

## NACDD Healthy Military Partnership Highlight:

# Bringing Customized Nutrition Messaging to Military Families In New Mexico

By Catherine McCann, PhD, MSPH



## At-A-Glance

Obesity, overweight, and minimal fruit and vegetable intake compromise the health and readiness of the over 3,100 National Guard members in New Mexico.

To address this issue, the Building Healthy Military Communities (BHMC) program initiated a partnership with the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) and the New Mexico Farmers' Marketing Association (NMFMA) to increase knowledge about low-cost, locally grown produce through the GoodFoodNM texting program.



## Challenge

New Mexico is home to over 3,100 Army and Air National Guard members.<sup>1</sup> Guardsmen and Guardswomen support both foreign and domestic security and make up a significant part of the United States' deployable forces; as such, it is essential that they remain healthy enough to deploy on short notice.

A Service member's weight and body composition impacts their readiness, performance, and overall health. A 2019 Health of the Force report found that 24% of Army National Guard Soldiers were classified as obese and 47% as overweight. Additionally, only 35% reported eating two or more servings of fruit per day, and 46% reported eating two or more servings of vegetables per day.<sup>2</sup> Eating adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables is an important component of maintaining a healthy weight as well as preventing several chronic conditions.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense Defense Manpower Data Center. DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports, & Publications. <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>. Accessed April 20, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Army National Guard. "Health of the ARNG Force". (2019). [https://phc.amedd.army.mil/PHC%20Resource%20Library/2019\\_Health-of-the-ARNG-Force.pdf](https://phc.amedd.army.mil/PHC%20Resource%20Library/2019_Health-of-the-ARNG-Force.pdf). Accessed April 20, 2021. [https://phc.amedd.army.mil/PHC%20Resource%20Library/2019\\_Health-of-the-ARNG-Force.pdf](https://phc.amedd.army.mil/PHC%20Resource%20Library/2019_Health-of-the-ARNG-Force.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. "Strategies to Prevent Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases: The CDC Guide to Strategies to Increase the Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables." (2011). <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/strategies-fruits-and-vegetables.pdf>. Accessed June 28, 2021.

## Approach

The New Mexico BHMC program aims to better understand and meet the needs of the National Guard members in New Mexico. To support increasing fruit and vegetable intake among Guard members, BHMC contacted NMDOH to discuss strategies. NMDOH facilitated a partnership between BHMC and NMFMA to promote their GoodFoodNM texting program to Guard members in the state. Launched in April 2020, participants in the free program receive one to two texts per week with cooking tips, simple and healthy recipes, links to local farmers markets, information about food pantries and food access programs such as Double Up Food Bucks™, and other tailored messages based on their need (see callout box).

Despite challenges associated with marketing and increased deployment demands during the COVID-19 pandemic, by March 2021, there were 80 unique subscribers. Messages averaged a 97% open rate and links included in text messages averaged a 22% click through rate.



### Sample of Tailored GoodFoodNM Text Messages

#### **Military Families:**

GoodFoodNM: Spinach is great for growing kids! Try these kid-friendly cheese & spinach empanadas for lunches.

#### **At-Risk Soldiers:**

GoodFoodNM: Trying to lose weight? Add some spinach to an omelet or salad. It is rich in insoluble fiber which is a key element in weight loss.

#### **Active Duty:**

GoodFoodNM: Need a boost of energy? Choose spinach at your next meal. It is an excellent source of iron which might perk you up when you're feeling tired.

#### **Veterans:** GoodFoodNM:

Feeling blue? Eat some green! Spinach is full of tryptophan which increases serotonin, the key hormone that stabilizes our mood.

# Lessons Learned

The BHMC state coordinator learned three critical lessons during the initial program promotion:

## 1 **Gaining buy-in from unit commanders is an ongoing process and has a better chance of success if tied to soldier performance.**

Frequent change of station among guard unit commanders poses a significant challenge to partnering and coordination. Although the BHMC program is housed within the National Guard, the BHMC state coordinator must continually educate unit commanders and recruitment and sustainment program managers as they rotate in. New unit commanders are not required to collaborate with the same partners or continue the same programs as their predecessors. The state coordinator found that connecting the program to the soldier performance triad – sleep, activity, and nutrition<sup>1</sup> – was an effective way to communicate the benefits of the program.

## 2 **Scheduling time with groups of national guard members is challenging, but possible.**

Guard members are widely dispersed throughout the state and are only assembled once a month for a weekend of training that is scheduled during the previous year. To alter the schedule and include an additional program brief, a unit commander must



request the change. The state coordinator learned that it was helpful to remind commanders who responded positively to the program to move forward with the request to add a program briefing to the training schedule.

## 3 **Gaining acceptance of the program among guardsmen is challenging due to competing priorities.**

Guard members must balance their civilian responsibilities, such as civilian employment, education, and family, in addition to military responsibilities. Limited time spent training each month also makes raising member awareness challenging. The state coordinator began investigating new methods to increase guard member awareness utilization of the platform. These are briefly highlighted in the next section.

### **Next Steps**

The BHMC program and NMFMA will intensify their marketing efforts in the coming year and expand outreach. The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services will support the effort by broadcasting a recorded video message featuring the program in their clinic waiting rooms<sup>2</sup> and promote the texting platform on their Facebook page. The National Guard Recruiting and Retention programs will require new cadets to sign up for the service, and current Guard members who are not meeting height and weight requirements will also be required to sign up for the program.

To reach the families of Service members, the New Mexico National Guard Family Programs will promote the program during regular check ins with families.<sup>3</sup> The BHMC program will also continue to promote the program in their statewide newsletter that reaches over 2,100 military-connected individuals.

1 Performance Triad. United States Army. Available at <https://p3.amedd.army.mil>.

2 Depending on time spent on deployments, guard members are eligible for veteran's benefits and can access services at VA clinics.

3 These are monthly calls with families of deployed members to discuss needs and concerns.

NACDD Healthy Military Partnership Highlights feature new relationships or projects between public health and military stakeholders. NACDD will follow these partnerships and share progress and successes.

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