

# 2 Roles 1 Purpose



**CPT NIKKI ESPIL** wears two very important hats. She serves as a Behavior Health Officer with the 135th Medical Company on drill weekends and also as a full-time Army civilian social worker during the month. After more than 15 years of service as a civilian working with military, she decided to take a direct commission to continue to serve our state and nation. Learn more about CPT Espil's compelling story here:

## What is your role in the WING?

I'm an MDAY Behavioral Health Officer (BHO) with the 135<sup>th</sup> Medical Company Area Support (MCAS), where I serve as a 73A (Social Worker). I have been in the WIARNG for 18 months. I'm also a full-time WIARNG civilian social worker on the Behavioral Health Team in Health Service Support (HSS). I've been there about 2 ½ years. The two roles overlap nicely and being a full-time social worker has helped me to understand the structure of the Army and have a better understanding of the regulations related to behavioral health and medical readiness. I also get to interact with different types of units, Command teams, and Soldiers from all over the state outside of my unit and the 64<sup>th</sup> Troop Command. Building these relationships has been incredibly valuable to both careers.

## What made you want to direct commission in the WIARNG?

I worked at the VA in Milwaukee for just over 15 years, my husband is retired military (USMC/Army), I have a son in the USMC, and I was largely raised by a WWII Navy sailor. I really wanted to be able to join the family tradition and to also serve Soldiers *during* their careers vs after their military careers. I also was fortunate to see a lot of other MDAY BHOs at the Milwaukee VA. I was fascinated in what they did, and that it was not too late for me to join!

## What advice would you give to a service member in a difficult situation?

There are two things that I really emphasize to anyone going through a tough time. **First, stay connected to others.** Get their perspective, validation, or just vent. Or say nothing but stay in touch. This can be to your supports, colleagues, battle buddies, or even online friends. In the world of behavioral health, we know that

connection to others and belonging are the largest protective factors for suicide and self-injury, in addition to so many other negative outcomes of isolation. **Second, stay with your routine.** You may not be able to control the difficult situation, but you have a life that deserves and needs your attention, even if you don't feel like it. This you have control over.

My dad used to tell me, "Nikki, the busses will keep running," when I was going through a tough time to show me that despite feeling stuck and in some difficult situations, that the world around me was still moving. I had a choice to keep moving. 'Forward momentum, just keep forward momentum' became a mantra of mine. Dory from Finding Nemo, said it even better, "just keep swimming." My dad passed away very unexpectedly at the age of 53, I was only 31. I remember seeing busses in the days after he passed, and this concept stuck with me and helped me to keep my own 'forward momentum' in the time that followed (along with connection to others and my own routine).

### **What resources are out there to help Service Members going through a difficult situation?**

**Military One Source** (1-800-342-9647) and the **Military Family Life Counselors** (serving both WIARNG and WIANG, 352-801-2742, 608-215-3037) both offer non-medical counseling for things like stress, coping strategies, family issues, and work-life balance.

**Non-Crisis Warmline** by R&R House, a warmline for Veterans and Military families: 262-336-9540. Leave a voicemail and a Veteran Peer Support will return the call and provide supportive listening and peer-to-peer counseling.

**Unit chaplains**, State Chaplain: 608.242.3450

Contact your **HSS Social Worker** (WI Army Guard) or **DPH Social Worker** (WI Air Guard) if you want help finding other behavioral health resources (counseling, psychiatry). Your units will have the contact for these resources.

**Soldier & Family Readiness Specialists (SFRS):** 1-800-292-9464 (Option 1)

**Airman Family Readiness:** Jerry Hook (115FW/Volk), 608-245-4654 and Amy Thompson (128ARW), 414-944-8249