

Dept. of Military Affairs: Revamped comprehensive health and wellness leaders course gives Wisconsin National Guard leaders the tools to help troops find balance

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FORT MCCOY, Wis. — Wisconsin National Guard Leaders at all levels now have another tool at their disposal to help address challenges Soldiers and Airmen in the organization face in their military and civilian lives that affect the force's readiness for its state and federal missions.

The Wisconsin National Guard's Comprehensive Health and Wellness program offers a leader course aimed at equipping unit leaders with tools to help their troops overcome obstacles to the five pillars of health and wellness.

On April 2nd the largest class served by the Comprehensive Health and Wellness leader course completed their week-long training at the Wisconsin Military Academy in Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. First Lt. Meghan Skrepenski of the 115th Fighter Wing is an instructor for the course and has been a part of the health and wellness program for about three years since first beginning in a previous iteration of the leadership course.

The new course has added aspects to that prior program that Skrepenski hopes will change the culture to focus on the five pillars of health and wellness – fitness through financial, social, mental, physical, and spiritual stability. Not only was this the largest course so far, it also had its first Air National Guard chief enrolled and was a blended mix of both Soldiers and Airmen.

Citizen Soldiers and Airmen who serve in the Wisconsin National Guard face a lot of challenges and must balance many competing demands. Nearly the entire force serves in a part-time capacity – meaning they attend drill one weekend a month and a two week annual training period in addition to military schools and training on top of full-time civilian employment, college, parenting duties, community service, and more depending on the individual. They can be mobilized at any time for service here in Wisconsin, as seen in the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic and periods of civil unrest, or for federal overseas deployments to combat zones worldwide. Balancing it all can be a tall task, and the Comprehensive Health and Wellness Program aims to help troops find that balance.

“We are raising up our biggest group of leaders that has come through so far,” said Skrepenski. “We have 36 leaders right now who are going through this course. They’re trying to learn new ways that they can work with their Soldiers and Airmen so they can help them overcome life’s struggles and find balance in their lives. Whether they’re in or out of uniform it doesn’t matter. We want to make them to be the best Soldiers, the best Airmen, the best people that they can be.”

The course aims to teach that when a Soldier or Airmen fails a fitness test, for example, it could be due to one or more of those pillars being out of balance, said 1st Lt Skrepenski. She believes that leaders who are empathetic and are able to relate to the struggles a Guard member may be facing will be better able to help them find a solution and take ownership of their life and improve themselves.

Tech. Sgt. Jake Hansen, a radar airfield weather systems craftsmen at Volk Field, is assisting as cadre with the Comprehensive Health and Wellness Leader course.

“Previous iterations of a course similar to this were aimed only at fitness,” said Hansen. “The health and wellness leaders course is more of a holistic approach. The idea is to instill lasting and meaningful behavior change. It’s not about just getting a person to pass a test. It’s about finding the underlying cause of the issue and helping them to provide solutions so they can meet their goals. It’s a more meaningful and lasting approach to wellness.”

“The leaders taking the course are gaining the skills they need to bring this back to their unit to affect people on a face-to-face level,” said Hansen. “Graduates of the course also have the opportunity to become a cadre in the two week basic behavior change course, where they will help people live to the full extent of their potential via the different pillars of wellness.”

During this two week course Guardsmen have the opportunity to meet with financial advisors as well as focus specifically on their fitness through resources like a running clinic.

Second Lt. Mason Higgins, a platoon leader with the 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry, took the course to bring change to his unit and help others who may be struggling within its formations.

"The 127th has had some tragedy in the past year and I think it's important that leaders come to these kinds of courses and gain the skills to help better address Soldiers' needs and to better care for their Soldiers," said Higgins. "I'm really happy to be here today and work toward sustaining those skills. I'm impressed so far with what we're learning and the idea of converting to a more compassionate form of counseling with our Soldiers."

Higgins said the most valuable thing he's taken away from the course so far is perspective.

"There's a lot of vulnerability here," said Higgins. "My classmates are being very honest and candid, and we've heard some past testimonials from previous course participants. It helped me see things a bit differently and learn some new perspectives about what Soldiers go through and possible reasons why they go through those things."

Higgins said he is grateful for the Wisconsin National Guard, which has both challenged him and given him opportunity.

"I've been given the chance to do my best in a lot of cases and I've always felt supported to have what I need to do my best in those cases," he said. "So it's important for me as a leader to make sure that my Soldiers are also being challenged and have what they need to do their best."

Higgins is currently in law school and said he's looking forward to applying the skills he's learned throughout the course to be a better leader both in and out of uniform.