

New York National Guard COVID response is now the largest domestic mobilization in U.S. history

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Beginning in early March 2020, military forces in the State of New York, comprising the Army National Guard, Air National Guard, Naval

Militia, and State Guard, with contributions from the Army Corps of Engineers, mobilized to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. The ongoing New York State Operation COVID-19 (OPCOV19) has become the largest domestic mobilization in U.S history—by length of mission, volume of deployed soldiers, and diversity of missions.

Kai Ruggeri, Ph.D., assistant professor of health policy and management at Columbia University School of Public Health, a former specialist in the New York Guard, and current officer candidate in the US Air Force (New York Air National Guard), is lead author of an article in *JAMA Health Forum* that details the COVID-related contributions of these [military forces](#) and offers lessons learned for the future.

As part of OPCOV19, over 7,000 service members have served across 200 COVID mission sites, administering over 4 million vaccines, producing over 35 million testing kits, delivering over 54 million meals, and administering over 1.5 million tests. At the April 2020 mobilization peak, 3,646 service members were actively serving the State on a single day.

The rapid vaccine rollout in early 2021—at its peak 2,790 service members severed at the Javits Center vaccination center in New York City alone—and testing support helped prevent tens of thousands of deaths and allowed hospitals to focus on all levels of treatment and care such as cancer treatment and outpatient surgery.

On March 7, 2020 then-Gov Andrew Cuomo signed Executive Order 202 declaring a state of emergency for the State of New York. This action made available 270 service members from the New York Army National Guard and Air National Guard, who deployed two days later to New Rochelle in Westchester County, the location of the first outbreak in the state, where they provided [community services](#), primarily in the form of meal preparation and distribution.

In the following months, OPCOV19, under civilian direction of New York State and coordinated by New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services, provided critical serves, delivering relief, testing, care, vaccination, and other community support. Activities included PPE distribution, food delivery, recovery of the deceased, cleaning and decontamination, and the establishment and operations of drive-through testing sites, mobile testing sites, and airport health screenings. At nursing homes, New York Military Forces (NYMF) provided staffing, and medical support, ranging from direct testing to full-time labor backfill.

Service members also served as data scientists, working alongside public health officers to capitalize on the large amounts of data generated to combat the pandemic. Data modeling of pandemic trends enabled missions to mobilize at high speed, making NYMF sites operational before trends were publicly reported. These actions were directly responsible for the early availability of mass testing and vaccination that played a critical role in saving lives.

During this time, NYMF service members continued to serve in other roles, including 1,300 soldiers deployed to Washington, D.C., due to the violence at the U.S. Capital and protests in the summer of 2020 and fall of 2021. They also were mobilized during [natural disasters](#), combat deployments, and other long-term missions, including Joint Task Force Empire Shield, which is partly responsible for the military defense of New York City.

Ruggeri and his co-authors offer lessons learned from the NYMF responses to the pandemic. Among these are a need for greater coordination between healthcare institutions and the NYMF, and improved recruitment of healthcare professionals in the National Guard. Nevertheless, the NYMF COVID-19 response showed that full-time soldiers and reservists who bring civilian skills have a major role to play

from patient-facing medical support to coordinating drive-in testing sites to backroom data analytics.

"Every service member can become a public health professional if the situation demands it," says Ruggeri. "Thousands of service members have played a critical role in protecting the health of New Yorkers statewide."

The article is co-authored by members of the New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs, New York Army National Guard, and New York Air National Guard. A full list of authors is available in the journal article.

More information: Role of Military Forces in the New York State Response to COVID-19, *JAMA Health Forum* (2022). [DOI: 10.1001/jamahealthforum.2022.2136](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamahealthforum.2022.2136)

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