



Ohio Adjutant General's Department

Mike DeWine, Governor

Major General John C. Harris Jr., Adjutant General

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Ohio National Guard, State Defense Force to scale back COVID-19 response force

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Ohio National Guard and Ohio State Defense Force are transitioning from the emergency COVID-19 response that began in March 2020 to a smaller, yet flexible, response force.

At the request of Gov. Mike DeWine, more than 4,000 members have deployed throughout the past 16 months for approximately 70 missions across the state to assist local, county, and state partners. Among numerous contributions, they assisted in providing more than 360,000 COVID-19 vaccinations; received, packed, and distributed more than 150 million pounds of food and groceries to over 2.9 million Ohioans; and provided temporary medical staffing to more than 30 long-term care facilities.

“In the tradition of the minuteman, each Soldier and Airman who contributed to the missions while helping their fellow Ohioans did so with little or no notice. It is part of our organization’s DNA to always be ready,” said Maj. Gen. John C. Harris Jr., Ohio adjutant general. “The COVID-19 response mission has affirmed and strengthened their commitment to support this great state and its people.”

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, about 1,000 Ohio service members were deployed to support missions. As of July 19, that number stood at about 180. Among the larger missions was support to 14 food banks, which ended on July 2. Harris has directed the joint task force overseeing COVID-19 missions to continue to scale back by July 30 to a force of about 40 personnel, who will continue providing logistics and vaccination support.

Ohio Air National Guard Col. Gregg J. Hesterman, commander of the joint task force, praised the commitment of the men and women who have answered the call to serve during the pandemic, some for more than a year.

“I can’t say enough about the professionalism from each and every one of the Guard, Military Reserve, and Naval Militia members who have stepped up to successfully complete every mission placed before them,” Hesterman said. “While we are scaling back the COVID-19 response, we remain ready to support vaccination efforts and any additional needs the state may have in the continued fight against this virus.”

Federal funding for the mission is scheduled to continue until the end of September.

Service members reflect on completed missions

Sgt. 1st Class Colin Kelly was one of about 50 Ohio Military Reserve members who completed a three-month deployment on June 30 to help the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services process more than 300,000 pandemic unemployment claims.

“The people who were legitimate, that really need the help, needed the help right now, and the faster we could get to those legitimate claims and get them processed, the better I think all of our soldiers felt,” Kelly said.

Ohio National Guard Airmen and Soldiers worked alongside Ohio Department of Health personnel for about year to distribute personal protective equipment statewide during COVID-19 relief efforts.

“It’s definitely been a rewarding experience,” said Senior Airman Briana Staples, assigned to the 123rd Air Control Squadron, based in Blue Ash, while she was still on the mission.

“Knowing that what I’m doing is making an impact on people who live down the street from me and people who live in a different city than me, it feels good.”

Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Austin Henry, of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 216th Engineer Battalion, based in Cincinnati, was among those who supported the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction in more than 20 state prisons and the Cuyahoga County Corrections Center in Cleveland during a mission that ended in March.

“I learned a lot and I have a lot of respect for the COs (corrections officers) and what they do,” Henry said. “After about a month, a lot of the Soldiers, myself included, started to understand what we were there for and understood that the reason we were there was to assist where needed because corrections officers and staff were coming down with COVID. They saw the big picture and every last one of them pushed through to do the mission.”

About the Ohio Adjutant General’s Department

The adjutant general is a member of the governor’s cabinet and is responsible for the command of the Ohio National Guard, comprising the Ohio Army National Guard, Ohio Air National Guard, and the Ohio State Defense Force, which is composed of the Ohio Military Reserve, Ohio Naval Militia, and Ohio Cyber Reserve.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: High-resolution photos and b-roll package to support this story are available at <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/401726/ohio-national-guard-state-defense-force-scale-back-covid-19-response-force>.

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