

National Guard: Serving those who serve - Service Member Support Division part 2

Posted on Thursday, Aug 18, 2022

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

The majority of the Wisconsin National Guard's Service Member Support Division (SMSD) relocated to a new location earlier this year, ultimately making it easier to collaborate in an effort to provide Wisconsin's service members, veterans, Department of Defense civilians, and families access to comprehensive services and resources based on their needs.

The SMSD is composed of a variety of programs and objectives. These include Soldier and family readiness, Yellow Ribbon reintegration, sexual assault prevention and response, and warrior resilience and fitness.

The Wisconsin National Guard's most important asset is people. The Service Member Support Division strives to support Soldiers and Airmen to ensure they are healthy and resilient in all aspects of their lives, on and off duty.

"The voice of our service members and our families are very, very important," said Sgt. 1st Class Tracy Urban, the Warrior Resilience and Fitness program noncommissioned officer in charge. "Those are the people that we serve."

The Wisconsin National Guard Warrior Resilience and Fitness program focuses on holistic wellness and fitness for Service Members and their families. The program ensures multiple programs that support the well-being and resilience of National Guard members and their families are synchronized and meet the needs of the force. These programs include suicide prevention, sexual assault response and prevention, comprehensive health and wellness, state resilience coordinator, military funeral honors, and survivor outreach services.

“We’re looking over the whole macro level on how we can help the health of our force,” Urban said. “We work very jointly with [Health Service Support] and the Chaplain Corps because that’s also part of it.”

The Warrior Resilience and Fitness program is responsible for the commander’s ready and resilient council. The council looks at evidence-based practice and data points to determine where the health of the force is. It also identifies leading and lagging indicators on where the overall health will be.

“That’s one big thing is to try to help our leaders come together and to look at these different data points so that way we know where to put our time, money, and resources in effective ways,” Urban said.

The Comprehensive Health and Wellness program is a part of Warrior Resilience and Fitness that focuses on the five pillars of health and wellness — physical, mental, social, spiritual, and financial.

Comprehensive Health and Wellness offers a basic course, a leader’s course, and an executive course to train Soldiers and Airmen at all levels in the organization on how to take care of their own well-being and to be mindful of the well-being of those around them and the Force as a whole. The team has also led courses at National Guard Bureau, training leaders throughout the nation.

“We provide lifestyle skills that can be applied inside and outside the military, as we strategically support the students who come through and help them to show up as their best selves,” said Chief Warrant Officer 3 Aaron Hunnel, the Comprehensive Health and Wellness program manager. “I don’t know of many courses that incorporate the Army and Air National Guard together. We are paving new ground and it will make the organization better as a result.”

The program has expanded over the past several months with the addition of several employees, including a registered dietician and a health promotion and wellness practitioner.

Penny Gietzen, the sexual assault response coordinator, has helped out at Comprehensive Health and Wellness courses, providing innovative and creative training to teach Service Members about the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response program.

The Wisconsin National Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response program has adapted to meet the needs of Service Members in the hopes that individuals are more comfortable reporting sexual assault and harassment. Leaders and commanders within the state are required to receive training in order to be equipped with the proper knowledge to take back to their unit and work with their victim advocate who passes information out to Service Members.

"Recently the change has been made that Soldiers can still retain the option to file a restricted report even though they may have gone and disclosed to someone in their chain of command," Gietzen said.

The change puts the control back into the Service Member's hands so they can get the support they need for their desired outcome.

The Sexual Assault Prevention and Response office also has a 24/7 response line that Service Members can call to either report or to ask questions. Individuals who call can maintain anonymity and can disclose information based on their comfort level.

Gietzen is drawn to helping people and being there for them in their time of need.

"To be told that they feel comfortable coming to me and sharing their experience, that's very important and rewarding for me," Gietzen said. "It's a satisfaction that I don't know that I can really describe."

Another Warrior Resilience and Fitness initiative is Operation Resilience. The initiative provides a quarterly focus with vignettes and resources for Service Members in order to address the unique challenges which have become even more prevalent from the global COVID-19 pandemic, civil unrest, and a high operations tempo.

The Warrior Resilience and Fitness team has also provided support to individual units that may be facing adversity. Wellness Resilience Intervention Tailored Events at Wisconsin National Guard units have had a positive impact, identifying service members experiencing suicidal ideations and providing them resources and a safe space to address psychological concerns.

Wisconsin National Guard units also have resilience training during drill weekends and annual training. Each unit or command is required to have qualified Master

Resilience Trainers (MRT) who are tracked by the State Resilience Coordinator. The MRTs are trained at the Wisconsin National Guard's 426th Regional Training Institute in a train-the-trainer course. Once qualified, MRTs train their unit on each of the 14 resiliency skills within a two-year period.

Resiliency training is especially important for National Guard members who face unique challenges compared to active-duty service members.

"We're citizen Soldiers," said Sgt. 1st Class Bill Niehausen, the state resilience coordinator. "We have a career, a civilian career. We have a military career, and we have a family which is like a third career, and they conflict or at least need some sort of a balance which requires a lot on that individual. You've got to be resilient."

The Warrior Resilience and Fitness program also includes survivor outreach services and the Wisconsin National Guard Military Funeral Honors team.

The mission of military funeral honors is to render professional and dignified military funeral honors to all eligible service members, retirees, and veterans when requested by an authorized family member or representative. The teams work closely with funeral home staff and families to honor the family's loved one's wishes.

"I feel a great sense of personal honor and strength to be part of this uniquely difficult mission," said Staff Sgt. Liam Walsh, a member of the funeral honors team. "I believe that when we accomplish our mission, we have provided comfort to the loved ones of a peer of mine. I get to be part of this unending chain of service and honor, and it is amazing."

The Military Funeral Honors team averages around 3,000 missions each year. Members of the team take pride in their job, and many members have supported Military Funeral Honors in a variety of ways for more than ten years.

The Warrior Resilience and Fitness program covers several other programs that support Service Members and their families. Each member of the team has a unique story to tell about their own resilience and has a passion for serving those who serve. As the needs of Wisconsin's service members evolve, the Warrior Resilience and Fitness program continues to grow and change to meet those needs and have a more comprehensive understanding of the organization.

“When we have clarity within our organization, then we can have commitment, and once we have commitment, then we can have trust,” Urban said. “Without trust we’re not going to have a healthy organization.”