

Dept. of Military Affairs: Serving those who serve: Service Member Support Division Part 3 - Office of Diversity and Inclusion

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The Wisconsin National Guard strives to foster an environment where individuals who make up the organization feel valued for who they are and their contributions.

The National Guard's strength is the people. Soldiers, Airmen and civilians, and the families and employers who support the National Guard, represent all races, religions, ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. That is why the National Guard is committed to establishing a safe and inclusive culture to represent the diversity of our Nation, ensure equity for every current and prospective member of the National Guard, build trust, and achieve overall readiness and mission accomplishment.

As Service Members complete their initial entry training alongside their peers, they are taught the values of their service component and trained to be uniform in all that they do. While the training has a fundamental purpose in providing Service Members with the skills they need to complete their missions, protect lives and liberty, and work as members of a team, it is not meant to discount who each Service Member is as an individual.

"The problem I see here is that many Service Members are trying to behave like people who they aren't," said Liam Walsh, the diversity equity and inclusion technician. "I believe that letting people live as who they really are makes them much more productive and happier as they don't have to 'play down' or hide who they are and where they come from."

Wisconsin's Office of Diversity and Inclusion, part of a National Guard-wide initiative, aims to address inequitable behaviors and educate people about the benefits of diversity.

"I made a commitment to become more culturally humble and responsive to the needs of Wisconsin's Service Members," said Katie Bermudez, the program manager for the office of diversity and inclusion. "A commitment to understanding the histories that tried to keep us all apart. The commitment goes beyond checking the boxes and promoting readiness."

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion focuses on education and training, cultural awareness, and building internal and external partnerships.

Bermudez has been the program manager since 2020. She initially struggled with the role.

"I struggled because I did not want to be the party planner for the observance of the month," Bermudez said. "I always wanted to make a difference and feel like what I do adds value and contributes to meaningful change."

A year into her struggle, Bermudez attended a pilot training program put together by the National Guard Bureau's Diversity and Inclusion Office. Part of the instruction focused on emotional intelligence. That's where she found her voice.

"I discovered that the emotional intelligence training is a tool that will bring you to the edge of self-understanding with a vocabulary that helps you name and better understand how and why you show up in the world," Bermudez said. "It helps us understand why we do what we do and best yet, it is a skill set that with a little education and training, you can show up in the world as a better version of you."

Walsh and Bermudez were the first of their cohort to deliver the full 8-hour block of emotional intelligence training, spreading the wealth of knowledge to others within the organization.

"I think the best part of my job is when an individual gets an 'aha' moment and I get to see their eyes widen when all of the concepts and ideas we are discussing come into focus and they get it," Walsh said.

Working within the Office of Diversity and Inclusion has also helped Walsh and Bermudez explore their core values and use those to effectively fulfill their roles

supporting Wisconsin's Service Members.

"It is a core value of mine to protect my peers and my community," Walsh said. "So this position allows me to act in accordance with my values by trying to ensure inclusive behavior in this organization."

Bermudez said her values are growth, connection, and authenticity.

"As the diversity and inclusion program person, I can be authentically me and grow as a professional in one of the most sought-after career fields of today," Bermudez said. "And I get to develop meaningful connections with people in ways that I never knew existed before."

The role can also be lonely at times and very difficult, Bermudez added.

"Diversity and inclusion work is not easy because it calls out behaviors that are not okay or acceptable in our changing society," Bermudez said. "By nature, conversations about race, gender, ableism are uncomfortable. Some people welcome the chance to have education on these topics, but others in that moment are confronted with their privilege and the things they have been doing wrong - this brings up feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment."

The team's work, however, is fundamental in ensuring the Wisconsin National Guard is inclusive and its members feel a sense of belonging as they are.

"It promotes building a culture that moves beyond fitting in and being just like everyone else and seeks out each other's humanity," Bermudez said. "Service Members might look alike but our diverse ways to live, love, learn, think, talk, and just be true to ourselves requires a place that embraces all of that."