

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin emergency management reflects on longest emergency activation in state history

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Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) has been on the front lines of the state's battle against COVID-19 since March 12, 2020, when Gov. Tony Evers ordered the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) opened to support the Wisconsin Department of Health Services in coordinating statewide efforts to slow the spread of the pandemic. A year later, it remains the longest SEOC activation in state history.

"I want to thank our staff and our partner agencies for their steadfast and unyielding support to Wisconsin Emergency Management and the citizens of Wisconsin," said Dr. Darrell Williams, Wisconsin Emergency Management administrator. "They are a shining example of the true spirit of our state and our nation. Your efforts are truly appreciated and that will never be forgotten."

The activation of the SEOC to Level 1 — the highest level of response — followed Gov. Evers declaring a statewide public health emergency in response to a spike in COVID-19 cases across Wisconsin, after the virus first arrived in January of 2020. The agency has been a key player in the largest emergency response in the state's history — and the effort continues to this day.

"We want to thank everyone at Wisconsin Emergency Management for their partnership since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the activation of the State Emergency Operations Center," said Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) Interim Secretary Karen Timberlake. "We are proud to have teamed with

WEM throughout the year to distribute PPE [personal protective equipment], decontaminate masks, and set up mobile testing and vaccination clinics. Together, we are slowing the spread of this virus across our state.”

This remarkable year has set the bar high and WEM staff has met it time and again with unwavering commitment.

“When I declared our first statewide public health emergency for COVID-19 a year ago, we never could have imagined the challenges and tragedy the year would bring,” said Gov. Evers.

“It was, and continues to be, all hands on deck. On behalf of the state of Wisconsin, I want to thank the dedicated folks at WEM. From the leadership of Dr. Darrell Williams to the regional directors, to our county and tribal emergency managers, and all the WEM staff, thank you for your good work to keep our communities healthy and safe.”

That work remains coordinated through SEOC where it began last March. It was an unusual activation with all cabinet secretaries or their top representatives instructed to report there a year ago.

“When we opened the SEOC, I was asked to function as the safety officer given how many people were physically present at the beginning of the response,” said Kevin Wernet, Wisconsin Emergency Management Training and Exercise Supervisor. “I spent the first four days developing and implementing the safety measures that allowed everyone to support the incident in person. Many of those safety measures remain in place at the Department of Military Affairs.”

New roles were carved out of necessity as the response to COVID-19 evolved. Since April, Wernet has been leading task forces dealing with PPE decontamination services and mortuary resource needs.

“As the PPE Decontamination Task Force Leader, I worked with FEMA to coordinate the deployment of the Battelle System,” Wernet said. “The system uses hydrogen peroxide vaporization to decontaminate N-95 respirators so they can be safely reused in the healthcare system.”

While WEM continues to coordinate the procurement and delivery of PPE through its county and tribal emergency managers, the monumental task of assisting with the

vaccine distribution program for the state has become a huge focus of the agency's response.

"WEM and the National Guard are assisting as part of a multi-agency vaccination taskforce," said Greg Engle, Wisconsin Emergency Management's Bureau of Planning and Preparedness director. "WEM's role is assisting with the allocation of the vaccine to providers and the operations and logistics of the vaccine distribution of the vaccine from regional hubs to vaccine providers around the state."

Over the past 12 months, WEM also carried out its usual functions of responding to natural and manmade disasters and coordinating disaster assistance, as WEM is the conduit through which money, grants, and other supplies flow to affected areas that request assistance.

In late May, staff were also called to duty to respond to civil unrest — including protests and looting in several Wisconsin cities — stemming from the death of George Floyd while in custody by Minneapolis police. In Kenosha, the unrest turned deadly during a night of violence after the Aug. 23 shooting of Jacob Blake by a Kenosha police officer.

"The early parts of the overnight shifts were tense because of the unpredictable nature of the event," said Katie Sommers, Mitigation Section supervisor for Wisconsin Emergency Management who served as an SEOC manager during the response. "In storm events, we generally know what to expect and the types of resources that will be requested. For both COVID and the civil unrest in 2020, we faced many new challenges, including trying to assign and deploy the best resources for the unusual requests we received."

WEM region directors played an important role in working several fronts simultaneously in support of the state response to civil unrest and COVID-19. The southeast region was hit particularly hard with civil unrest in Kenosha and Wauwatosa in the middle of a pandemic.

"Emergency managers utilize the same skill-set regardless of the type of disaster — we look at life safety first, then property protection and immediate needs," said Ben Schliesman, southeast region director for WEM. "Being flexible and able to adapt to any situation was key as there were a lot of moving parts. I was guiding my county emergency managers and briefing elected officials, while communicating from the ground to WEM to provide that critical situational awareness at the state level."

Communication was constant.”

Schliesman also helped coordinate a FEMA Preliminary Damage Assessment as part of the state’s process to request a Presidential Disaster Declaration after storms resulted in flooding and damage along the Lake Michigan shoreline in January 2020, affecting three counties in his region. He met with local officials, helped county emergency managers collect damage information, and represented the state in meetings and site visits with FEMA.

“This past year has been about building upon existing relationships, but also fostering new ones that will result in further collaboration that will serve my region in the months to come,” Schliesman said. “What this past year has done is identified any possible gaps moving forward. We never want to leave anyone behind.”

Today, WEM staff and partner agencies are meeting several times a week, mostly virtually, to respond to the needs of counties, tribes, and local health departments both in the COVID response and carrying out the regular duties as a state agency.

“The most efficient COVID response is at the local level where talented emergency management professionals have supported their communities from testing, PPE distribution, and now mass vaccination clinics,” said Response Section Supervisor Natalie Easterday, who has been serving as operations chief through the COVID-19 activation. “They have done all of this while still ensuring a readiness for a natural or manmade disaster and accomplishing normal day job functions. We could not be as far along in our pandemic response without the work of local emergency managers.”

While the past year has been challenging, it’s been a year of growth and sharpening of skills that each staff member at WEM brings to the table.

“I have always felt I work with some of the most dedicated and gifted people in state government,” Wernet said. “This year has validated that feeling. Many people don’t know what we do for them, but they can rest assured they have a dedicated and well-trained team coordinating in what has been a very challenging year full of multiple challenges at a time.”

As the pandemic continues to impact citizens in Wisconsin, the strength and resilience of the WEM family means that their fight will continue.

“We always show up and do the best we can,” Sommers said. “We are a team — no matter how tired we are, we work until the job is done.”