldiers and Airmen working at the polls received glowing reviews from many clerks around the state.

“The nine Guardsmen that Langlade County received were so kind and eager to be of assistance to the municipal clerks,” said Judy Nagel, Langlade County clerk. “I really appreciate your help with this. It was valued that they were trained and informed of what they were doing for the community. Using local Guardsmen was a plus.”

Barron County Clerk DeeAnn Cook shared a similar opinion.

“Use of the soldiers has been the smoothest part of this election,” she said. “I am more than impressed with how this entire process of using the Guard came off. What a nice, polite, respectful group of people they are. They all arrived on time and were patient while their assignments were being decided, then reported for duty.”

Brig. Gen. Robyn Blader, Wisconsin's assistant adjutant general for readiness and training was responsible for coordinating the Wisconsin National Guard's response and served as a liaison with the Wisconsin Elections Commission in the days and weeks leading up to the election. She helped orchestrate the Wisconsin National Guard's logistical support to WEC by procuring and distributing supplies needed to ensure polling stations were as safe as possible such as hand sanitizer, wipes, spray bottles, and personal protective equipment before more than 2,400 troops mobilized to support the poll worker mission.

"The Wisconsin National Guard stands ready 24/7 to serve our communities and our state," she said. "The elections mission is an illustration of how we can bring our service members on state active duty, train them to be poll workers and send them out to polling stations within their community and execute the polling mission in a professional manner. Our unique military and civilian skills make us adaptable to execute any mission across every zip code in our state. The Wisconsin National Guard is part of your communities, as we are your family, your friends, your co-workers and your neighbors who live in your communities, and we could not be prouder to be serving the citizens of our state and being part of ensuring they can cast their vote in this election."

The troops mobilized for the mission in short order - a testament to the Wisconsin National Guard's readiness when called to serve. Within less than 48 hours of initially receiving the mission, more than 2,400 mobilized beginning April 5. By April 6, Guardsmen were reporting to local clerks, completing several hours of WEC-provided training and helping setup polling sites. Tuesday morning, they stood ready to assist, despite the uncertainty surrounding the election amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

"That would not have been possible without you," said Meagan Wolfe, the Wisconsin Elections Commission administrator. "Thank you to all the service men and women who helped make democracy in Wisconsin possible today."

Tracy Oldenburg, Fitchburg's city clerk shared a similar message.

"The National Guard has been wonderful," Oldenburg said. "We would not be able to run our polling locations without them. A lot of our normal polling volunteers are over the age of 70 and due to the Coronavirus they are unable to serve. So it's been awesome for the National Guard to step up and fill those positions."

The Wisconsin National Guard's mission to serve as poll workers in an election may mark the first time in the nation's history that the National Guard mobilized to staff polling sites during an emergency. The mission to serve as poll workers continues through April 8 when troops will assist with polling station cleanup and processing ballots, if needed, before being released from state active duty. Meanwhile, the Wisconsin National Guard simultaneously continues to support other missions across Wisconsin.

Wisconsin National Guard troops are currently helping staff two state-run voluntary self-isolation facilities in Milwaukee and Madison and another Milwaukee-run facility with medics providing medical monitoring as well as administrative support. Approximately 12 personnel are staffing each state-run facility, while nearly 30 are assisting at the Milwaukee-run facility.

Citizen Soldiers and Airmen are also conducting warehousing operations in support of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services where they are receiving personal protective equipment (PPE) shipments at warehouses, repackaging it, and then distributing it to sites that need PPE.

A team of six Wisconsin National Guard medics also augmented the staff at a senior living facility in Grafton, Wisconsin, for three days in March while the facility dealt with a staffing shortfall after a COVID-19 outbreak there.

Also last month, a team of 30 Wisconsin National Guard personnel assisted DHS transport a group of Wisconsin citizens back to their homes after they returned to our state from a cruise ship that had confirmed cases of COVID-19 onboard.

Last weekend, a team of approximately 30 Wisconsin National Guard troops responded to a senior living facility in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, where they established a mobile COVID-19 testing site and collected specimens from staff and residents there.

The Wisconsin National Guard continues to stand ready for additional missions, as requested by state or civil authorities.

Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Ard, Spc. Emma Anderson, Spc. Anya Hanson, and 1st Lt. Daniel Yarnall contributed to this report.