

Wisconsin National Guard: State adjutant general outlines 2023 goals for Department of Military Affairs

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Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin's adjutant general, described 2022 as "a transitional year."

"It was not quite as filled with crisis as 2020 or 2021," he explained.

But with the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs transitioning away from its mission supporting the state's response to the COVID pandemic beginning in late spring of 2022, Knapp reflected on how that unprecedented mission impacted the organization's overall readiness.

"A big topic during COVID and in 2023 is losing our readiness," Knapp acknowledged. "The last few years were less of a marathon and more of a triathlon, because we were doing multiple different missions."

Given its federal mission as the primary combat reserve for the Army and Air Force, Knapp said he understood the concern that the Wisconsin National Guard's lengthy state COVID response could detract from its readiness for federal missions. But the National Guard has to be prepared to respond to both federal and state missions.

"The way I look at it, and try to communicate it to our Soldiers and Airmen, is that we weren't necessarily losing our readiness — we were using our readiness," Knapp said. "That's why you have readiness, right? To use it when you need it. I don't think anyone can deny our readiness was needed and used during the last two and a half years.

"Our defense support of civil authorities in the civilian community is just as

important as our federal mission,” Knapp continued. “It’s very important in Wisconsin.”

The Department of Military Affairs is more than just the Wisconsin National Guard, however. The adjutant general also oversees Wisconsin Emergency Management, the Office of Emergency Communications, the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy and STARBASE, a STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) program for 5th-grade students in the Milwaukee Public School system.

“The Department of Military affairs is a very broad organization,” Knapp said. “Wisconsin Emergency Management has been critical the last two and a half years in keeping the state safe, responding to the COVID pandemic, civil unrest and all the other things.”

Knapp said his top three priorities for the Department of Military Affairs this year are “people, people and people.”

“That’s three different groups of people,” he explained. The first group is the employees and members of the Department of Military Affairs.

“If you take care of the people — and I think we’ve taken great strides with our Comprehensive Health and Wellness program — that will pay dividends.

“The second group is the families of our Soldiers, Airmen and employees, and making sure that they’re taken care of, and thanking them for all their service,” Knapp continued, “because the operations tempo for the last two and a half years has been outrageous. We have some things on the horizon that are going to keep us very busy — a different kind of busy, but we’re still going to be busy.

“We really have to keep families in mind as we make decisions going forward.”

The third group of people, Knapp said, are the citizens of Wisconsin and the United States.

“Those are the folks that we live with, live near and live around,” Knapp said. “They’re our neighbors and our friends, and we support them, protect them and defend them across all of our missions — federal, state and partnership.”

Perhaps the most anticipated change in the Wisconsin National Guard in 2023 is the arrival of F-35 Lightning fighter jets to Truax Field in Madison, Wisconsin. The first of

18 F-35 jets is expected to arrive later this spring. The 115th Fighter Wing was just the second National Guard unit to receive the F-35.

“That is a big transition from a fourth-generation fighter to a fifth-generation fighter,” Knapp said. “And it really means that here in Wisconsin, we’ll be on the cutting edge in the air defense of our country.”

The Wisconsin Army National Guard will open a new and improved armory in Appleton in July. The \$15 million project expands the current 28,079-foot masonry facility by adding more than 49,000 square feet. The renovated and expanded armory will include classrooms, administration areas, a vehicle maintenance bay, a warming kitchen, installation fencing, expanded storage and supply areas, and new parking lots. When completed, the facility will house the entire headquarters element of the 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry — at present a headquarters detachment is located in Clintonville, Wisconsin. This marks the first new Wisconsin Army National Guard armory since 2013 when the tactical unmanned aircraft system facility opened at Camp Williams.

The armory will also display historical photos to showcase the battalion’s heritage dating back to the Civil War. Stone artifacts from the 1904 Appleton armory will be seen under a glass floor in the building entry.

The Wisconsin Army National Guard’s 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team will also participate in an Exportable Combat Training Capability (XCTC) rotation this year at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin — though the brigade’s 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery will complete its XCTC requirements during this month’s Northern Strike exercise at Camp Grayling, Michigan. XCTC is an instrumented brigade field training exercise designed to certify platoon proficiency with training standards and expectations.

“That’s another opportunity for the Wisconsin National Guard to showcase that we are among the best,” Knapp said.

The Wisconsin Army National Guard will also participate in Tamiok Strike, a bilateral training exercise to improve interoperability between U.S. forces and the Papua New Guinea Defense Force (PNGDF) in July. The Wisconsin National Guard and the PNGDF formally signed a state partnership program agreement last December in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

“Going forward, we’ll see a new chapter in our relationship,” Knapp said. “These

partnerships usually start out as a military to military partnership. Eventually we'd like to propose and be a proponent for a civilian to civilian partnership as well, so that across all spectrums of our society we can partner with Papua New Guinea and learn from each other."

The adjutant general explained that the Wisconsin National Guard participates in national and international training exercises to build and maintain its readiness.

"You have to be able to integrate on a large scale anywhere in the world at any time," Knapp said. "In order to be ready in time of need, we need to rehearse that often, and we need to be sure that we have the necessary communication interoperability with our sister components as well as our international partners."

The Department of Military Affairs hopes to launch a state watch desk this year at its Joint Force Headquarters in Madison, Knapp said. Presently both the Wisconsin National Guard's Joint Operations Center and Wisconsin Emergency Management staff separate overnight desks. The state watch desk would combine those operations as well as include other state agencies, such as the Department of Natural Resources.

"That would be a great thing for our state," Knapp said.

In another modernization effort, the Office of Emergency Communications will begin updating its communication towers across the state to accommodate next-generation 9-1-1, which will provide more accurate location information for cell phone callers, as well as allow text and video capability.

"These are all things that are going to make Wisconsin safer," Knapp said.

The Office of Emergency Communication became part of the Department of Military Affairs in 2017.

Knapp also said that STARBASE — an Air National Guard initiative to promote science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) — plans to expand. Operating out of the U.S. Army Reserve Center on Milwaukee's northwest side, STARBASE provides 30 hours of STEM programming to approximately 1,500 5th-grade students in the Milwaukee Public School system.

"It meets their entire 5th-grade requirement for STEM education," Knapp said.

STARBASE will add two more classrooms and more full-time instructors so that they can grow from their current enrollment — roughly one-third of MPS 5th-graders — to 5,000 in a few years.

“That’s our long-term goal,” Knapp said. “We’re going to bump that up by 500 or so each year until we get to 5,000. But our goal, really, would be to get all the MPS 5th-grade students through this STARBASE STEM program.”

He noted that the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy is hosting its 50th class this year. The voluntary program helps young adults at risk of not graduating high school develop the disciplines and life skills necessary to earn, at a minimum, an equivalency degree and to succeed in life beyond high school.

Finally, looking even further ahead, the adjutant general said the Department of Military Affairs is already planning for the 2024 Republican National Convention in Milwaukee. The COVID pandemic curtailed the 2020 Democratic National Convention in Milwaukee but plans for that event are being revised and updated for next year’s convention.

“We’ve got recent practice doing this,” Knapp said. “All those planning pieces for being ready to respond to an event like a national convention took place.”

Knapp said he was optimistic about the remainder of 2023.

“The Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs is filled with professionals, dedicated to doing their best for Wisconsin and for the nation,” he said. “I am confident that we have what it takes to meet the next challenge that comes our way, and the challenge after that.”