



**TESTIMONY OF
VICE ADMIRAL PAUL F. THOMAS
DEPUTY COMMANDANT FOR MISSION SUPPORT, U.S. COAST GUARD**

ON

**“IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS
OF THE ACCOUNTABILITY & TRANSPARENCY REVIEW
AND EFFORTS TO EASE COAST GUARD MANPOWER SHORTAGES”**

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD & MARITIME TRANSPORTATION**

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and thank you for your enduring support of the United States Coast Guard.

The U.S. Coast Guard is the world’s premier, multi-mission, maritime service responsible for the safety, security, and stewardship of the maritime domain. The Service’s 57,000 active duty, reserve, and civilian personnel, supported by 21,000 Auxiliary volunteers, conduct dynamic homeland security and defense missions around the globe on a 24/7 basis 365 days-a-year. Our status as the world’s best Coast Guard depends on the ability to attract, recruit, and retain talent with the motivation to perform these missions.

Over the last several months, the Coast Guard has responded to questions about the handling of investigations of prior sexual misconduct at the Coast Guard Academy. Consequently, the Service has focused on prevention of sexual harassment and sexual assault; matured policies to hold members and leaders accountable; and listened to and supported victims and survivors. From Senior Leaders to the most junior recruit, everyone in our Service must be committed to fostering a culture where each member of our workforce is valued, empowered, trusted, and supported.

The Coast Guard’s homeland security and defense operations enable the Nation’s economic prosperity, enforce our laws at sea, protect the marine environment, and perform vital lifesaving missions to ensure the safety, security, and resiliency of America’s far-reaching maritime interests. Strengthening the Coast Guard’s culture and reaffirming our commitment to our core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty is critically linked to Service readiness, efforts to retain those who serve today, and our ability to recruit those who will perform Coast Guard missions in the future.

Accountability and Transparency

We must ensure every member of the Coast Guard adheres to our core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty through a culture that deters harmful behaviors and gives everyone the positive Coast Guard experience they expect and deserve. Over the past two decades, the Coast Guard has adopted policies, enhanced training, dedicated personnel, expanded victim services, and sought accountability for sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other harassing or harmful behaviors. While the Service has made great strides, there is still much work to be done and we are committed to continuing our efforts.

In 2014, a former Coast Guard Academy (CGA) cadet reported to the Coast Guard Investigative Service (CGIS) that she was sexually assaulted by a fellow cadet in the 1990s. During the investigation, the Service learned of other potential victims of sexual misconduct at the CGA from 1988 to 2006 whose cases were either not investigated, mishandled, or not reported at the time. CGIS reached out to potential victims and opened numerous criminal investigations. This effort resulted in hundreds of leads and 20,000 investigative hours spanning over six years.

Given the passage of time between the alleged offenses and the investigations, as well as jurisdictional limitations, criminal prosecutions were not possible in any of these cases. However, the Coast Guard took action to hold offenders accountable through administrative means where the evidence was sufficient to support the allegations and the individual remained within the Coast Guard's jurisdiction. The Coast Guard did not notify Congress of these cases while this work was ongoing or when it was complete. As the Commandant has previously stated, the failure to disclose the investigations or the findings deprived Congress of the opportunity to conduct proper oversight, and the Coast Guard is committed to cooperating with the Committee's inquiry.

In July 2023, the Commandant directed a 90-day review covering six lines of effort: Transparency, Accountability, Awareness, Prevention, Climate and Culture, and Victim Support. The team conducted a retrospective review of the laws, policies, processes, practices, resources, and Service culture relevant to countering sexual assault and harassment within the Service. The team made key findings in the areas of Sexual Assault Prevention, Response, and Recovery (SAPRR) training and leadership development, Integrated Primary Prevention, effective use of climate and gender relations data, and care for survivors. Many of these findings and recommendations align with those of the Department of Defense 90-Day Independent Review Commission (IRC) on Sexual Assault in the Military, and build on Coast Guard's implementation of adapted recommendations from the IRC.

Actions Taken – Accountability and Transparency

In response to these findings, the Commandant directed 33 initial actions to further cultural norms around respect, transparency, and accountability across six areas: workforce training, culture, and professional development; Integrated Primary Prevention; core values; accountability; the CGA; and information, data, and transparency. The Service is working to implement the Commandant's directed actions, with several initiatives already complete: Senior Executive Implementation Summit, Senior Leader Engagement through the 2024 Commanding Officer Conference Cycle, Online Mandated SAPRR Training, Academy Reporting Structure, and the Coast Guard-wide Climate Survey.

In addition to those directed actions, the Service identified other opportunities to further support our workforce and enhance our culture, including working with Congress to identify gaps in Coast Guard authorities related to accountability, increasing the number of behavioral health professionals in the Service, and creating a new Enterprise Victim Advocate (EVA) position, the first of its kind in the armed forces. The EVA advises senior leaders and connects with victims, championing enterprise actions in response to issues affecting the workforce. Additionally, the Coast Guard recently established the Office of the Chief Prosecutor, ensuring experienced military prosecutors handle the disposition of the most serious crimes – furthering the Service’s commitment to accountability. The Service is confident these measures will improve organizational culture and further our goal of ensuring an environment free from sexual assault, harassment, bullying, hazing, retaliation, and reprisal. The Coast Guard is committed to continuous improvement to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our people.

Recruiting, Retention, and Force Alignment

Like all military services and many employers, the Coast Guard faces fierce competition for talent in today’s economy. The Coast Guard is currently 10 percent below authorized strength within the enlisted workforce. This is one of the largest workforce shortages in the Coast Guard’s 233-year history, and it is significantly impacting our daily operations. We expect the shortage to grow throughout 2024. While we continue to work to bolster recruiting efforts, improve retention, and make risk-based adjustments to operations, the workforce is feeling the strain.

It remains true that non-military employers often provide more attractive pay and, because of the highly competitive labor market, many now offer other non-compensation benefits like college tuition assistance, workplace flexibility, expanded healthcare services, and childcare benefits. The Coast Guard is committed to working with the Department of Defense (DoD) and Congress to ensure military pay and benefits appropriately compensate the women and men who serve the Nation. However, regardless of compensation, recent DoD data shows that more than 75 percent of 17 to 21-year-old Americans are ineligible for military service without a waiver. As a result, the Coast Guard must be committed to reviewing policies related to the most frequent disqualifiers (i.e., medical history, drug use, body modifications, and fitness) to ensure we continue to enable every appropriately qualified individual the opportunity to serve.

Actions Taken - Recruiting

Since May 2022, the Coast Guard has staffed an Incident Management Team to help focus Service-wide resources on recruiting. This team has supported the Coast Guard Recruiting Command across three lines of effort to bolster recruiting: generate more leads, improve the recruiting process, and increase recruiting capacity and performance. The last 20 months of effort provided valuable insights into the most effective strategies for long-term changes, and the Coast Guard is committed to building that capacity into the recruiting enterprise, so it is poised to continue recent successes.

While the Service is cautiously optimistic regarding FY 2024 recruiting efforts, we must continue to generate more awareness of the Coast Guard’s value to the Nation, message the benefits of military service, and identify more candidates for potential recruitment. When the Service updated its messaging and recruiting logos in March 2023 to ensure the Coast Guard brand resonates with those we are trying to recruit, the impact was uncertain. We now know that those changes and the others described below are beginning to pay off.

As of February 13, 2024, the Coast Guard has achieved more than 50 percent of its active duty recruiting goal for FY 2024 and continues to surge marketing efforts and recruiting capacity into untapped markets; deliver targeted content across the web, social media, and streaming platforms; and provide local contacts for potential recruits when they are ready to learn about what opportunities the Service offers.

To improve the recruiting process, we remain focused on removing barriers to entry. In the last 18 months, the Coast Guard changed accession standards, including standards regarding maximum age, debt-to-income ratio, and dependency status. The recruiting enterprise also continues its effort to meet recruits where they are with a mobile application that modernizes the recruiting process. The initial version will include an online applicant portal, digital forms, and the ability to collect digital signatures. When fully implemented, it will have the capacity to track all application package details, which will greatly improve transparency and management of Coast Guard applications.

To increase the Coast Guard's recruiting capacity and performance, we will continue to open additional recruiting offices and place independent duty recruiters in locations with less historical awareness of the Coast Guard's missions and role as a military service. Virtual recruiters and a dedicated call center continue to further the Coast Guard's ability to reach and recruit individuals across the country, particularly those not located near a physical recruiting office. Additionally, we are partnering with technical schools and mariner training programs that graduate young people with complementary skillsets to our enlisted ratings. To professionalize the recruiting workforce, the Coast Guard recently established a permanent recruiter rate and will begin to fill the most senior enlisted recruiting positions across the country with Talent Acquisition Specialists this summer.

We are also beginning to place officer recruiters in geographic areas that have had historically high levels of interest for those who want to earn a commission. By the end of the summer, we will have five junior officers located across the country who will be able to attract the best talent for our officer corps, while allowing the remainder of the recruiters to focus on the needs of the enlisted workforce. Further, the Coast Guard is working to establish additional training resources and provide incentive pay to recruiters like the other Armed Services. These efforts are increasing the Coast Guard's recruiting footprint across the country, maximizing exposure of the Service to the very best young women and men our Nation has to offer.

Actions Taken - Retention

Retention of Coast Guard members is also essential to conducting and supporting missions around the globe. The Coast Guard has taken significant steps to transform its talent management system, ensuring there are opportunities for flexible assignments, advancements, workplaces, and careers. These policy changes enable the workforce to serve our Nation to their best potential, while balancing other needs and demands on their lives.

Providing key support services to the workforce and their families -- in the form of housing, healthcare, and childcare services -- is essential to improving our personnel loss rates. The Coast Guard has enhanced the workforce's quality of life through improved support programs. We have modified assignment policies to better facilitate the co-location of dual military families, enhanced parental leave policies and expanded the childcare fee assistance subsidy program.

The Service also continues to improve healthcare services and access to care for our workforce and their families by expanding access to telehealth services, offering online appointment scheduling, migrating to electronic health records, and expanding key health services such as physical therapy and behavioral health services.

Finally, the Coast Guard's Workforce Planning Teams monitor and evaluate the total active duty, reserve, and civilian workforce to identify trends, assess gaps, and provide recommendations for policy modifications, as well as monetary and non-monetary interventions, to ensure the Coast Guard is best positioned to meet future needs. These teams carefully consider organizational and programmatic equities and risks to optimize service readiness. To maintain a competitive edge, the Coast Guard must continue modernization efforts for personnel management and family support services.

Actions Taken – Force Alignment

In September 2023, the Coast Guard initiated a holistic evaluation of the workforce shortage and its impact on Coast Guard operations and personnel and developed a series of actions to reduce operational risk and minimize the burden to those currently serving. This effort evaluated force posture in Search and Rescue (SAR) and the Marine Transportation System (MTS), and provided opportunities to adjust force strength, mission demands, and staffing. We will prioritize our lifesaving missions, national security, and protection of the MTS. Beginning this summer, the Service will temporarily transition all seasonal stations into forward operating locations, pause operations at western river units, and reduce manning requirements at stations with overlapping coverage. In total, the initiative identified 1,500 positions that will temporarily be left vacant, allowing the Coast Guard to distribute specialized personnel to ensure the integrity and continuity of SAR operations. The actions are temporary and reversible. Going forward the Service will continue to evaluate force laydown, mission demands, and staffing priorities to address workforce challenges.

Conclusion

The U.S. Coast Guard provides services that benefit the American public, national security, and the global economy. To do so, the Service must build a strong and robust Coast Guard while simultaneously providing each member an experience that is free from harmful behaviors and ensures they are treated with courtesy, dignity, and respect. Preserving American prosperity and contributing to global stability requires the Service to focus on key initiatives to meet the challenges of recruiting and retention alongside efforts to find new and better ways to support Coast Guard personnel and their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and thank you for your continued support of the United States Coast Guard. I look forward to your questions.