

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Emergency Management assists with disaster recovery in California

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MADISON, Wis. – As California responds to widespread flooding across multiple counties, the state has turned to emergency management agencies across the country for help during the recovery process. Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) responded to California's request for assistance earlier this year by sending a member of its recovery staff to help.

WEM Public Assistance Specialist Ellen Gundrum traveled to California in January of 2023 under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), which allows states to rapidly request resources and personnel from other states during disasters. Gundrum returned to Wisconsin in early March, ending a 55-day deployment – the longest ever of a WEM employee under the compact.

“Letting people go out like this gets them involved, interested, and growing,” said Gundrum, who has deployed across the country previously as a firefighter. “Bringing in outside assistance helps to introduce new skills and perspectives into a complex situation.”

Wisconsin has not had a federally declared disaster since 2020, and Gundrum is one of several WEM staff members who joined the agency after those declarations were granted and the recovery process was already well underway. She saw the deployment as an opportunity to learn more about how other states initiate recovery efforts at the onset of a disaster.

“The recovery process starts immediately after a disaster occurs,” Gundrum said. “While we are blessed not to currently be facing something like this in Wisconsin,

this was an opportunity to get out and experience this side of the recovery process.”

Since late 2022, California has been subject to repeated atmospheric river storms, which brought record-breaking rainfalls and flooding to dozens of counties. Working with the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, Gundrum’s task was to help many of the communities in the state’s inland region identify projects for federal assistance, begin their applications and navigate what can sometimes be a complex recovery process.

Now that she’s back in Wisconsin, Gundrum has been sharing her experiences with other staff at WEM, while still processing some of the lessons learned. She compared it to creating a mental slide show of her time in California, which will be ready to call up when it’s needed back in Wisconsin.

“I don’t think I truly know yet how much I learned,” she said. “You really don’t until you get to that moment and pull that slide out.”

More information on WEM’s recovery section and the programs it oversees is available at <https://wem.wi.gov/Recovery/>.