

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard leaders express appreciation to healthcare facilities as nursing assistance mission moves toward conclusion

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LA CROSSE, Wisconsin – After more than three months, the Wisconsin National Guard's mission to assist as nursing assistants at state healthcare facilities is winding down.

Senior Wisconsin National Guard leaders and officials from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services travelled to several healthcare facilities around the state to express their appreciation for the partnership that formed between them and the hospitality they provided to the Guard members who have been serving at those facilities.

As the state grappled with the Omicron COVID-19 variant surge in late 2021 and an ongoing staffing shortage in the healthcare field, bedspace availability at healthcare facilities was at a premium. That mission will wind down over the coming days as the need for the Guard's assistance has dissipated.

The state turned to the Wisconsin National Guard to help fill the void and open up additional beds at key facilities. More than 160 Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard completed two-week training programs at Madison College or Bellin College in Green Bay as well as on-the-job training to gain nursing assistant certification before getting assigned to healthcare facilities and long-term care facilities around the state. More than 130 additional troops provided assistance

at other state-operated facilities.

Despite these troops coming mostly from non-medical backgrounds, the reviews have been phenomenal, as the troops displayed their adaptability and professionalism at every turn.

Charlene Everett, the chief executive officer at Odd Fellows Home in Green Bay where approximately 10 troops assisted beginning in mid-January, praised the Guard members for their service at her facility.

"It's been wonderful," she said at an April 26 recognition event at Odd Fellows Home. "They've been obedient, attentive, and so kind to our residents."

Everett relayed a story about an Odd Fellows resident who historically did not want anyone assisting her, but struck up a fantastic relationship with one of the Guard members assisting at the facility. Another resident struggling financially told one of the Guard members that he needed a few items, and the Guard member wanted to assist and used his own money to purchase the items for the man.

"I honestly don't have one negative thing to say," Everett said. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat. The scary part is their absence, but we knew it was coming, so we prepared for it, and I think we're going to be good."

Everett said she hopes that some of the Guard members remain in the healthcare field with their new training and experience, despite the fact that this is a role no one would have ever expected to see National Guard members filling.

"You picture them after a hurricane or after a flood being the first people there to help, and you love them for it," she said. "I wish the public could understand that this was just as urgent. This was dear lives that they were caring for."

Spc. James Henkel, a Neenah resident and normally an infantryman assigned to C Company, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry in Fond du Lac, was named the "CNA of the Month" at Odd Fellows in March, for his exemplary performance. He and Henkel had some basic medical care experience in the past, but while his role serving as a nursing assistant at Odd Fellows was a learning experience, it was extremely rewarding.

"I've worked mostly in rehab centers, so being able to see the patients as they come in day one and then working with them up until they leave and have built up

the strength they needed to get over, I think that was most rewarding,” he said. “Seeing them at their worst point and then seeing them at the point where they can go back home.”

“I think it’s amazing,” he said of the versatility and adaptability that Soldiers and Airmen displayed by taking on this mission. “Being able to take a ton of people from all backgrounds both on the civilian and military side with no prior experience in the medical field and being able to come here and be successful in this is just amazing to see happen.”

Henkel recently applied to the Wisconsin State Patrol Academy and also has EMT experience. He hopes to pursue a future career in one of those fields following the completion of this duty assignment.

Pfc. Amanda Hierstetter, of Prairie du Chien and originally a combat engineer with the Medford-based 273rd Engineer Company, was assigned to the Mayo Clinic Health System Franciscan Healthcare facility in La Crosse. She arrived at Mayo in January not sure what to expect.

The experience working as a nursing assistant was so impactful for her that she now plans to pursue a career in the healthcare industry, as a result.

“It’s been wonderful,” she said. “I really didn’t realize my life was going to take me this direction before I got on these orders.”

“I didn’t realize how much this would impact me – patient care,” she continued. “Every day I loved getting up in the morning. It doesn’t matter what time it was. Super excited to get up and work with these people every day.”

Hierstetter developed an immense respect and admiration for other healthcare workers like the nurses she saw working 16-hour shifts. It opened her eyes to a newfound calling.

She is currently finishing a bachelor’s degree in management, but as a result of her time serving in this capacity, her new plan is to continue working in the medical field and pursue a master’s degree in the field.

“This is where I want to be – something in the medical field, because I want to help people,” she said.

Hierstetter will be participating in a program designed for military members to transition into medical careers upon the completion of her tour supporting the state's COVID response.

Brig. Gen. Tim Covington, the Wisconsin National Guard's deputy adjutant general for civil support, travelled to Green Bay to personally thank the Soldiers and Airmen involved in the nursing assistant support mission who served at Bellin Health Systems facilities and Odd Fellows before travelling to La Crosse, where troops had been assisting at both Mayo Clinic and Hillview Health Center.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services' Dr. Jon Meiman, state epidemiologist and chief medical officer, and Miki Gould, the facility liaison for the Wisconsin Healthcare Capacity Task Force, joined Covington and Col. Randall Myszka, the Wisconsin Army National Guard's Medical Detachment commander, on the visits.

Meiman noted the critical role long-term care facilities play in the state's overall healthcare system and how profound the impact of COVID coupled with healthcare staffing shortages impacted that system.

"We can't thank the Guard enough for the work that you've done, being willing to step up and volunteer into a completely new role," Meiman said while visiting troops finishing their tours at Odd Fellow Home in Green Bay. "It has helped more patients than I think we'll ever know across this state."

Covington also expressed his gratitude for the service of National Guard members while pointing out that the success of the mission over the past several months has been largely due to the strong partnerships developed between the National Guard, the Department of Health Services, and healthcare facilities like Bellin, Odd Fellow, Mayo, Hillview, and dozens of others that troops directly supported.

"Success comes in partnerships," Covington said. "It doesn't come from being a 185-year-old organization. It comes from partnerships. First and foremost our partnership is that relationship we have with the Soldiers and Airmen that are members of the organization that trust the leadership to find a way to make things happen, but then it's the partnership with the civil authority that is actually asking us for support. In this case, the Department of Health Services in this state recognized a very large delta and need as COVID had taken on a very long journey through our nation and taken us down roads we'd never been on before."

Now, as the Wisconsin National Guard begins to transition out of its mission to support the state's COVID-19 response, some troops plan to remain in the healthcare industry, while others will transition back to their full-time civilian careers or academic pursuits.

Since beginning its nursing assistant staffing surge mission in mid-January, Wisconsin National Guard troops helped increase the state's post-acute care bedspace capacity by nearly 270, which enabled healthcare partners to decompress hospitals.

The Guard's support to the nursing assistant mission is slated to conclude over the coming days.

The Wisconsin National Guard played a major role in the state's response to the pandemic from the day the public health emergency was first declared in March 2020. Since then, the Wisconsin National Guard has helped administer more than 1.2 million COVID tests, more than 230,000 vaccines, placed more than 565,000 calls to notify residents of test results, assisted county medical examiners, staffed self-isolation facilities, and more. The COVID response represents the largest sustained domestic mobilization in the Wisconsin National Guard's 185-year history.