

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard Civil Support Team trains with first responders in Dane County

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The Wisconsin National Guard's 54th Civil Support Team (CST) completed a collective lanes training exercise last week in Madison and DeForest, Wis., organized by evaluators from United States Army North.

The Madison-based CST is the state's full-time response team for emergencies or terrorist events that involve weapons of mass destruction, toxic industrial chemicals or natural disasters. The unit is designed to rapidly deploy, assist local first-responders in determining the nature of an attack or hazardous materials scenario, and provide medical, communications, technical support and advice.

The 22 Soldiers and Airmen of the 54th CST regularly prepare and train alongside fire departments and law enforcement agencies around the state to be ready to serve as the state's first military responder. Building relationships with partners across the state through regular training is one of the unit's top priorities.

In the training scenario last week Tuesday, the Madison Fire Department called in the CST after a security guard observed a potential clandestine lab in an abandoned building. The CST's strike team, consisting of 12 people and four vehicles,

responded to assist.

“As a survey team member, we go down when we get a call for assistance from a fire department or something like that and we actually survey the building and go down range for whatever the [incident commander’s] objectives are,” said Sgt. Jaclyn Sommers, a survey team member with the CST.

After receiving a brief from the incident commander with the Madison Fire Department, Sommers and another team member donned protective gear, entered the lab, tested substances and documented everything, all the while relaying information back to the rest of the team.

This was Sommers’ first collective lanes training event with the CST. She joined the CST last October.

“I haven’t been on a real-world mission or anything yet,” Sommers said. “Being so new on the team, getting to have lots of experience working with the team members and having their experience showing me what I’m going to be doing if we were ever utilized in a real-world scenario is super valuable.”

Training exercises also help to foster relationships between the CST and first responders throughout the state.

“We have to have a good working relationship with our partners – local, state and federal – because they’re really who make us a valid unit,” said Capt. Peter Vakos, the operations officer with the CST. “That’s our mission, so if we’re not in contact with our partners, we’re not doing our job.”

Vakos added that it's important to conduct exercises alongside partner agencies since that's where the unit's calls come from and it builds familiarity with partners prior to a real-world response.

In addition to training exercises and real-world emergency response operations, the CST also conducts steady state operations providing support for known, planned events.

"It's a great job," Vakos said. "It's definitely one of the things I love about being on the CST and being in the National Guard in general being able to get out and help your fellow state partners."