

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard supports parenthood, pregnancy and postpartum initiatives

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Nearly 60 Soldiers gathered Dec. 14 for a course on parenthood, pregnancy and postpartum (P3) policies in the Wisconsin National Guard. It was a historic landmark training that represents groundbreaking Soldier equity and support policies and the culmination of years of work by Wisconsin Army National Guard volunteers. There are now more than 100 Soldiers trained across the organization.

The Wisconsin National Guard is at the forefront of efforts to create comprehensive policies, training and support systems for pregnant and postpartum parents in the military.

Five years ago, Soldiers from various units across the Wisconsin Army National Guard established a working group to develop policies and create resources for military families and pregnant and postpartum Soldiers. Recently, this working group developed into the Parenthood, Pregnancy, and Postpartum (P3) Program, and on Nov. 16 their efforts came to fruition with the Wisconsin Army National Guard's first ever P3 Advisor Course.

P3 advisors are Soldiers who provide knowledge, resources, and support to pregnant and postpartum Soldiers, and bridge communication gaps between commanders and parents. The responsibility is an additional duty assignment on top of their traditional military job.

Wisconsin Army National Guard Sgt. 1st Class Kalie Bach, the senior supply

sergeant for the 132nd Brigade Support Battalion (BSB), led the first training with Sgt. 1st Class Melissa Rataczak, the battalion supply non-commissioned officer for the 64th Troop Command.

Bach stated that being a member of the State P3 Advisor team has been one of the most important things she has accomplished in her career and that this project is just one aspect of a much larger and necessary shift in the organization.

“This training was not only necessary and overdue to improve our organization, but also an example for others to ‘be the change’ when there are flaws in the system,” Bach said.

Staff Sgt. Amanda Stock, a drill sergeant and P3 Advisor, has been a vital member of the P3 program since May.

“Our team’s work is almost entirely done voluntarily and outside normal working hours,” Stock explained. “The Soldiers involved in this group really care about making positive, lasting change and it has been exciting to see a lot of what we’ve accomplished recently come to fruition.”

The creation of the P3 Advisor course is not the only accomplishment of this program. Milestones reached over the last five years include selection for the National Security Innovation Network Hacking 4 Defense program, the publication of several policies, allocation of lactation space in state armories, development of a mentorship program for new mothers, the creation of counseling videos, multimedia products and educational and advising initiatives. Critical to this effort, is educating leaders so they are properly equipped to support P3 Soldiers.

Lt. Col. Shannon Hellenbrand, commander of the Recruiting and Retention Battalion — who has been at the heart of this initiative from the beginning and led the group over the last five years — considered the immense amount of cultural change she has witnessed.

“The amount of work we have done is stunning, just putting up a sign advertising lactation space is significant in our educational campaign and goals to reduce stigma associated with parenthood,” Hellenbrand observed. “We will continue to spread the word and ensure new parents have access to the resources and support provided by our organization.”

Hellenbrand said that her greatest career accomplishment is being a part of P3.

“We expanded the existing definition of what it means to be a good Soldier and provided resources and support to help the people in this organization achieve an even higher standard of excellence,” she said.

Lt. Col. Matthew McDonald, chief of the Wisconsin Army National Guard career management branch, reflected on his time on the P3 team.

“Our Soldiers’ experiences informed our efforts to improve existing processes and policy,” McDonald said. “I’ve learned that female Soldiers face unique barriers that can hinder their ability to serve honorably in the Army. P3 removes many of those barriers.”

Sgt. 1st Class Savannah Wanek, a state training manager and P3 non-commissioned officer in charge, said that one of her favorite parts of the group is that leaders asked for her opinion and that it held weight in the decisions and development of projects.

“These policies evolved and changed so much since I was a new mother in the military,” Wanek said.

Wanek pointed out that the impacts of this initiative are not limited to just birth parents, but non-birth parents as well.

Lt. Col. Craig Jansen, the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s state training officer, echoed Wanek’s sentiments.

“Non-birth parents frequently have a hard time taking leave without feeling guilty, so the success of these policies depends on a cultural shift in our organization as well,” Jansen said.

Brig. Gen. Matthew J. Strub, Wisconsin’s deputy adjutant general for Army, stated that he believes P3’s mission is essential to the future of the organization and well-being of the Guard community.

“Soldiers and their families make extraordinary sacrifices every day and P3 will help Soldiers not just achieve their goals in the Guard but also lead fulfilling, satisfying lives beyond it,” Strub said.

By the end of August 2023, the Wisconsin Army National Guard expects to have more than 200 trained P3 advisors across the state.