

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard continues to fulfill state's needs in

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By Maj. Joe Trovato

More than 20 months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the Wisconsin National Guard continues to fulfill a variety of roles for the state.

Currently, approximately 500 Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard are actively assisting communities with COVID-19 testing, vaccinations, and helping manage the state's stockpiles of vaccines.

In recent weeks, some of those troops have taken on a new role – serving as temporary nursing assistants at four state mental health facilities at the request of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Approximately 60 Wisconsin National Guard troops completed a multi-day training regimen to assist with basic tasks and functions to assist healthcare workers at the facilities they're supporting. They are also completing an additional 59-hour Certified Nursing Assistant program under the supervision of registered nurses at each facility.

The number of Wisconsin National Guard troops mobilized for the pandemic response has ebbed and flowed since the first troops mobilized in March 2020. At one point in the spring of 2020, more than 1,400 troops were mobilized as the Guard took on a multitude of missions to support the state ranging from COVID testing, staffing a state call center that informed people of their test results, assisting county medical examiners, staffing self-isolation facilities for individuals who didn't have the means to effectively self-isolate, assisting at a senior living facility amidst a staffing shortage, and even transporting a group of Wisconsin

residents home that were exposed to COVID in the earliest days of the pandemic.

Others trained to perform the temporary nursing assistant role at Wisconsin State Fair Park in the event additional support was needed at the state's alternate care facility.

Despite many missions and roles and a long-lasting mobilization, Citizen Soldiers and Airmen in the National Guard continue to find inspiration to serve their fellow citizens and communities.

"For me, it's the people," said Master Sgt. Emily Decker, a member of the Wisconsin Air National Guard now serving as a company first sergeant on the COVID-19 task force. "It's always about the people and how much we need each other in so many ways, and how much good we can accomplish together in difficult times.

"I'm proud to serve alongside so many professional military counterparts as we respond to the COVID 19 pandemic," she added. "The camaraderie we have forged together during this time of service has been life-changing, and the respect I have for them is immeasurable. Each one of the men and women that have raised their hand to serve during this pandemic have played a critical role. Looking back at the past 22 months, it's incredible knowing the impact we have had collectively on serving the citizens of Wisconsin."

The Guard's primary mission for most of the pandemic became mass community-based COVID testing all across the state. Since the pandemic began, the Guard has administered approximately 1.2 million COVID tests. When vaccines became available in early 2021, the Guard assisted with mobile and community vaccination teams, helping administer more than 230,000 vaccines statewide while also assisting the state with personnel to help manage the state's vaccine shipments and inventory.

Since the spring of 2020, the Wisconsin National Guard has worked continuously with its partners at the state and local level to assess demand signals for testing and vaccination support. In the fall of 2021 only a few hundred troops remained mobilized, but as the state saw increased demand for testing and vaccinations stemming from new variants and employer vaccination mandates, additional troops mobilized on a voluntary basis to meet that need. As testing and vaccination demand waned, some troops were repurposed to assist with basic functions at mental health facilities.

The Wisconsin National Guard's mobilization for COVID-19 represents the longest sustained domestic mobilization in Wisconsin National Guard history. Wisconsin troops have mobilized throughout history for long periods in support of overseas combat operations in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, both world wars, the Spanish-American War, and the Civil War, but never have so many troops mobilized for so long here in Wisconsin.