

LOCKLEED NEWS

Minnesota National Guard fills gap amid COVID-19 surge

By Sgt. Mahsima Alkamoonah, Minnesota National Guard

COTTAGE GROVE, Minn. – The Minnesota National Guard is supporting new COVID-19 community testing sites in Cottage Grove, Anoka and North Branch.

The Minnesota National Guard now has approximately 200 service members assisting with COVID-19 testing at nine community sites across the state. Since November, the Minnesota National Guard has helped test more than 105,000 Minnesotans.

“We are happy to do it,” said Master Sgt. John Vavra, the noncommissioned officer in charge of the testing sites the Minnesota National Guard operates.

Since the pandemic’s beginning, the Minnesota National Guard has responded to the crisis on the front lines. Service members have worked at testing and vaccination sites and long-term care facilities for almost two years.

Recently, more than 500 personnel trained with 16 state colleges to become certified nursing assistants (CNA) so they could bridge the gap as the coronavirus creates health care staffing shortages.

“Those that are doing this come from all walks of life,” Gov. Tim Walz said Jan. 4 at an alternative care site in Maplewood. “We’ve got pilots here, soil scientists. We’ve got full-time technicians. We have a plethora of skill sets, but to train to be a CNA, to put your own family on hold, and to come here and serve is the epitome of that selfless service we talk about.”

The Airmen and Soldiers are serving at 10 long-term care facilities and nine community-based testing sites across the state.

The Minnesota National Guard is not alone in stepping up to the challenge of responding to the pandemic. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands have activated National Guard forces to assist in the battle against the pandemic.

In Wisconsin, National Guard members were activated in March 2020. In 2021, they focused on testing people for



133rd Airlift Wing crew chief, Airman 1st Class Myrian Monjaraz Olmos, registers a customer at a Community Based Testing Site at the Hibbing, Minnesota Armory on December 20, 2021. The Minnesota National Guard is partnering with the Minnesota Department of Health to staff six community-based COVID-19 testing sites across Minnesota. (Audra Flanagan)



COVID-19 and distributing vaccines. In the fall, Wisconsin National Guard members began training as temporary and certified nursing assistants.

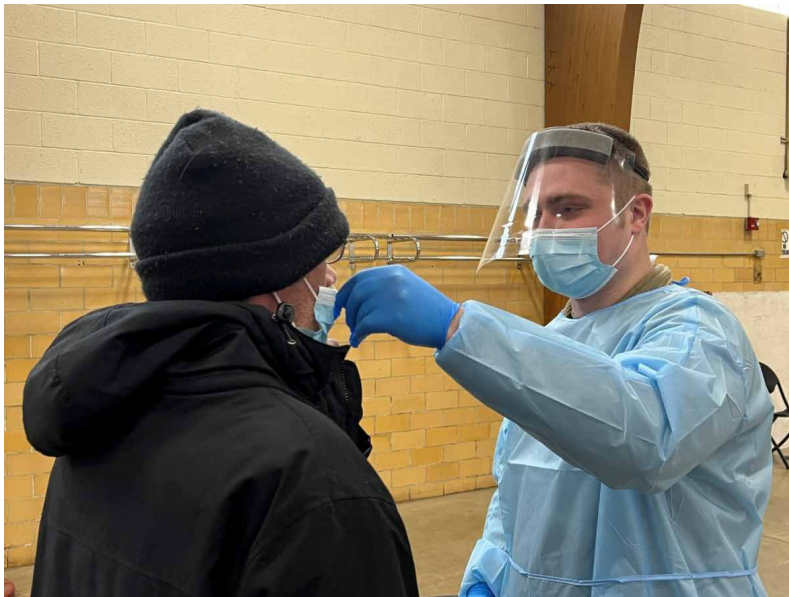
“We have the most expansive use of the Guard in this model,” Walz said. “It appears that every other state, now with [the Omicron variant of COVID 19], is hustling to get there. They are picking up this model and starting to train.”

Minnesota’s Task Force COVID began in March 2020 when Walz authorized the Minnesota National Guard to assist with the COVID-19 response. The Guard provided personal protective equipment from its medical warehouse at Camp Ripley to first responders across the state.

The Minnesota National Guard also partnered with the Minnesota Department of Health and the Army Corps of Engineers to identify and select alternate care sites.

In May 2020, the Minnesota National Guard began supporting COVID-19 testing in Minnesota’s long-term care facilities. Approximately 100 Soldiers and Airmen assisted state health officials, conducting more than 70,000 tests at more than 500 facilities by Aug. 25, 2020.

In May and June 2021, Guard members tested almost 350,000 people for the coronavirus. Minnesota’s Airmen and Soldiers continued to operate these sites throughout 2021, supporting nasal swab and saliva testing.



Minnesota National Guard soldier, 1st Lt. Lance Dehn, prepares COVID-19 nasal swab test supplies at a Community Based Testing Site at the Hibbing, Minnesota Armory on December 20, 2021. The Minnesota National Guard is partnering with the Minnesota Department of Health to staff six community-based COVID-19 testing sites across Minnesota. (Audra Flanagan)



Minnesota National Guard soldier, 1st Lt. Lance Dehn, prepares COVID-19 nasal swab test supplies at a Community Based Testing Site at the Hibbing, Minnesota Armory on December 20, 2021. The Minnesota National Guard is partnering with the Minnesota Department of Health to staff six community-based COVID-19 testing sites across Minnesota. (Audra Flanagan)

“The Guard has been asked to do a lot, and they are still continuing to do it,” added Walz. “They are doing it with professionalism, and they are doing it with care.”

“The Minnesota National Guard’s success is a result of the professional women and men who serve our organization,” said Col. Scott Rohweder, Minnesota National Guard’s director of operations. “Additionally, our interagency and educational partners made it possible to quickly respond to requests for COVID-19 missions. These relationships at home were the foundation for planning and performing duties associated with COVID-19 community-based testing and vaccination sites, and support to long-term care facilities.”



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