

Governor Announces Mental Health Support for National Guard, Veterans

Written by GOV Press Wisconsin
Wednesday, 16 February 2022 09:59 -



\$5 million investment in Guard's Wellness Office to combat burnout after two years of stress during pandemic. Blue Ribbon Commission on Veteran Opportunity created.

MADISON — During his 2022 State of the State address Tuesday night, Gov. Tony Evers announced a \$5 million investment in the Wisconsin National Guard's Comprehensive Wellness Office to expand access to their services for every member of the Wisconsin National Guard. The investment ensures members of the Guard will receive additional mental health support and services including case management, counseling, referral services, suicide prevention services, psychological health programs, resiliency training, crisis intervention, and stress reduction programs and trainings.



The Wisconsin National Guard was mobilized in early March of 2020. Among their first missions was to bring 30 Wisconsinites who had been stranded aboard a cruise ship for weeks home to Wisconsin. Since then, the Guard has played a key role in the state's efforts to distribute more than 80 million pieces of personal protective equipment and sanitizing supplies to schools, healthcare workers, and first responders and local law enforcement. They have

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helped administer tests and support community testing sites, as well as distribute more than 1.2 million of the more than nine million vaccine doses administered across the state, administering more than 230,000 of those vaccines themselves. The Guard also assisted in election administration across the state to ensure Wisconsinites could cast their ballots safely, and today, some Guard members are volunteering and being trained as certified nursing assistants through a partnership with Madison College to support Wisconsin's healthcare systems.

Gov. Evers proposed investing more than \$3 million into helping staff and expanding the Guard's Comprehensive Wellness Program in his 2021-23 biennial budget. This investment would have increased access to important mental health and wellness support to more than 9,000 Guard members. The Legislature's Joint Finance Committee gutted this provision from the governor's budget.



"We would not be here as a state without the extraordinary efforts of the Wisconsin National Guard," Gov. Evers said during his address. "These folks have stepped up to serve our state time and time again during one of the direst periods in our state's history. And their service has not come without cost—emotionally, physically, and mentally.

"This program will provide counseling, resiliency training, and crisis intervention and stress reduction programming, to help reduce burnout, take care of mental health needs, prevent suicide, and treat substance use disorders for our service members.

"And I'll tell you right now this program will have ongoing funding in the budget I'll propose next year. And I call on this Legislature tonight to join me by ensuring this program receives long-term, sustainable funding."

The \$5 million investment announced by the governor will be supported by the state's federal American Rescue Plan Act funding.

In addition to supporting active service members in the Wisconsin National Guard, the governor announced tonight that he will be signing an executive order creating a Blue Ribbon Commission on Veteran Opportunity to develop new, innovative initiatives to support the more than 300,000 veterans who live in Wisconsin. Many veterans continue to face challenges after their service and hurdles unique to those who have served while also disproportionately experiencing negative issues facing the general population. The Commission will examine the issues facing Wisconsin veterans today, including but not limited to employment and job training, post-service education, housing, stability of the Veterans Trust Fund, long-term care nursing quality and affordability, and mental and behavioral health initiatives. With a veteran-centric lens, the Commission will listen to veterans and stakeholders who have lived experience and expertise to find action-oriented solutions for the future.

"We need long-term solutions to support our veterans and the challenges they face—both those

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that existed before this pandemic and others that worsened because of it,” said Gov. Evers during his address. “We’ve worked to proactively address some of the challenges facing our veterans, and the Legislature even agreed with me on several provisions in the last budget. In fact, folks on both sides of the aisle even called this ‘a really good budget for veterans.’ I agree. But our work cannot end there.

“We can help reduce barriers to higher education, employment, and job training, and streamline the licensure process for veterans who want to join our workforce. We can help make sure we have sustainable, ongoing funding for programs that support these folks by ensuring our Veterans Trust Fund remains solvent. And yes, we can help invest in housing security, more mental health supports, and more substance use treatment. And this Blue Ribbon Commission is going to make recommendations for me to do just that in my next budget.”

This Blue Ribbon Commission builds on Gov. Evers’ strong track record of supporting Wisconsin’s National Guard members and Wisconsin veterans. In his last budget proposal, Gov. Evers included additional funding and position authority for the Hire Heroes program through the Department of Workforce Development, recommended expanding the Veterans and Surviving Spouses Property Tax Credit to renters, and proposed increasing Wisconsin’s Veterans Outreach and Recovery Program (VORP) staff by 50 percent. The Republican-controlled Legislature rejected these critical proposals, removing them from the final budget. The 2021-23 budget, as signed by Gov. Evers, did include an increase for grants to support county veterans service officers and funding to promote suicide prevention and awareness among veterans through outreach, mental health services, and support to individuals who are members of a traditionally underserved population.

Gov. Evers will execute an executive order creating the Blue Ribbon Commission on Veteran Opportunity in the coming days.