

Dept. of Military Affairs: State hosts career fair for troops transitioning from COVID-19 response

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The Wisconsin National Guard hosted a career fair May 4 at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center, along with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, the Department of Workforce Development, and the Wisconsin Healthcare Association, for service members completing their tours of duty responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of the troops have spent more than two years serving on military orders away from their civilian careers or educations.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Wisconsin National Guard has been called upon several times to work in varying capacities supporting the state. Wisconsin National Guard members administered more than 230,000 COVID-19 vaccines and more than 1.2 million COVID-19 tests since the pandemic began. They also fulfilled a number of other roles including serving as certified nursing assistants at healthcare facilities, staffing a call center, staffing a warehouse that distributed PPE supplies, staffing self-isolation facilities, assisting county medical examiners, and more.

“Though you deserve so much more credit than just for your COVID-19 efforts, your work continues a pattern and a legacy of the Guard of being a reliable and versatile force that’s ready to go up against any and all challenges that the state does face,” said Deb Standridge, deputy secretary with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

Brig. Gen. Timothy Covington, the Wisconsin National Guard’s deputy adjutant

general for civil support, commended the service members before they went around to different employer booths at the career fair.

“To demonstrate the incredible amount of work and effort you have done, a few of you have been just absolutely crushing it,” Covington said. “The greatest example I think I can give is that one of you actually within the CNA facilities was nominated the employee of the month for that facility.”

That Soldier was Spc. James Henkel, and infantryman with Company C, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry. Henkel served as a CNA supporting Odd Fellow Rebekah Home Association in Green Bay, Wis.

“The experience over the last year pretty much that I’ve been on has just kind of taught me that there’s been more out there than I ever expected as far as jobs go,” Henkel said. “Being able to take the skills and abilities that I’ve learned through the National Guard and being able to incorporate them into the healthcare system has been instrumental in how I see my future.”

Wisconsin National Guards troops will soon transition back to their traditional part-time National Guard statuses and re-enter the civilian workforce or go back to school, and state agencies and employers partnered together to give them a helping hand in that transition.

Henkel said he is considering employment within the healthcare industry or as a state trooper. He was among hundreds of Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers and Airmen who attended the career fair.

“There are a lot of Soldiers who came onto these order sets that didn’t have employment, so offering this to them is a great way to interact in-person, face-to-face with potential employers,” said 1st Lt. Irene Landrum, a medical operations officer with Headquarters Company, 132nd Brigade Support Battalion, who also supported the state as a certified nursing assistant.

Dozens of employers and educational institutions from around the state, including many from the healthcare industry gathered at the career fair in hopes of hiring Citizen Soldiers and Airmen who have served selflessly over the past two years and gained valuable skills and experience in the process.

That’s especially true in the healthcare industry, where staffing shortages during

the pandemic laid bare the need to recruit more people into the field. With more than 160 Wisconsin National Guard troops serving in nursing assistant roles since January and receiving on-the-job training as well as formal certified nursing assistant training at Madison College and Bellin College in Green Bay, some troops may make the transition from other careers and remain in the healthcare field. More than 130 additional troops provided assistance at other state-operated healthcare facilities.