

WI Dept. of Military Affairs: Recognizes key efforts in second year of COVID-19 response

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MADISON, Wis. — The state Department of Military Affairs took a few minutes March 10 to commemorate its two-year effort — and counting — assisting Wisconsin's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's not 'mission complete,' but we're getting close," said Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin's adjutant general and the man in charge of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA), which includes the Wisconsin National Guard, Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) and the Office of Emergency Communications (OEC). "And the reason we've done so well in the last two years is largely because of all of you."

A handful of DMA employees, state and military, were awarded the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs Meritorious Service Medal, while several others received the adjutant general's challenge coin to recognize their efforts over the past two years. One Guard officer received the Army Meritorious Service Medal, and approximately 1,150 Wisconsin National Guard troops will receive the Armed Forces Service Medal for engaging in "significant activity" for which no other campaign or service medal is authorized.

Knapp struck an optimistic tone, acknowledging that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken quite a toll, but it has also produced some positive outcomes.

"One of them is we've really gotten a lot closer as an organization — including across DMA," Knapp said. "I know that we have a lot better relationships between [the Wisconsin National Guard], WEM, OEC and all the other parts of DMA."

Greg Engle, acting administrator for WEM, said he was also proud of the collaboration between WEM and the Wisconsin National Guard throughout the entire course of the pandemic.

“I am always impressed by their professionalism and their duty and dedication,” Engle said of the Wisconsin National Guard members assigned to state active duty for the COVID response mission. “As Maj. Gen. Knapp mentioned, the partnership is very, very strong. The collaboration between WEM and the Guard is stronger now than at any time in the 10 years I have been here.”

More than 1,400 troops were mobilized at one point in the spring of 2020 to support a multitude of state missions. This included COVID testing, staffing a state call center that informed people of their test results, assisting county medical examiners, staffing self-isolation facilities for individuals who didn't have the means to effectively self-isolate, assisting at a senior living facility amidst a staffing shortage, staffing a warehouse to distribute personal protective equipment to medical facilities across the state, and even transporting a group of Wisconsin residents home that were exposed to COVID in the earliest days of the pandemic.

More recently, the Wisconsin National Guard has assisted with distributing and administering COVID vaccines, and more than 200 Wisconsin Guard members have completed training to serve as certified nursing assistants at facilities struggling with staff shortages.

Engle said he was very proud of the job WEM had done over the past two years. The State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) was activated March 14, 2020 after Gov. Tony Evers declared a statewide public health emergency in response to a spike in COVID-19 cases. The SEOC transitioned to a full-scale activation, with staff present around the clock daily, by March 16, 2020. Today the SEOC remains activated at Level 4, with staff continuing to respond to requests for resources.

“We are doing things we had never done before, learning new things and forming new partnerships,” Engle said.

Examples of how WEM adapted to meet the needs presented by the pandemic include coordinating the acquisition, distribution and decontamination of personal protective equipment, vaccine distribution, and filling requests for testing, staffing and alternative care facilities. During the pandemic, WEM and the SEOC also responded to natural disasters and civil unrest.

“That’s why I want today to be a celebration,” Knapp said. “A celebration of the missions we’ve done and continue to do, and the way we’ve done it.”