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COVID-19 requires historic Guard response, says Guard chief

By Sgt. 1st Class Jon Soucy | National Guard Bureau | March 23, 2020

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Soldiers with the Louisiana Army National Guard's 256th Infantry Brigade Combat Team don protective suits as they prepare to administer nasal swabs to first responders and medical personnel at a mobile testing site in Westwego, Louisiana, March 21, 2020. More than 8,000 National Guard members in all 54 states, territories and the District of Columbia have been called out in to support state and local officials responding to COVID-19. **(Photo by Staff Sgt. Garrett Dipuma)**

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ARLINGTON, Va. – The COVID-19 virus is a historic pandemic that requires a historic response from the National Guard, said the Guard's top general.

"With COVID-19, it's like we have 54 different hurricanes hitting every state, every territory, and the District of Columbia – some are Category 5, some are Category 3, and some are Category 1," said Air Force Gen. Joseph Lengyel, the chief of the National Guard Bureau.

For many National Guard members, COVID-19 response efforts bring into sharp focus the support they provide in the locations where they live, work and raise their families.

"One of the most important National Guard missions is to support our own communities," said Air Force Maj. Gen. Anthony Carrelli, adjutant general of the Pennsylvania National Guard. "Assisting and serving our

fellow neighbors is a very personal effort as this is where we live. We are all in this together.”

Airmen with the Maryland Air National Guard’s 175th Wing helped Maryland Department of Health officials transport Maryland residents who had been potentially exposed to the COVID-19 virus aboard a cruise ship that was quarantined off the California coast.

“This is just another example of Marylanders helping their fellow Marylanders throughout this crisis situation,” said Army Maj. Gen. Timothy Gowen, the adjutant general of the Maryland National Guard.

Additionally, those Airmen brought food and essential supplies for the passengers to self-quarantine for at least two weeks. Guard members in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin similarly assisted cruise ship passengers who are residents of those states.

Members of the Florida National Guard were called up to help local officials screen people who may have contracted the virus.

“We’re responding to Broward County’s request for medical aid,” said Tech. Sgt. Ariel Van Winkle, a medic with the Florida Air National Guard’s 125th Medical Detachment. “We’ll be augmenting civilian hospitals to swab individuals [to test for COVID-19].”

For Van Winkle, helping out is all part of being a medic.

“Besides military service, any type of health care position where you get to help people, I find most rewarding,” she said. “As a medic, I get to provide firsthand response to people in need.”

Others in her unit agreed.

“I think it’s amazing that I get to be a part of making the state of Florida better and then the nation overall,” said Air Force Staff Sgt. Devyn Mitchell, also a medic.

Louisiana National Guard members have also been called out by their governor. They have been providing medical support, shelter security and traffic control as well as helping at drive-through testing sites in support of local health and emergency officials.

“We are continuing to lean forward and plan for possible follow-on missions that we may be called upon to perform,” said Army Brig. Gen. D. Keith Waddell, adjutant general of the Louisiana Guard. “As our missions develop and increase, today’s preparations will lead to tomorrow’s success.”

Meanwhile, Guard members in Michigan have been distributing personal protective gear to state public health officials and Arkansas National Guard members have been staffing state health department informational phone banks.

As of Monday morning, more than 8,000 Guard men and women are providing critical skills and support to the 50 states, three territories, and District of Columbia.

“It [shows] the value of connection,” said Van Winkle, the medic with the Florida Air Guard. “You have times of uncertainty – people are scared and anxious. When we come in, we bring a sense of calm and, hopefully, peace.”

Army Lt. Col. Dawn Dancer, Army Maj. Kurt Rauschenberg, Air Force 1st Lt. Andrew Layton, Army Staff Sgt. Garrett Dipuma and Army Sgt. Michael Baltz contributed to this report.

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