
National Guard

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Sen. Tammy Baldwin presses National Guard leader for answers, data about the high suicide rate in the force

By Katelyn Ferral, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Responding to a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation into the high suicide rate in the National Guard, U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin has asked the head of the force to release specific numbers of deaths and provide details about how the Guard can provide better care for its members.

In a letter to Gen. Daniel Hokanson, chief of the National Guard Bureau, Baldwin cited

several findings and possible reforms highlighted in the Journal Sentinel's investigation last month, including the need for a one-stop shop of mental health resources tailored to the force.

"If federal and state services for Guard members, including mental health services, are not tailored in a way that accounts for this highly irregular and evolved profile of the National Guard, then we are falling short

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of our duty to support our servicemembers,” wrote Baldwin, a Democrat from Wisconsin who serves on the defense subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

In her letter, sent Thursday, Baldwin is also asking for what funding is needed to address gaps in mental health care for Guard members.

The Journal Sentinel investigation chronicled how four Wisconsin Guardsmen died by suicide in a five-month span in 2020 and early 2021 after serving in Afghanistan. The investigation also detailed how Guard leaders and lawmakers have failed to keep pace with the distinct mental health burden facing the force.

The suicide rate in the National Guard is higher on average over the past five years than the rate among full-time and reserve military personnel. In 2020, 120 Guard members nationwide died from suicide, up from 90 the year before. Guard leaders will not release the numbers of suicides by

state, citing privacy concerns.

Two of the Guardsmen profiled by the Journal Sentinel tried to get help but either faced long delays in care or were given inaccurate information about services for which they were eligible.

The men also expressed concerns to friends and family about the stigma of asking for help, a cultural problem state and federal Guard leaders have pledged to fix. In her letter, Baldwin said it was critical for politicians and Guard leaders to improve their understanding of the distinct issues that Guard members are facing.

The Guard, intended to be a state-based militia used seldomly, has been increasingly deployed to meet myriad other needs throughout the pandemic, including policing protests, driving school buses and serving as nursing assistants in Wisconsin psychiatric facilities.

Guard units across the country have been called up more in the last year and a half than

in any 18-month period since World War II, and there's no cap on the number of times a soldier can be activated.

"Each state must have subject matter experts for suicide prevention that is a fit for their state, and these programs should receive federal funding considering that Guard's outsized role in supporting federal missions at home and abroad," Baldwin wrote.

The National Guard Bureau declined to be interviewed about Baldwin's letter.

"It would be inappropriate for us to comment on interpersonal correspondence between

elected officials and the Chief of the National Guard Bureau," bureau spokesman Wayne Hall said.

On a separate Guard issue, U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier of California, who chairs the House Armed Services Committee, reaffirmed she will hold hearings on how the force handles sexual assault allegations. She said the hearings would occur sometime next year. Previously, Speier said the hearings would take place this past summer, a pledge that followed a Journal Sentinel-Cap Times investigation published in March.

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Evers pledges COVID money to stem suicide in Wisconsin National Guard, but other state and national leaders offer no new solutions

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Gov. Tony Evers is pledging to invest federal COVID-19 stimulus money to address suicides in the Wisconsin National Guard and expand mental health services for its members.

“It is clear our Guard members need additional help and support that cannot wait for the next biennial budget to be signed into law,” Evers’ spokeswoman Britt Cudaback said.

The pledge follows an [investigation by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#) last month that revealed flaws in how the Guard handles suicides, including four such deaths in a recent five-month span in Wisconsin.

The state has received more than [\\$5 billion in federal COVID relief money](#), which Evers— the Wisconsin Guard’s commander-in-chief — has broad discretion to spend. Evers’ spokeswoman last week did not offer any other details of the governor’s plan, including the amount, what services it would specifically fund and when the investments would be made.

But beyond Evers’ promise of more money, other national and state Guard leaders have offered no new anti-suicide measures since the Journal Sentinel investigation.

“Those in the Guard have not contacted us in any way. It is hard to put into words,” said Linda Collison, whose son Logan was one Wisconsin Army Guardsmen who took his life earlier this year. “It makes me feel exactly what Logan said, ‘that they don’t care about us.’”

When the Journal Sentinel last month contacted Maj. General Daniel Hokanson, leader of the National Guard Bureau, which oversees but does not regulate state units, did not provide any new solutions. He said soldiers should take action themselves to address their mental problems.

“It can be reaching out to your leadership, your chaplain, your healthcare provider, or your family — or all of the above! — if you’re struggling,” Hokanson said in a statement. It doesn’t matter which steps you take first — it only matters that you take them.”

In recent months, the Guard Bureau declined to offer additional comments on any new strategies they may be pursuing and said lack of funding was an ongoing obstacle. Wisconsin National Guard chief Maj. General Paul Knapp also offered no new measures.

The Journal Sentinel investigation chronicled how four Wisconsin Guardsmen died by suicide in 2020 and early 2021 after serving in Afghanistan. It found that as the state and the country increasingly rely on the Guard, leaders have failed to provide more comprehensive mental health care for troops to stem its suicide rate.

Legislators stripped funding for expanded mental health services

State legislators stripped funding from Evers’ budget proposal earlier this year to expand the Guard’s mental health program and hire more staff.

The Republicans who control the state budget committee that removed the funding, including Rep. Mark Born, Sen. Dale Kooyenga, Sen. Howard Marklein, did not respond to questions about the decision or the recent Guard suicides.

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Assembly Speaker Robin Vos of Rochester and Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu of Oostburg, the Republican leaders who control legislation, also would not address questions about what, if anything, they plan to do to prevent future deaths in the Wisconsin Guard.

Former Republican Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, who is running to replace Evers in 2022, said the Journal Sentinel’s investigation makes it clear more funding to connect the Guard with mental health services is needed but did not offer details on what she would specifically do to address the problem if elected.

Despite the Wisconsin Guard's historically high number of missions over the last two years, Kleefisch wants to activate more troops, sending them to the Mexico border to police undocumented migrants.

"If the federal government won't help, we will," she said in a statement. "I've seen the crisis at southern border firsthand; it's important we're prioritizing the use of the Guard for security issues and not using them as a temporary band-aid for all of our problems."

Yet, Guard experts and families of soldiers who have died say that is exactly what is happening — and that the Guard is increasingly being used as a political tool.

"The Guard can't do everything all the time," said John Goheen, communications director of the National Guard Association of the United States, a national lobbying group that is pushing a bill in Congress to extend free healthcare to all Guard members. "When you start talking to the Guard leaders, the Adjutant Generals across the country, they express concerns that the Guard can't become every governor's 'easy button.'"

The National Guard, comprising 54 separate militias in each state and territory, is supposed to be a part-time force, used infrequently as a last resort for states facing emergencies. But Guard members nationwide continue to supplement full-time forces overseas and serve stateside in a variety of non-military jobs, including staffing nursing homes, driving school buses, and in Wisconsin, staffing psychiatric facilities as low-level nursing assistants.

"Governors view Guard personnel as multi-purpose tools, bendable instruments able to be reconfigured to fit any emergency or need," said Dwight Stirling, an expert on the National Guard system, who teaches law at the University of Southern California and serves in the California National Guard. "A psychological breaking point can be reached when they are overused. Indeed, the increase in mental health problems in the Guard is evidence we're coming dangerously close to this line."

Unlike full-time military forces, the Guard does not receive free health care coverage through the Veterans Administration and must rely on a patchwork of programs.

"We put people on the frontline of the worst pandemic in a century with no health coverage," said Goheen, the National Guard Association lobbyist. "This nation does not give its guardsmen and reservists medical coverage. We don't provide it. I think that would shock a lot of people."

Meanwhile, Linda Collison and other Guard families who have lost loved ones to suicide, are eager to see changes that prevent more deaths.

“These helpers of last resort have nowhere to turn when they themselves need help,” Collison said.

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