



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Lloid Davis, a recruiter with the New England Recruiting Station, talks with a recruit in Framingham, Massachusetts, Aug. 11, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. David Marquis)

Recruiting in a Global Pandemic

By Lt. Col. Whitney O. Jensen & Command Sgt. Maj. Latosha Ravenell

New York City Recruiting Battalion

A year ago in March of 2020, the New York City Recruiting Battalion (NYCRB) faced an unexpected challenge. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo declared a state of emergency as the COVID-19 virus spun out of control in New York. As the world was just beginning to understand the lethality of the virus, and the conditions under which it spread, the U.S. military was still learning how to contain the virus within the force. Through adaptability, resilience, and strong leadership, the NYCRB overcame the challenges presented by the global pandemic, ensuring the U.S. Army could still fill its ranks. This article is a snapshot of the action plans the NYCRB took to combat the COVID-19 virus and the lessons learned over the past year during this pandemic.

Adaptability

A global pandemic renders traditional recruiting methods obsolete and the junior leaders of the NYCRB had to rapidly adapt to this new reality. Events typically held face-to-face with recruits to include job fairs, high school sports events, mass-transit hubs, and other activities ceased with implementation of social distancing rules (Jahner, 2015). Junior leaders, specifically noncommissioned officers (NCOs) of the NYCRB, embraced mission command and leveraged technology to continue their recruiting mission.

As the world embraced teleworking, NCOs of the NYCRB used Microsoft Teams and FaceTime to collaborate and conduct essential planning meetings, training, and accountability requirements. U.S. Army Recruiting



Future U.S. Army Soldiers recite the Oath of Enlistment aboard the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers vessel Hayward at New York City Harbor during a ceremony as part of Army National Hiring Days, New York City, New York, July 2020. (U.S. Army photo courtesy of New York City Recruiting Battalion)

Command (USAREC) authorized the use of virtual operations to conduct applicant interviews, witness signatures, and commence the application process, which could be completed once operations at Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS) resumed. Traditional job fairs evolved into virtual fairs; organic social media video content emerged to supplement formal Army marketing products; digital marketing expanded to streaming services, jobsite platforms, and Google and Facebook Ads; and face-to-face classroom presentations transitioned to virtual Zoom presentations (South, 2020).

COVID-19 was not the only challenge USAREC overcame. Extreme weather across the country also tested the adaptability and resilience of the recruiting force (Lacdan, 2020). As airports and training bases were shut down, USAREC and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command diverted hundreds of future Soldiers to other training bases for initial training while local commanders executed well-planned telework battle drills.

Resilience

Army recruiters are not immune to the effects of COVID-19. To ensure continued success and mission accomplishment, leaders in 1st Recruiting Brigade developed a Red Working Group, an independent group that challenges an organization to improve its effectiveness, to discuss COVID-19 concerns, and develop a long-term strategy for operating in congested or “Red” environments.

Other recruiting organizations were invited to this working group to include adjacent battalions in the northeast, units in hard-hit metro areas, and senior leaders from USAREC. The working group’s products and recommendations included battle drills, risk management techniques, quarantine requirements, and support

to hundreds of NCOs and their families who contracted the virus. The Red Working Group developed leadership flow charts for presumed or confirmed positive Soldiers or applicants, trace analysis procedures, and a common operating picture to plan out station and MEPS closures.

Mission command relies on trust between leaders in both the operational and institutional force (Department of the Army, 2019). Continued dialogue up and down the recruiting chain of command is essential for maintaining continuity of operations. Notably, the NYCRB pioneered a risk mitigation strategy incorporating known protection procedures (masks, disinfectant, social distancing) with an extensive COVID-19 testing strategy designed to minimize quarantine requirements for mission essential personnel. NYCRB conducted trace analysis for confirmed positives, enacted “A” and “B” team alternating work schedules, and empowered company and station-level commanders to manage hours of operations conducive to individual situations and changes in market conditions.

Leadership

NCOs who served in USAREC during the COVID-19 global pandemic will return to the operational force with invaluable leadership experience. They embraced change and adapted successfully to a complex and evolving home and work environment. These NCOs had to overcome personal adversity while providing support to teammates, future Soldiers, and applicants. They had to prevail against hospitalizations, evictions, homelessness, unemployment, and deaths of family members due to the New York City’s high positivity and fatality rates. They provided mentorship, empathy, and assistance to both their Soldiers and their community. In addition, NCOs at all levels provided direct feedback to their chain of command which drove battalion and brigade-level command decisions for risk mitigation, work hours, station closures, processing operations, and more. Today, NYCRB NCOs continue to play a key role in decision-making as the pandemic evolves and a “new normal” emerges.

Conclusion

The biggest takeaway from this past year is recognizing the ability to adapt and overcome given circumstances is crucial for all Army organizations to accomplish their mission no matter the challenge. Though the U.S. Army is full of great leaders who continue to demonstrate initiative, adaptability, and resilience throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic, the operational Army in particular will benefit uniquely from the NCOs who withstood and continue to overcome the challenges of filling the force’s ranks during this unprecedented time in our nation’s history. ■

References

- Department of the Army. (2019). *ADP 6.0: Mission command: Command and control of Army forces*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN19189_AD6_6-0_FINAL_WEB_v2.pdf
- Jahner, K. (2015). Secret tactics of successful Army recruiters. *Army Times*. <https://www.armytimes.com/education-transition/jobs/2015/03/02/secret-tactics-of-successful-army-recruiters/>
- Lacdan, J. (2020). New directive to prepare Army installations against extreme weather, climate change. *Army.mil*. https://www.army.mil/article/238014/new_directive_to_prepare_army_installations_against_extreme_weather_climate_change
- South, T. (2020). Army training, recruiting marches on despite COVID-19 challenges. *Defense News*. <https://www.defense-news.com/news/your-army/2020/10/14/army-training-recruiting-marches-on-despite-covid-19-challenges/>

Lt. Col. Whitney Jensen currently serves as the commander of the New York City Recruiting Battalion. She is a Military Police officer and two-time Department of the Army select battalion commander. She has served multiple tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. She holds degrees from University of South Alabama, Webster University, and the Command General Staff College.

Command Sgt. Maj. Latosha Ravenell currently serves as the brigade command sergeant major at the Marketing and Engagement Brigade, Fort Knox, Kentucky. She has held several U.S. Army Recruiting Command leadership positions. She holds a bachelor's degree in business administration and a master's degree in organizational leadership from Columbia Southern University.



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

<https://www.instagram.com/ncojournalofficial/>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

