

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard troops continue to support state's COVID-19 vaccination efforts

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MADISON, Wis. — Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard have helped local health departments administer more than 60,000 vaccines across Wisconsin since establishing the first mobile vaccination teams in late January.

Guard personnel have responded to requests for assistance in approximately a dozen Wisconsin counties including: Buffalo, Columbia, Eau Claire, Kenosha, Milwaukee, Portage, Rock, Sauk, Sheboygan, St. Croix, Walworth, Waukesha, and Winnebago.

The support requests range from high schools and county fairgrounds to local municipal buildings or smaller clinics.

Mobile vaccination teams are a joint effort between the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS), the Wisconsin National Guard, and a team of vaccinators – usually sourced locally, and they respond upon receiving a request for assistance.

Generally the teams consist of six total personnel, including four Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard, who perform most of the administrative and support functions on site in support of the local or tribal health department requesting state assistance. The Guard members generally assist with initial triage and greeting, check-in, provide some background information on the vaccine, and then monitoring after the shot is administered.

Then two vaccinators – generally from other non-Guard entities – actually administer the vaccine.

“We’re helping the local communities with their own vaccine sites,” said Spc. Brandon Mueller, a Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldier assisting at a vaccination facility in Milwaukee County. “We’re helping with anything they need. So we can work in the front reception area. We can help people through doors. We can help in the observation area. We can do anything that the public health asks us to.”

Mueller, a medic assigned to Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry, has been mobilized with the Wisconsin National Guard for nearly a year as part of the state’s pandemic response.

These mobile vaccination teams are dispatched to sites on a request-for-assistance basis, meaning the local or tribal health department makes a request to the state level, which then assigns the team to support.

One of the larger goals of the mobile vaccination teams is to ensure that underserved populations, or that agencies that don’t have the resources to run clinics have access to the vaccine.

“On the mobile vaccination team it’s a lot of just whatever people need,” said Spc. Logan Nguyen, a horizontal engineer assigned to Company B, 173rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, who, like Mueller, has been part of the Guard’s mobilization since May 2020. “The National Guard’s been supporting the civilian roles with just being an extra helping hand.”

Tech. Sgt. Tyler Schmitz, a member of the Wisconsin Air National Guard’s 128th Air Control Squadron at Volk Field Combat Readiness Training Center, is a mobile vaccination team leader who has also performed a variety of roles since mobilizing for the COVID response May 1, 2020.

“I control aircraft normally, so this is definitely outside my vault,” he said.

Schmitz has been impressed with the Guard’s flexibility and ability to adapt to any mission. Like Schmitz, every other Soldier and Airman has a different job in the military – whether they serve in logistics, field artillery, personnel management, infantry, medical, or other fields. Prior to the pandemic – other than some who work or serve in healthcare fields, no personnel had managed a pandemic response

before.

"I think it's huge, just like the logistics like how we've been able to sustain such a large mission set within the state, and we've had thousands of people on orders to support this," he said. "I think it's just, the logistical feat is impressive."

Schmitz noted the contrast between serving at a COVID testing site – like most Wisconsin Guard troops supporting the pandemic response have – to now helping local health departments administer vaccines.

"I like the vaccination side just because it's a lot more cheerful," he said. "People are just so much happier to be here. A lot of these over 75, over 65-year olds, this is the first time they've been able to get out of the house, and they can get the vaccination, see their families. So I definitely really enjoy this compared to the swab site."

The Wisconsin National Guard originally built teams capable of supporting nine mobile vaccination teams that were available to serve the state. That number has now swelled to 17, and as the state continues to expand vaccine eligibility, those teams are ready to continue assisting.

"It takes a lot of work to get needles in arms, but between the entire DHS and Wisconsin National Guard Vaccination Taskforce and Joint Task Force-64, we're making it happen," said Capt. Amanda Dickenson, the Wisconsin National Guard's officer-in-charge for the vaccine and specimen collection action team. "We have another 17,000 vaccinations projected just this week so we're steadily increasing in our abilities to educate and demonstrate to the local and tribal health departments what the National Guard and our mobile vaccination teams can provide to counties and tribes all over the state."

The Wisconsin National Guard simultaneously continues to assist with vaccine inventory management at sites across the state too.

In that role, small teams of National Guard troops are working at distribution centers where the state's supply of vaccines arrives. The troops assist with preparing vaccine shipments for transport to vaccination centers around Wisconsin.