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The 49th State's Defense Force provides COVID-19 support Experts in domestic response strong ally for AKNG and Alaska amidst pandemic

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska —Alaska's geography, land mass and weather create a unique challenge in combatting the state's more common natural disasters like earthquakes, fires and floods. So how much more is that challenge accentuated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic?

In extreme circumstances, there simply aren't enough law enforcement officials, firefighters or others employed in the field of domestic response to grapple with the task of protecting every Alaska citizen with maximal efficiency. Providentially, Alaska is one of 23 U.S. states that's backed by a tested, experienced volunteer force with a state-wide presence and the precise skillset for the job: the Alaska State Defense Force.

The ASDF's immediate command cell is made up of three Soldiers with a combined military experience of more than 100 years. Col. Simon Brown, a retiree of both the Alaska State Troopers and the Alaska Army National Guard's military police, leads the state's defense force as its commanding officer and works directly for the Alaska National Guard's Adjutant General Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe.

Brown and his team meet for training on a monthly basis on the same weekends as the Alaska National Guard in order to support the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs in a complete and integrated manner. With 17 Detachments throughout Alaska ranging from Kodiak, Barrow, Diomedes, the Aleutian chain, Ketchikan and Valdez, the ASDF is able to maintain functional roles across the entire state.

"We look for people who are dedicated to volunteerism and who are dedicated to giving back to save Alaska," Brown said. "Most of us have been involved and know what it is to give of ourselves and our time. A good percentage of our volunteers put in five to 10 days a month improving their skills in some way or form."

In early April, Saxe called upon Brown and the ASDF under the authority of Gov. Mike Dunleavy to assist the Alaska National Guard in its COVID-19 mission.

Currently, 19 Soldiers with the ASDF have been activated, with 80 on standby across the state to assist the National Guard in its COVID-19 readiness. These volunteers include a licensed Alaska surgeon, two registered nurses, two emergency medical technicians, and a variety of other specialties specific to mitigating the pandemic threat.

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“They can perform in any medical emergency scenario you can think of,” Brown said. “We have subject matter experts who have skillsets that transcend your average Soldier in each respective branch of the military.”

“Nearly every member of the ASDF holds the military emergency management specialist badge,” Brown said.

According to the State Guard Association of the United States website, the MEMS program curriculum includes online Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) NIMS and ICS courses offered free of charge through FEMA's Emergency Management Institute's (EMI) Independent Study Program.

The principle behind the several MEMS curricula is that individuals with Basic MEMS qualification will have operational understanding of the principles of emergency management, including mitigation, preparedness, emergency response and recovery, and have knowledge, skills and abilities needed to effectively work within a comprehensive emergency management operation. Those with senior and master level qualification will be able to lead and plan incident response efforts of increasing complexity.”

Other tasks the ASDF has been responsible for during the pandemic effort are passing out surveys and quarantine information at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport, assisting in a receiving warehouse for the Department of Health and Social Services, processing applications for state active duty orders, tracking personnel, as well as command-and-control measures in the Joint Task Force Operations Center.

The ASDF is also postured around the state to provide assistance and resources in the realm of communications, emergency management, logistical support and shelter management. This could prove vital, as impending seasonal floods are set to hit Alaska amidst the pandemic.

“I’ve got 25 people around the state who volunteer on their own time and do emergency operations in each city,” Brown said. “We work with communities to solve problems. We offer suggestions and point them in the right direction to get the resources they need.”

The ASDF engineer unit in Kodiak has Soldiers who are certified in assessing damage to buildings and bridges, and are also HAZMAT-response certified.

An ASDF scout company executes domain awareness in Western Alaska, keeping track of the weather, wind and snow.

“They can live off the land for as long as need be, and they practice this on a continuous basis,” Brown said.

Finally, the ASDF’s signal group has control of eight high-frequency base stations across the state to mitigate potential blackouts if other signal transmitting devices in local communities go down.

When not on pay status while activated during a crisis like COVID-19, the talented, experienced Soldiers of the ASDF don’t make a dime for their volunteer effort. They’re doctors, nurses, probation officers, police chiefs and managers of state departments and local businesses with the desire and expertise to answer the call when Alaskans are in need.

“If all of a sudden pay went away for 72 hours, how many people would be at work tomorrow morning?” Brown asked. “It takes a very special person to dedicate their time in the way that these men and women do. But all of us have been blessed in some fashion either with a good job, good military experience, etc. So, we have the mentality to say hey, let’s give some of that back to the community.”

Brown has encouraged Alaskans across the state who have a passion for volunteering and a dedication to making Alaska a safer and better place to live to show up to an ASDF drill to see for themselves what these Soldiers do for their communities.

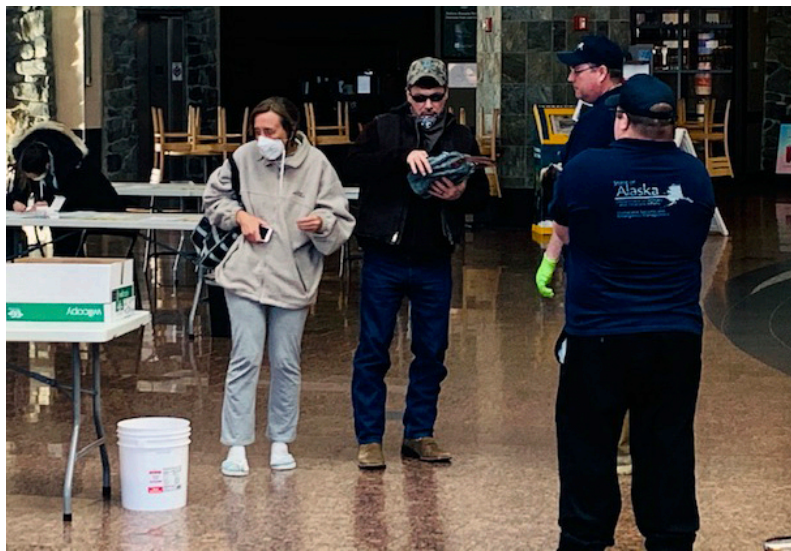
“Come Join us, if you have that volunteer spirit,” Brown said. “Because Alaskans all over need our help.”

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DVIDS link includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/367297/49th-states-defense-force-provides-vital-covid-19-support>

PHOTOS

Attached pdf includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.



Alaska Army National Guard Soldier Sgt. Kenneth Engle and Alaska State Defense Force Soldier Tony Balzer screen Alaskans entering Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport, Apr. 7, 2020. The partnership between the AKARNG and the ASDF is part of an ongoing effort to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in Alaska. (Courtesy photo)



Members of the Alaska State Defense Force and Alaska Army National Guard Soldiers set up tables to screen incoming travelers before coming into Alaska at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport, Apr. 6, 2020.

"It's great to work alongside the folks at the ASDF," said Pfc. Connor Sheehan, an AKARNG signal specialist.

"The prior service connection has definitely made for a positive experience for me, and it's great to be out here helping people who need it." (Courtesy photo)