

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

(118-47)

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

MARCH 6, 2024

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Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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MARCH 1, 2024

SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER

TO: Members, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
FROM: Staff, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
RE: Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Hearing on *“Implementation of the Recommendations of the Accountability and Transparency Review and Efforts to Ease Coast Guard Manpower Shortages”*

I. PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure will meet on March 6, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. ET in 2167 Rayburn House Office Building to receive testimony at a hearing entitled, *“Implementation of the Recommendations of the Accountability and Transparency Review and Efforts to Ease Coast Guard Manpower Shortages.”* The Subcommittee will receive testimony from the United States Coast Guard (Coast Guard or Service) and the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) on the implementation of recommendations of the Accountability and Transparency Review that was conducted after “Operation Fouled Anchor,” the Service’s investigation into sexual assault and sexual harassment at the United States Coast Guard Academy, and efforts to reduce manpower shortages within the Coast Guard.

II. BACKGROUND

Coast Guard personnel deficits are widespread and threaten to impede the ability of the Service to execute its obligations. In recent years, these challenges have only been exacerbated by improper handling of reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment.

OPERATION FOULED ANCHOR AND THE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY REVIEW

Operation Fouled Anchor was a Coast Guard investigation initiated in 2014 that revealed incidents of rape, assault, and other misconduct at the Coast Guard Academy (Academy) occurring from 1990 until 2006.¹ The report uncovered a repeated pattern of mishandling cases and not holding perpetrators accountable, in part driven by efforts to protect the reputation of the Academy.² The investigation identified 63 potential victims and allegations against 43 separate individuals who were sub-

¹MEMORANDUM, UNITED STATES COAST GUARD, “Fouled Anchor” Investigation—Final Report, (Jan. 31, 2020), available at https://www.uscg.mil/Portals/0/documents/FOULED_ANCHOR_INVESTIGATION_FINAL_REPORT_AND_ENCLOSURE-508Compliant.pdf.

²*Id.*

ject to investigation.³ The results of the investigation were made public only after the report was leaked to CNN.⁴

The Coast Guard chose not to disclose the existence of Operation Fouled Anchor to the Congress despite Congress' demonstrated interest in curbing sexual harassment and sexual harassment. Further, the decision to bury the report resulted in a failure to implement the recommendations from Operation Fouled Anchor.

After the report became public, the Service undertook an Accountability and Transparency Review (ATR), which included recommendations to prevent and better respond to future sexual assault and sexual harassment incidents.⁵

MANPOWER SHORTAGES

The Coast Guard is currently authorized for an active duty end-strength of 44,500.⁶ However, it is operating with a deficit of approximately 4,800 members across its workforce.⁷ Approximately 3,000 of the 4,800 member deficit are for active-duty personnel.⁸ In fiscal year (FY) 2023, the Coast Guard sought a total of 59,854 personnel positions to carry out its statutory missions.⁹ Increased mission demands and the limited growth in Coast Guard ranks makes it even more difficult to carry out its mission effectively.

III. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY REVIEW

In response to Operation Fouled Anchor, the Coast Guard Commandant, Admiral Linda Fagan, chartered a 90-day ATR on July 14, 2023.¹⁰ The ATR included a review of current laws, policies, practices and culture designed to prevent and respond to instances of sexual assault and harassment within the Service.¹¹ The ATR team visited Coast Guard units across the country to solicit member feedback from all ranks; incorporated anonymous comments and climate surveys, like the defense organizational climate survey; and engaged with other Services and organizations with shared goals and values.¹² The team also examined previous studies dating from 1990 to the present, including a 2015 Culture of Respect Report.¹³ On November 27, 2023, the Coast Guard released the ATR, along with the Commandant's Directed Actions, which seek to mitigate instances of harassment, assault, and other mistreatment.¹⁴

In a 95-page report, the ATR identifies four key themes and provides specific findings and recommendations for improvement along five lines of effort to build Coast Guard competence and capabilities related to sexual assault and harassment prevention, response, and recovery.¹⁵ The key themes are: increasing the focus on prevention and intervention; skills based training and leadership development; effective use of survey information; and obligation to care for victims.¹⁶ The lines of effort are: climate and culture; prevention; awareness; accountability and transparency; and victim support and recovery.¹⁷

³ *Id.*

⁴ Blake Ellis, Melanie Hicken and Audrey Ash, *Criminal investigation into Coast Guard Academy revealed years of sexual assault cover-ups, but findings were kept secret*, CNN, (June 30, 2023), available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/30/politics/coast-guard-academy-secret-sexual-assault-investigation-invs/index.html>.

⁵ MEMORANDUM, COAST GUARD, COMMANDANT'S DIRECTED ACTIONS—ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY; (Nov. 27, 2023), available at <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Nov/30/2003349064/-1/-1/0/CCGS%20DIRECTED%20ACTIONS%20-%20ACCOUNTABILITY%20AND%20TRANSPARENCY%20W%20ENCL.508-COMPLIANT.PDF> [hereinafter Commandant's Directed Actions—Accountability and Transparency].

⁶ 14 U.S.C. § 4904.

⁷ UNITED STATES COAST GUARD, FY 2024 CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET JUSTIFICATION 28 (2023), available at https://www.uscg.mil/Portals/0/documents/budget/2024/Coast_Guard_FY2024_Congressional_Justification.pdf.

⁸ United States Coast Guard Briefing to Congress, Coast Guard Recruiting & Retention (Feb. 14, 2023) (on file with Comm.) [hereinafter Briefing].

⁹ COAST GUARD, REPORT TO CONGRESS, MANPOWER REQUIREMENTS PLAN, (Mar. 9, 2023) (on file with Comm.).

¹⁰ Memorandum, from Adm. Linda Fagan, on Accountability and Transparency Review, (July 14, 2023) (on file with Comm.).

¹¹ Commandant's Directed Actions—Accountability and Transparency, *supra* note 5.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

The Commandant reviewed the ATR and issued the memorandum titled “Commandant’s Directed Actions—Accountability and Transparency,” to address workforce training and culture, strengthen support for victims, improve accountability within the workforce and at the Academy, and strengthen transparency.¹⁸ Splitting the directed actions into those completed and those outstanding, she directed the implementation of over 30 outstanding directed actions along with quarterly updates and a one-year progress brief. Each directed action was assigned a line of effort correlating to the ATR and either a completion date or date to brief the Vice Commandant as appropriate.¹⁹

A RAND study published in 2021 found that exposure to sexual assault in the United States military doubled the odds that a service member would leave the military within 28 months, and sexual harassment was associated with roughly four percent of all military separations during the same time period.²⁰ The report estimated that sexual assaults were associated with 2,000 more separations than would normally be expected, and an additional 8,000 separations were associated with sexual harassment.²¹ Most of these separations were voluntary, meaning that in addition to harming the members involved, sexual assault and sexual harassment contributes to higher attrition rates and weakens military force readiness.²²

The Commandant’s directed actions in support of the ATR are intended to address, mitigate, and prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment in the Coast Guard—making members feel safe and wanting to continue to serve.

Upon learning of “Operation Fouled Anchor” in June 2023, the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (Committee) opened an investigation into the Coast Guard’s conduct, including failures to investigate and properly address sexual assaults at the Coast Guard Academy (Academy).²³ Given the Coast Guard’s past lack of transparency on these issues, the Committee will continue to closely follow the Service’s efforts to fulfill its commitments to ensure successful implementation over the long term.

IV. RECRUITING AND RETENTION CHALLENGES IN THE UNITED STATES COAST GUARD AND RESPONSE

Like other military services, the Coast Guard has fallen short of its recruitment targets, failing to meet its goals by an average of 20 percent each year since 2018.²⁴ The gap is expected to increase in the coming years and is especially acute in the enlisted ranks. By 2025, the Coast Guard expects to be short several hundred officers and nearly 6,000 enlisted members.²⁵

The Service is confronting a landscape where the pool of eligible candidates for military service is shrinking. According to the Department of Defense, only 23 percent of Americans ages 17 to 24 are qualified to serve without a waiver.²⁶ Physical fitness concerns, criminal history, and prescription and illegal drug-related issues are the primary disqualifiers for many individuals.²⁷ Moreover, just nine percent of those eligible to serve have an interest in doing so.²⁸

To address these challenges, the Coast Guard sought \$12 million in its FY 2024 budget request to fund additional personnel and offices to augment its recruiting efforts.²⁹ Additionally, the Coast Guard intends to implement a multi-tiered strategy

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Andrew R. Morral, Miriam Matthews, Matthew Cefalu, Terry L. Schell, Linda Cottrell, 2014 RAND MILITARY WORKPLACE STUDY EFFECTS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON SEPARATION FROM THE U.S. MILITARY, (Feb. 8, 2021), available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR870z10.html.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ Letter from Sam Graves, Chairman, H. Comm. on Transp. and Infrastructure and Rick Larsen, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Transp. and Infrastructure, to Admiral Linda L. Fagan, Commandant, Coast Guard, (Aug. 28, 2023) (on file with Comm.).

²⁴ Caitlin Yilek, Norah O’Donnel, & Angel Canales, *How the Coast Guard plans to boost recruitment after years of shortfalls*, CBS NEWS, (Dec. 7, 2022), available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coast-guard-recruitment-challenges-shortfalls/>.

²⁵ Briefing, *supra* note 8.

²⁶ Molly Boigon & Courtney Kube, *Every branch of the military is struggling to make its 2022 recruiting goals, officials say*, NBC NEWS, (June 27, 2022), available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/every-branch-us-military-struggling-meet-2022-recruiting-goals-officials-rcna35078>.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ COAST GUARD, 2024 BUDGET FACT SHEET, available at https://www.uscg.mil/Portals/0/documents/budget/2024/Coast_Guard_FY2024_Posture_Statement_FINAL.pdf.

to address its recruiting and retention challenges.³⁰ This includes relaxing certain requirements, like age restrictions, to expand the aperture of qualified candidates and adjusting personnel policies, including those related to parental leave and promotions, in an effort to retain personnel.³¹ To support the Coast Guard's efforts, the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2023, as reported by the Committee, authorizes for FYs 2024 and 2025, \$11.98 million to fund additional recruiting personnel and offices for Coast Guard recruiting Command and \$9 million to enhance Coast Guard recruiting capabilities.³²

Organically, on January 17, 2024, the Coast Guard announced the creation of a new Talent Acquisition Specialist (TA) rating with the aim of improving its recruitment strategy.³³ The TA rating transforms recruiting into a dedicated and specialized field focused on attracting the best talent in the United States.³⁴

Additionally, the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (P.L. 117-263) directs the Coast Guard to establish at least one Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program in each Coast Guard district by December 31, 2025.³⁵ To date, the Coast Guard maintains six JROTC units at high schools on the East Coast.³⁶ It has plans to launch four more programs this year, including the first program to be stood up on the West Coast.³⁷ The expectation is that such programs will raise the Coast Guard's visibility and augment recruiting numbers.

Operationally, the Coast Guard has addressed manpower shortages by reducing staffing standards at shoreside stations, reassigning personnel at redundant and seasonal stations, decommissioning cutters ahead of schedule, and gapping some positions.³⁸ Short nearly 10 percent of the entire enlisted workforce the Coast Guard cannot continue to operate as it historically has with fewer people.³⁹

V. WITNESSES

- Vice Admiral Paul Thomas, Deputy Commandant for Mission Support, United States Coast Guard
- Heather MacLeod, Director, Homeland Security and Justice, United States Government Accountability Office

³⁰ See 46 U.S.C. §§ 53101–54012.

³¹ *Id.*

³² Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2023, H.R. 2741, 118th Cong. (2023).

³³ Bulletin, COAST GUARD, *ALCOAST 018/24—Creation of New Talent Acquisition Specialist (TA) rating*, (Jan. 17, 2024) available at <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDHSCG/bulletins/3856b5a>.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-263, 136 Stat. 3691.

³⁶ COAST GUARD, *JROTC Units*, available at <https://www.uscg.mil/Community/JROTC/JROTC-Units/>.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ AJ Pulkkinen, *Coast Guard adjusts operations plan to mitigate 2024 workforce shortage*, MyCG, available at <https://www.mycg.uscg.mil/News/Article/3575592/coast-guard-adjusts-operations-plan-to-mitigate-2024-workforce-shortage/>.

³⁹ *Id.*

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY REVIEW AND EFFORTS TO EASE COAST GUARD MANPOWER SHORTAGES

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2024

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD AND MARITIME
TRANSPORTATION,
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:09 a.m. in room 2167 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Daniel Webster (Chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. The Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation will come to order.

I ask unanimous consent that the chairman be authorized to declare a recess any time during the hearing.

Without objection, show that done.

I also ask unanimous consent that Members not on the subcommittee be present. If they are present, they can participate in the subcommittee.

As a reminder, if Members have anything to insert to the document, please email that to DocumentsTI@mail.house.gov.

So, I now recognize myself for the purpose of an opening statement for 5 minutes.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DANIEL WEBSTER OF FLORIDA, CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. We meet here today to examine the Coast Guard's implementation of the recommendations from the Accountability and Transparency Review, as well as the Service's efforts to ease its manpower shortages.

I would like to welcome our witnesses joining us today: Vice Admiral Paul Thomas is here, and he is the Deputy Commandant for Mission Support, United States Coast Guard; and Heather MacLeod, Director of Homeland Security and Justice at the United States Government Accountability Office. We welcome you both back to the subcommittee. Good to see you again.

In June of 2023, the Coast Guard briefed the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee on Operation Fouled Anchor, the Service's years-long investigation into sexual harassment and assault

cases, and other misconduct at the Coast Guard Academy that occurred between 1990 and 2006. The investigation uncovered a pattern of not handling cases as they would be handled today. As a result, perpetrators were not held properly accountable, and victims were not treated with the respect and care they deserved.

Unfortunately, the Coast Guard's efforts to inform Congress and the public of these findings were not prompted by transparency, nor did it come up during the last two Congresses while working with the committee to curb sexual assault and sexual harassment. Instead, the committee found out through a news report. That's where I find out most of my information.

During the course of the committee's investigation, it has become apparent that some of the Service's critical disclosures and document production continued to be driven by leaks and news reports, rather than true transparency and accountability.

In July of 2023, after the public release of the Operation Fouled Anchor Report, the Commandant directed a 90-day review of current laws, policies, practices, and culture designed to prevent and respond to instances of sexual assault and harassment within the Service.

On November 27th, the Coast Guard released the result of the 90-day review, along with more than 30 Directed Actions by the Commandant, which seek to mitigate instances of harassment, assault, and other misconduct within the Service.

While the Coast Guard's lack of transparency appeared to be driven in part by a desire to protect the Service and reputation of the Academy, its failure to be forthcoming achieved the opposite effect.

The men and women serving in our Coast Guard, who we ask so much of, deserve better from their leadership. So today, we are going to look towards the future and discuss the Service's efforts to implement practices that will meaningfully address these issues.

The Commandant's Directed Actions, released along with the Accountability and Transparency Report, provide a solid starting place to strengthen protections for victims and uphold the Service's values.

To ensure these practices are implemented, and to provide the Service with the authorities it requires to carry out the recommendations, yesterday, Ranking Member Carbajal and I introduced the Coast Guard Accountability and Transparency Act.

Vice Admiral Thomas, this legislation will hold the Service's feet to the fire to make sure those recommendations are carried out.

The Coast Guard's struggles with transparency and accountability are occurring as it also struggles to retain and recruit servicemembers. Despite increasing mission demands, the Service is operating with a deficit of approximately 4,800 members across its ranks.

Short nearly 10 percent of its workforce, the Coast Guard has been forced to reduce staffing standards at the shoreside stations, temporarily close seasonal stations, and decommission cutters ahead of schedule. With fewer people, the Coast Guard cannot continue to operate as it has historically without either reducing its missions or degrading its capabilities.

Recognizing these challenges, in the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2023, the committee authorized for fiscal years 2024 and 2025 \$12 million to fund additional recruiting personnel and officers for the Coast Guard Recruiting Command and \$9 million to enhance Coast Guard recruiting capabilities.

I look forward to hearing more about the Coast Guard's multi-tiered effort to mitigate its recruiting challenges, including efforts to retain personnel and improve recruiting capabilities.

[Mr. Webster of Florida's prepared statement follows:]

**Prepared Statement of Hon. Daniel Webster of Florida, Chairman,
Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation**

We meet today to examine the Coast Guard's implementation of the recommendations from the Accountability and Transparency Review, as well as the Service's efforts to ease its manpower shortages.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses joining us today—Vice Admiral Paul Thomas, Deputy Commandant for Mission Support, United States Coast Guard, and Heather MacLeod, Director, Homeland Security and Justice at the United States Government Accountability Office. We welcome you both back to the Subcommittee.

In June 2023, the Coast Guard briefed the Transportation Committee on Operation Fouled Anchor, the Service's years-long investigation into sexual assault and harassment cases and other misconduct at the Coast Guard Academy that occurred between 1990 and 2006. The investigation uncovered a pattern of not handling cases as they would be handled today. As a result, perpetrators were not held properly accountable, and victims were not treated with the respect and care they deserved.

Unfortunately, the Coast Guard's efforts to inform Congress and the public of these findings were not prompted by transparency, or even while working with this committee to curb sexual assault and sexual harassment in the merchant marine fleet over the previous two Congresses, but rather by a forthcoming news report.

During the course of the Committee's investigation, it has become apparent that some of the Service's critical disclosures and document production continued to be driven by leaks and news reports, rather than true transparency and accountability.

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The men and women serving in our Coast Guard, whom we ask so much of, deserve better from their leadership. So today, we are going to look towards the future and discuss the Service's efforts to implement practices that will meaningfully address these issues.

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Vice Admiral Thomas—this legislation will hold the Service's feet to the fire to make sure those recommendations are carried out.

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I look forward to hearing more about the Coast Guard's multi-tiered effort to mitigate its recruiting challenges, including efforts to retain personnel and improve recruiting capabilities.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. So, I now recognize Ranking Member Carbajal.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. SALUD O. CARBAJAL OF CALIFORNIA, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you, Chairman Webster, and thank you for calling today's hearing. The issues we are examining today are paramount to the success of the Coast Guard.

Over the past 3 years, I have had the opportunity to visit Coast Guard stations across the country. I have been on icebreakers, National Security Cutters, Fast Response Cutters, various aircraft, and small boats. While I enjoy seeing Coast Guard assets, I leave every visit struck by the professionalism of Coasties. I am sure that anyone who has a chance to interact with members of the Coast Guard feels the same.

Unfortunately, we are here today to talk about the small minority in the Coast Guard whose actions have affected morale, safety, recruitment, and retention in the Service. As a veteran, I know firsthand the importance of morale in the military. Those choosing to serve our country sacrifice so much, and they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. Perpetrators of sexual assault and sexual harassment, and the command leaders who permit those actions, must be held accountable. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on how the Coast Guard plans to do that.

It is unacceptable that the Coast Guard decided to hide Operation Fouled Anchor. Let me repeat that: hid Operation Fouled Anchor. This subcommittee conducts oversight of the Coast Guard, and we should have been told. I look forward to hearing today about the systems you put in place to ensure this never happens again, regardless of who is leading the Service.

More importantly though, those involved with burying the findings and recommendations are responsible for 5 years of inaction from the Service. I want to be clear: If the former leadership had treated this issue with the seriousness it deserves, the seriousness in which Admiral Fagan is addressing the issue, incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment would have been greatly prevented. Instead, the former leadership appears to have prioritized the reputation of the Coast Guard over the Coasties. That cannot happen again.

I would like to applaud the actions taken by Admiral Fagan since learning of Operation Fouled Anchor. The Directed Actions in the Accountability and Transparency Review are comprehensive and serve as a good starting point to effecting cultural change and eradicating this behavior from the Service.

I am, however, concerned that the Coast Guard is able and willing to make the long-term commitment necessary to effect real change. Leadership at the Coast Guard is constantly changing, so, future leaders must continue what Admiral Fagan has started.

I look forward to hearing from the GAO today on structural impediments in the Coast Guard. Implementation of reforms must be tracked, measured, and adjusted as necessary. Without the appropriate IT infrastructure, this will be difficult, and challenging, at best.

And that leads me to my last concern: funding. Many of the Directed Actions in the ATR [Accountability and Transparency Review] will require funding. Congress must provide the appropriate funding to ensure a shift in culture within the Coast Guard. Recruitment and retention and the success of every mission depends on it.

Mr. Chair, I yield back.

[Mr. Carbajal's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Salud O. Carbajal of California, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation

Thank you, Chair Webster, for calling today's hearing. The issues we're examining today are paramount to the success of the Coast Guard.

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While I enjoy seeing Coast Guard assets, I leave every visit struck by the professionalism of Coasties. I'm sure that anyone who has a chance to interact with members of the Coast Guard feels the same.

Unfortunately, we're here today to talk about the small minority in the Coast Guard whose actions have affected morale, safety, recruiting, and retention in the Service.

As a veteran, I know firsthand the importance of morale in the military. Those choosing to serve our country sacrifice so much and they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. Perpetrators of sexual assault and sexual harassment and the command leaders who permit those actions must be held accountable. I look forward to hearing from our witness today on how the Coast Guard plans to do that.

It is unacceptable that the Coast Guard decided to hide Operation Fouled Anchor. This Subcommittee conducts oversight of the Coast Guard, and we should have been told. I look forward to hearing today about the systems you've put in place to ensure this never happens again—regardless of who is leading the Service.

More importantly though, those involved with burying the findings and recommendations are responsible for five years of inaction from the Service. I want to be clear—if the former leadership had treated this issue with the seriousness it deserves, the seriousness in which Admiral Fagan is addressing the issue, incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment would have been prevented. Instead, the former leadership appears to have prioritized the reputation of the Coast Guard over Coasties. That cannot happen again.

I would like to applaud the actions taken by Admiral Fagan since learning of Operation Fouled Anchor. The directed actions in the Accountability and Transparency Review are comprehensive and serve as a good starting point to affecting culture change and eradicating this behavior from the service.

I am, however, concerned that the Coast Guard is able and willing to make the long-term commitment necessary to affect real change. Leadership at the Coast Guard is constantly changing so future leaders must continue what Admiral Fagan has started.

I look forward to hearing from the GAO today on structural impediments in the Coast Guard. Implementation of reforms must be tracked, measured, and adjusted as necessary. Without the appropriate IT infrastructure, this will be difficult.

And that leads me to my last concern—funding. Many of the directed actions in the ATR will require funding. Congress must provide the appropriate funding to en-

sure a shift in culture within the Coast Guard. Recruitment and retention and the success of every mission depend on it.

Thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. I now recognize the ranking member of the full committee, Mr. Larsen, for 5 minutes.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICK LARSEN OF WASHINGTON, RANKING MEMBER, COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Thank you, Chair Webster and Ranking Member Carbajal, for holding this hearing.

The decision by former Coast Guard leadership to conceal the existence of Operation Fouled Anchor hurt the Coast Guard, its reputation, and the Coasties serving our country. Former Coast Guard leadership chose not to inform Congress of Operation Fouled Anchor and then hid the findings and recommendations from the public and other Coasties. Had the findings and recommendations from OFA been acted upon in 2018, the Coast Guard could have already implemented meaningful reforms. Instead, these actions sowed distrust among its workforce.

So, we want to hear today from the Deputy Commandant on how the Service plans to rebuild trust and ensure its workforce is supported in the future. Culture change can create a more tolerant, accepting, and supportive workforce and one that is better prepared to complete its mission.

With an estimated shortage of roughly 4,800 members, the Coast Guard has both a moral and functional need to implement culture change so women and men want to join and stay in the Service.

While culture change is ultimately about changing the behavior of people, getting there is going to require significant resources.

For instance, the Coast Guard recently started an Integrated Primary Prevention Program to help prevent suicide, sexual assault, harassment, domestic abuse, and child abuse through community engagement, policy, programs, and improved practices. However, this Coast Guard program is staffed by 1 person, while the Department of Defense has over 1,000 staff for a similar program.

Ranking Member Carbajal and I sent a letter to the Appropriations Committee last month urging the inclusion of an additional \$21.8 million for the Integrated Primary Prevention Program in the final fiscal year 2024 funding bill. If included, that funding would enable the Coast Guard to immediately begin hiring new civilian employees.

In addition, the Service needs funding for improvements to human resources information technology, improvements to governance and oversight at the Academy, enhanced training and professional development for the workforce, and more robust and sustained support for victims.

While the Coast Guard deserves criticism and increased oversight for its handling of sexual assault and sexual harassment, I believe that under the leadership of Admiral Fagan, the Service is now on the right path. The Coast Guard, therefore, deserves the support of Congress in addressing this issue.

It is facing a budget shortfall that includes a \$3 billion shoreside infrastructure backlog and ballooning costs associated with the con-

struction of Polar Security Cutters. Especially when it comes to sexual assault and sexual harassment, we cannot ask the Coast Guard to do more with less.

The Coast Guard is a \$20 billion Service operating on a \$13 billion budget, and the women and men who serve in the Coast Guard deserve better. They deserve dorm rooms that are free of asbestos. They deserve access to affordable housing and childcare. They deserve workplaces and technology that assist, rather than hinder, their mission. And above all, they deserve a work environment free from sexual assault and harassment.

So, I hope my colleagues will join me in making the case for increased funding for the Coast Guard to address these and other issues.

Thank you, and I yield back.

[Mr. Larsen of Washington's prepared statement follows:]

**Prepared Statement of Hon. Rick Larsen of Washington, Ranking Member,
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure**

Thank you, Chairman Webster and Ranking Member Carbajal, for holding this hearing.

The decision by former Coast Guard leadership to conceal the existence of Operation Fouled Anchor (OFA) hurt the Coast Guard, its reputation, and the Coasties serving our country.

Former Coast Guard leadership chose not to inform Congress of OFA and then hid the findings and recommendations from the public and other Coasties. Had the findings and recommendations from OFA been acted upon in 2018, the Coast Guard could have already implemented meaningful reforms.

Instead, the Coast Guard's actions sowed distrust among its workforce. I want to hear today from the Deputy Commandant on how the Service plans to rebuild trust and ensure its workforce is supported in the future.

Culture change can create a more tolerant, accepting, and supportive workforce and one that is better prepared to complete its mission.

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The Coast Guard is a \$20 billion Service operating on a \$13 billion budget and those who serve in the Coast Guard deserve better.

They deserve dorm rooms that are free of asbestos. They deserve access to affordable housing and childcare. They deserve workplaces and technology that assist rather than hinder their mission.

And, above all, they deserve a work environment free from sexual assault and harassment.

I hope my colleagues will join me in making the case for increased funding for the Coast Guard to address these and other issues.

Thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. I want to thank and welcome our witnesses, and thank them for being here today. I appreciate that.

And I would like to take a moment to explain our lighting system. Green is go, yellow is slow up, and red, stop.

I ask unanimous consent that the witnesses' full testimonies and statements be included in the record.

Without objection, show that ordered.

I ask unanimous consent that the record of today's hearing remain open until such time as our witnesses have provided answers to any questions that may be submitted to them in writing.

Without objection, show that ordered.

I ask unanimous consent that the record remain open for 15 days for additional comments and information submitted by the Members or the witnesses to be included in the record of today's hearing.

Without objection, show that ordered.

As your written testimony has been made part of the record, the committee asks that you limit your time and remarks to 5 minutes.

With that, Vice Admiral Thomas, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

**TESTIMONY OF VICE ADMIRAL PAUL F. THOMAS, DEPUTY
COMMANDANT FOR MISSION SUPPORT, U.S. COAST GUARD;
AND HEATHER MACLEOD, DIRECTOR, HOMELAND SECURITY
AND JUSTICE, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE**

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

Admiral THOMAS. Good morning, Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. I truly appreciate this opportunity to testify today on these very important topics.

As you know, the Coast Guard helps to enable the Nation's economic prosperity, enforces our laws at sea, protects the maritime environment, and performs lifesaving missions that are vital to preserving America's maritime interests. To do this, we must employ the very best and brightest our Nation has to offer.

Implementation of the Accountability and Transparency Review recommendations and other initiatives the Commandant has directed are critically linked to our efforts to recruit and retain those who will perform Coast Guard missions in the 21st century. And as you have mentioned, over the last several months, the Service has responded to questions and concerns about the handling and findings of investigations of prior sexual misconduct at the Coast Guard Academy.

But over the course of the last two decades, we have taken lessons learned from those investigations to heart, and we have ag-

gressively increased the intensity of our focus on prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment, not just at the Academy, but across our Service.

That work continues. We are maturing policies on accountability, listening to and increasing support to survivors and victims, taking concrete actions towards strengthening the Service culture and commitment to our core values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty. From our senior leaders to our most junior recruits, everyone in our Service must be committed to focusing on fostering a culture where each member is valued, empowered, trusted, and supported.

Following the completion of the 90-day Accountability and Transparency Review, the Commandant directed over 30 actions intended to improve transparency, accountability, awareness, prevention, climate and culture, and victim support. And we are taking action now without delay. And while we have completed several of the Commandant's Directed Actions, we have made a long-term commitment to strengthening our culture.

Ongoing initiatives include working with Congress to identify and address gaps in Coast Guard authorities related to accountability; building an integrated prevention program; and creating a new enterprise victim advocate position, which is the first of its kind amongst the armed services. We believe these measures will be a strong step toward strengthening our Service culture and ensuring a work environment that is free of sexual assault, harassment, bullying, hazing, retaliation, and reprisal for all Coast Guard members always.

But we recognize this cannot be only a surge effort around the Commandant's Directed Actions. It cannot be one and done. We are committed to continuous improvement as an essential part of our culture. Let me assure you, we will sustain this effort. This work will help us better align our actions with our values, and better define who we are and what we stand for. And that work is necessary to attract, recruit, and retain today's talents.

Like many employers and all of our military services, we face fierce competition for talent. The Coast Guard is currently 10 percent below authorized strength within our enlisted workforce, and we anticipate that shortage may grow in 2024. Our workforce shortage has had an impact on our operations and our personnel. In response, we are taking decisive action to reduce operational risk and mitigate the burden shouldered by a frontline workforce. This summer, we are aligning the workforce to prioritize lifesaving missions, national security, and protection of the Marine Transportation System. And going forward, we will continue to evaluate force strength, mission demands, and staffing priorities.

And while we are currently cautiously optimistic about our fiscal year 2024 recruiting efforts, we must continue ongoing efforts to increase awareness of the Coast Guard's value to the Nation, the benefits of military service, and we must identify more candidates for recruitment. To this end and with your help, we are increasing resources aimed at building recruiting capacity and performance, generating more leads, and improving overall recruiting processes. We are also focused on reducing barriers to entry to our Service.

And while recruiting is critically important, retaining our workforce is equally so, and it requires similar focus. We have recently

seen our attrition numbers increase, which contributes to our workforce gaps. The Coast Guard has taken action to ensure our workforce policies, processes, and infrastructure provides better flexibility, transparency, predictability, and support to our members and their families. We simply must make it easier to serve for a full career.

I thank you for this opportunity to highlight workforce challenges and the strong linkage between strengthening Service culture and building a workforce for the future. I look forward to your questions.

[Vice Admiral Thomas' prepared statement follows:]

**Prepared Statement of Vice Admiral Paul F. Thomas, Deputy Commandant
for Mission Support, U.S. Coast Guard**

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 alle-

gations 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.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Ms. MacLeod, you are recognized for 5 minutes for your testimony.

TESTIMONY OF HEATHER MACLEOD, DIRECTOR, HOMELAND SECURITY AND JUSTICE, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Ms. MACLEOD. Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My testimony is based on our preliminary observations of the Coast Guard's recent efforts to implement actions associated with the Accountability and Transparency Review.

The issue of sexual assault and harassment in the Coast Guard is not new. Over the last two decades, Congress has taken steps to address these issues. For example, Congress has established numerous requirements to help DoD and the Coast Guard efforts for preventing and responding to incidents of sexual assault in the military. Congress passed a total of 249 statutory requirements directing DoD and the Coast Guard to address prevention and response to sexual assault incidents. More than 30 of these requirements applied to the Coast Guard.

For years, GAO has also made recommendations to military services to improve their sexual assault and harassment prevention and response efforts. Since 2014, we have made over 80 recommendations in this area. Most of these recommendations were specific to DoD, but they provide insights across military services. We plan to initiate a review specific to Coast Guard sexual assault prevention and response later this year.

The Coast Guard has taken some steps to address these issues. For example, between 2002 and 2023, the Coast Guard established 19 policies and initiatives, 10 trainings, and 6 victims services efforts intended to prevent, respond to, and support victims of sexual assault and harassment.

Despite these actions, the problems persist. In an internal investigation called Operation Fouled Anchor, the Coast Guard examined 102 separate allegations of sexual assault from 1990 to 2006 at the Coast Guard Academy. The investigation concluded that the Academy often mishandled these cases.

After media reporting on Operation Fouled Anchor in June 2023, the Commandant directed a 90-day review of policy processes, practices, and Service culture relevant to countering sexual assault and harassment in the Coast Guard. The resulting report identified areas for improvement across the Service to ensure a culture of accountability and transparency.

In November 2023, the Commandant directed the Coast Guard to implement 33 initial actions to address the findings of the review and to help ensure servicemembers have an experience free from sexual assault and harassment. As of February 2024, the Coast Guard has completed five actions. For example, officials told us that in December, the Coast Guard administered a survey across the Service on unit climate, harassment and discrimination, diversity and inclusion, and other aspects of organizational climate.

Swift implementation of defined actions is important, but it must be balanced with effective controls for ensuring the anticipated improvements to the culture of accountability and transparency is achieved. Even though it has already implemented certain actions, the Service has not developed a plan to evaluate its efforts. As a result, GAO is making a recommendation to the Coast Guard to develop a plan to evaluate the actions that the Service is taking to improve its culture of accountability and transparency. This will help ensure that the actions taken are achieving the intended outcomes.

We acknowledge that measuring the effectiveness of actions taken to improve Coast Guard culture may be difficult, but the Coast Guard already has resources, including regular employee surveys and contacts with experts in DoD, that could prove useful in this effort. The information would help the Coast Guard management understand the impact of these actions on servicemembers.

Taking these steps will help ensure the Service is improving its culture, which could assist in the recruitment and retention of its workforce. Given the challenges the Coast Guard faces with fully staffing its workforce, it is incumbent upon the Service to not only establish actions, but to ensure they are effective.

Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and members of the subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.
[Ms. MacLeod's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Heather MacLeod, Director, Homeland Security and Justice, U.S. Government Accountability Office

COAST GUARD: ACTION NEEDED TO EVALUATE EFFORTS TO ADDRESS SEXUAL ASSAULT AND HARASSMENT

HIGHLIGHTS

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard is a maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security that employs more than 55,000 personnel. Sexual assault and harassment have a negative effect on the victims, negatively affect retention, and disrupt mission readiness.

This statement discusses the Coast Guard's recent efforts to address sexual assault and harassment.

GAO analyzed Coast Guard documents, interviewed agency officials, and reviewed prior GAO reports on Department of Defense and Coast Guard efforts to prevent sexual assault and harassment. We also compared Coast Guard efforts to the Commandant instruction on internal controls as well as federal internal control standards.

What GAO Recommends

Previously, GAO has made four recommendations to the Coast Guard regarding implementation of laws pertaining to sexual assault. The Coast Guard has fully addressed one of them and GAO continues to monitor implementation.

In this statement, GAO recommends that the Coast Guard develop an evaluation plan and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of actions taken to help ensure service members have an experience free from sexual assault and harassment.

The Department of Homeland Security provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

What GAO Found

The Coast Guard has taken action to address sexual assault and harassment but has not developed a plan to assess its efforts. In a 2020 internal investigation called "Operation Fouled Anchor," the Coast Guard examined 102 separate allegations of sexual assault from 1990 to 2006 at the Coast Guard Academy and concluded that the academy often mishandled these cases. More recently, service members reported a total of 263 sexual harassment allegations between September 2020 through April 2023, according to Coast Guard data. After media reporting on Operation Fouled Anchor in June 2023, the Commandant directed a 90-day review of policy processes, practices, and service culture relevant to countering sexual assault and harassment in the Coast Guard. The resulting report identified areas for organizational improvement to ensure a culture of accountability and transparency. In November 2023, the Commandant directed the Coast Guard to implement 33 initial actions by certain dates to address the findings of the review and help ensure service members have an experience free from sexual assault and harassment [see figure 1]. The actions span six categories, including training, the academy, and information and data. According to Coast Guard officials, they have completed five actions as of February 2024.

The Commandant-directed actions include administering a Coast Guard-wide survey and analyzing survey results. However, the service has not developed an evaluation plan to assess the results of its 33 initial actions. According to Coast Guard officials, they have had discussions about assessing the results of the actions but have not developed plans or mechanisms to do so because measuring culture change is difficult. However, these officials identified certain resources, such as employee surveys and Department of Defense officials, that could prove useful in this effort.

Developing an evaluation plan and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of actions taken to improve its culture of accountability and transparency would better ensure that Coast Guard has the information it needs to evaluate whether the actions are helping service members have an experience free from sexual assault and

harassment. Further, taking these steps would help ensure the service is improving its culture, which could assist in the recruitment and retention of its workforce.

Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on the U.S. Coast Guard workforce and actions intended to prevent and respond to sexual assaults. Sexual assault is a heinous crime that can have lasting, harmful effects on victims. It contradicts the core values of the Coast Guard—a maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with more than 55,000 personnel.¹ Sexual assault and harassment also disrupt mission readiness.² Further, the Coast Guard’s workforce strategic plan, *Ready Workforce 2030*, states that attracting enough qualified young women and men to serve is one of the biggest challenges facing each of the U.S. military services today.³ As we have previously reported, a number of factors, including sexual assault and harassment, influence the Department of Defense’s (DOD) ability to retain active-duty personnel, a factor that Coast Guard officials have stated also influences their ability to retain personnel.⁴

The issue of sexual assault and harassment in the Coast Guard is not new, according to the Coast Guard.⁵ In a series of investigations called “Operation Fouled Anchor,” the Coast Guard Investigative Service examined 102 separate allegations of sexual assault that occurred between 1990 and 2006 at the Coast Guard Academy, according to a 2020 Coast Guard report.⁶ The investigations’ final report concluded that the academy often mishandled these cases and failed to take sufficient action to ensure a safe environment and instill a culture intolerant of any form of sexual misconduct. Further, in 2015, the Coast Guard conducted a gap analysis comparing the current and optimal state of Coast Guard culture and identified 41 gaps.⁷ At least 28 of these 41 gaps pertained to efforts to prevent or respond to sexual assault and harassment.

The Coast Guard and Congress took some steps to address these issues, but according to several published reports and Coast Guard data on this matter, the problems persist.⁸ Between 2002 and 2023, the Coast Guard established 19 policies and initiatives, 10 trainings, and six victims services efforts intended to prevent, respond to, and support victims of sexual assault and harassment, according to a Coast Guard report.⁹ Further, since the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2004, Congress has established numerous requirements to help DOD and Coast Guard efforts for preventing and responding to incidents of sexual assault in the military.¹⁰ However, sexual assault and harassment remains an ongoing

¹The Coast Guard’s core values are honor, respect, and devotion to duty.

²The Coast Guard defines sexual assault as sexual contact characterized by use of force, threats, intimidation, or abuse of authority when the victim does not or cannot consent. The term includes a broad category of sexual offenses consisting of rape, sexual assault, aggravated sexual contact, abusive sexual contact, forcible sodomy, or attempts to commit any of these offenses. The Coast Guard defines sexual harassment as harassment including, but not limited to, unwelcome verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct, intended to or effect unreasonable interference with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, offensive, or hostile environment based on a protected status. Sexual harassment is a form of prohibited harassment. See Coast Guard COMDTINST 1754.10F, *Sexual Assault Prevention, Response, and Recovery (SAPR) Program* (Apr. 2023) and COMDTINST 5350.6, *Harassing Behavior Prevention, Response, and Accountability* (Feb. 2023).

³U.S. Coast Guard, *Ready Workforce 2030* (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 2022).

⁴GAO, *Coast Guard: Recruitment and Retention Challenges Persist*, GAO–23–106750 (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2023).

⁵Coast Guard, *Accountability and Transparency Review Team Report*, (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2023).

⁶Coast Guard, “*Fouled Anchor*” *Investigation—Final Report*, Memo of 31 Jan 2020. The Coast Guard Academy typically has about 1,000 cadets enrolled.

⁷Coast Guard, *Culture of Respect (COR) Integrated Process Team (IPT): Phase I Report*, (Yorktown, VA: Apr. 2015).

⁸Reports including K. Hall, K. Keller, D. Schulker, S. Weiland, K. Kidder, N. Lim, *Improving Gender Diversity in the U.S. Coast Guard: Identifying Barriers to Female Retention*, (Mar. 29, 2019). Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center operated by the RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2770.html.

⁹Coast Guard, *Commandant’s Directed Actions—Accountability and Transparency*, Memo of 27 Nov 2023.

¹⁰Congress passed a total of 249 statutory requirements directing, in part, DOD and the Coast Guard to address prevention of and response to sexual assault incidents, about 34 of which applied to the U.S. Coast Guard, and most remained in force as of March 2022. See GAO, *Sexual Assault: DOD and Coast Guard Should Ensure Laws Are Implemented to Improve Over-*

issue. According to Coast Guard Anti-Harassment & Hate Incident data, from fiscal year 2020 through April 2023, Coast Guard service members reported a total of 263 alleged incidents of sexual harassment, of which 164 (62 percent) were substantiated.¹¹

My statement today focuses on the Coast Guard’s recent efforts to address sexual assault and harassment in the service. We analyzed Coast Guard documentation of efforts to prevent sexual assault and harassment in the service since June 2023—when the media first reported on Operation Fouled Anchor and the Coast Guard began taking actions to respond.¹² In addition, we interviewed Coast Guard officials responsible for overseeing implementation of these efforts. We compared Coast Guard efforts to the Commandant instruction on internal controls, as well as federal internal control standards for performing monitoring activities.¹³ We also considered selected GAO and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) leading practices concerning evidence-based policymaking and evaluation planning.

We also reviewed our prior work since 2014 on DOD and the Coast Guard’s efforts to prevent sexual assault and harassment and the extent to which the military services incorporated internal controls into those efforts.¹⁴ For these eight reports, we reviewed laws and DOD and Coast Guard documents and interviewed agency officials. Detailed information on the objectives, scope, and methodology for our work can be found in the issued reports listed in Related GAO Products at the conclusion of this statement.

We made 81 recommendations to DOD and the Coast Guard in these reports, including that DOD and the Coast Guard establish mechanisms to track and to document that relevant sexual assault laws are implemented.¹⁵ DOD and the Coast Guard generally concurred with the recommendations. As of February 2024, DOD and the Coast Guard had taken actions to fully implement 22 of these 81 recommendations, and 59 remain unaddressed. We continue to monitor the agencies’ progress in implementing them.

The work upon which this statement is based was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

COAST GUARD HAS NOT ESTABLISHED A PLAN TO EVALUATE RECENT EFFORTS TO ADDRESS SEXUAL ASSAULT AND HARASSMENT

The Coast Guard has taken action to address sexual assault and harassment, but the service has not developed a plan to assess its efforts. After media reporting on Operation Fouled Anchor in June 2023,¹⁶ the Commandant directed a 90-day Accountability and Transparency Review of current law, policy processes, practices, resources, and service culture relevant to countering sexual assault and harassment

sight of Key Prevention and Response Efforts, GAO–22–103973 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 2022).

¹¹Anti-Harassment & Hate Incident complaints can be based on a single event of harassment or hate. The goal of the complaint process is to stop the behavior before it becomes severe or pervasive and to improve overall workplace climate. Coast Guard complaint processes are outlined in the *U.S. Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual*.

¹²Coast Guard, *Accountability and Transparency Review Team Report* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2023) and Coast Guard, *Commandant’s Directed Actions—Accountability and Transparency*, Memorandum of 27 Nov 2023.

¹³Coast Guard Commandant Instruction 5200.10A (Nov. 2022). GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO–14–704G (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

¹⁴We chose 2014 because it aligns with the most recent update of *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.

¹⁵Of the 81 recommendations across the eight GAO reports, 77 were to DOD and four were to the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard has fully addressed one of the four recommendations. Specifically, the Coast Guard addressed our recommendation in GAO–22–103973 that it establish an oversight structure to consistently track the implementation of ongoing and future statutory requirements related to sexual assault prevention and response. Coast Guard officials told us that they are working to address our recommendations pertaining to policies on allowing victims to transfer units, training, and publishing required quarterly reports. On February 29, 2024, the Coast Guard provided us with updates on its efforts to address these recommendations, which we are reviewing. We continue to monitor their implementation.

¹⁶B. Ellis, M. Hicken, and A. Ash, “Criminal investigation into Coast Guard Academy revealed years of sexual assault cover-ups, but findings were kept secret,” *CNN Politics* (June 30, 2023).

in the Coast Guard. The resulting report identified areas for Coast Guard-wide organizational improvement to ensure a culture of accountability and transparency.¹⁷

According to a November 2023 memorandum from the Commandant, the Accountability and Transparency Review report made clear that change is necessary.¹⁸ To address the issues identified in the report, the Commandant directed implementation of 33 initial actions across six categories. These actions included specific timeframes to help ensure service members have an experience aligned with the Coast Guard's core values and that is free from assault, harassment, and other negative interactions. The six categories include *'workforce training, culture, and professional development,'* *'Coast Guard Academy,'* and *'information, data, and transparency.'*¹⁹ Each category is supported by a number of actions. For example, under the category *Workforce Training, Culture, and Professional Development*, there are eight related actions. These include holding a senior executive summit and developing new in-person and online training courses. Appendix I provides additional information on the Commandant's directed actions in support of the accountability and transparency review.

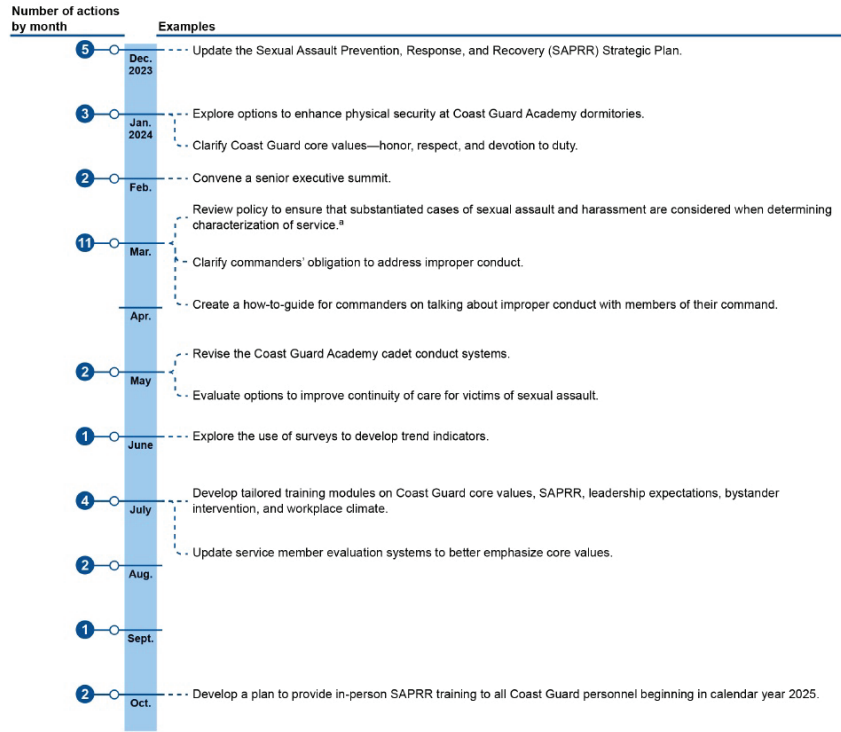
In December 2023, the Coast Guard began implementing the 33 initial actions as directed by the Commandant, an important first step. As shown in figure 1, the Coast Guard's planned timelines for the actions range from December 2023 (to, for example, conduct a senior leadership engagement conference) to October 2024 (to, for example, develop a plan to provide in-person sexual assault prevention training by 2025). Each action has a deadline with identified results, such as convene a summit or brief the Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard. Of the 33 initial actions, the expected results of 29 actions are briefings to the Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard (see appendix I for more details). According to Coast Guard officials, they plan to take subsequent actions after these briefings, as appropriate.

¹⁷ Coast Guard, *Accountability and Transparency Review Team Report* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2023).

¹⁸ Coast Guard, *Commandant's Directed Actions—Accountability and Transparency*, Memo of 27 Nov 2023.

¹⁹ The remaining three categories are: integrated primary prevention program; core values; and accountability.

Figure 1: Number of Coast Guard Planned Actions Each Month to Respond to Sexual Assault and Harassment and Selected Examples



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard documents. | GAO-24-107388

^a The characterization of service is the process to determine the type of discharge and characterization of service a service member receives when separating from the Coast Guard. There are three types of discharge and characterization of service: (1) an honorable discharge (characterization of service as honorable), (2) a general discharge (characterization of service as under honorable conditions), or (3) a discharge under other than honorable conditions (characterization of service as under other than honorable conditions).

As of February 2024, the Coast Guard had completed five actions, according to Coast Guard officials. For example, in December 2023, the Coast Guard administered a service-wide survey on unit climate, harassment and discrimination, diversity and inclusion, and other aspects of organizational climate, according to Coast Guard officials. These officials also stated that the service held a senior executive Accountability and Transparency Report leadership summit in February 2024.

Swift implementation of defined actions is important, but it must be balanced with effective controls for ensuring the anticipated improvements to the culture of accountability and transparency are achieved. The Coast Guard has not developed a performance plan to assess the results of its 33 actions in response to the Accountability and Transparency Report, even though it has already implemented certain actions. The Commandant-directed actions include administering a Coast Guard-wide climate survey, as discussed above, and analyzing the results of the survey. However, the Commandant memorandum directing the actions did not include any direction to develop a plan to assess the results to ensure the actions are helping to meet the Coast Guard's goals. Coast Guard officials stated that they are partnering with DOD to understand unit, regional, and service-wide issues, concerns, and trends but have not yet determined how they will evaluate the effectiveness of efforts to improve service members' experiences.

According to the Coast Guard's Commandant instruction on internal controls, plans are to be developed to assess control performance and evaluate results in the

planning stage.²⁰ In addition, federal internal control standards highlight the importance of developing plans to monitor the performance of agencies' actions and evaluating the results.²¹

Further, according to leading practices concerning evidence-based policymaking and program evaluation planning, agencies should establish evaluation plans.²² These same leading practices state that an evaluation or program evaluation is an assessment using systematic data collection and analysis of one or more programs, policies, and organizations intended to assess their effectiveness and efficiency. In addition, GAO leading practices concerning program evaluations define effectiveness as the extent to which a program or intervention is achieving its intended goals, as determined by a program evaluation.²³ Leading practices concerning evidence-based policymaking and program evaluation planning also highlight that there are different types of evaluations.²⁴ For example, an OMB memorandum related to program evaluation planning states that outcome evaluations are best suited for helping an agency understand the extent to which a program, policy, or organization has achieved its intended outcome(s) and focuses on outputs and outcomes to assess effectiveness.²⁵

According to GAO leading practices, program evaluation and performance measurement are distinct but complementary. Performance measurement can tell an agency how a program is performing.²⁶ It concerns the ongoing monitoring and reporting of a program's (or strategy's) accomplishments and progress toward preestablished goals.²⁷

Coast Guard officials stated that they have had discussions about evaluating the results of the 33 actions but have not developed plans or mechanisms to do so. The officials explained that measuring culture change is difficult. However, these officials identified certain resources, such as regular employee surveys, that could prove useful in this effort.

Coast Guard officials also told us that they have begun conversations with relevant stakeholders, including experts in DOD, on how to better utilize survey information to measure the effectiveness of actions taken to improve the Coast Guard's culture of accountability and transparency. However, according to these officials, it is not clear if or when the Coast Guard will develop an evaluation plan and mechanisms for using survey information to assess the effectiveness of its actions.

Evaluating progress is also important for recruitment and retention. Media reports and Congress have raised concerns that the conclusions of Operation Fouled Anchor could negatively affect recruitment.²⁸ In fiscal year 2023, the Coast Guard had a shortfall of 3,500 service members and had missed recruiting goals in recent years. I testified before this committee in May 2023 that the service's recruitment and retention challenges persist.²⁹ Further, Coast Guard participants in a 2019 RAND study raised sexual assault and harassment as concerns that influence retention of female service members.³⁰ Given the challenges the Coast Guard faces with recruitment and retention and fully staffing its workforce, it is incumbent upon the

²⁰ Coast Guard Commandant Instruction 5200.10A: *Management's Responsibility for Internal Controls and Reporting Requirements* (Nov. 2022).

²¹ GAO-14-704G.

²² GAO, *Program Evaluation: Key Terms and Concepts*, GAO-21-404SP (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 22, 2021); OMB Memorandum No. M-19-23, *Phase 1 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Learning Agendas, Personnel, and Planning Guidance* (July 10, 2019); and OMB Memorandum No. M-20-12, *Phase 4 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Program Evaluation Standards and Practices* (Mar. 10, 2020). OMB Memorandum No. M-19-23 instructs federal agencies on how to implement the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policy Making Act of 2018. Pub. L. No. 115-435 (2019), 132 Stat. 5529, which mandated that federal agencies create certain plans and other products on a recurring basis, including evaluation plans. While not necessarily controlling for evaluation plans like the one under discussion here, the memorandum includes best practices for agencies to follow when practicing evidence-based policymaking.

²³ GAO-21-404SP.

²⁴ GAO-21-404SP; and OMB Memorandum No. M-20-12 (Mar. 10, 2020).

²⁵ OMB Memorandum No. M-20-12 (Mar. 10, 2020).

²⁶ GAO-21-404SP.

²⁷ GAO-21-404SP; and OMB Memorandum No. M-19-23 (July 10, 2019).

²⁸ See, for example, The Maritime Executive, *Combatting Sexual Assault in the Coast Guard: A Decade of Reflection* (Feb. 4, 2024).

²⁹ GAO-23-106750.

³⁰ K. Hall, K. Keller, D. Schulker, S. Weiland, K. Kidder, N. Lim, *Improving Gender Diversity in the U.S. Coast Guard: Identifying Barriers to Female Retention*, (Mar. 29, 2019). Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center operated by the RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2770.html.

service to not only establish actions, but to ensure they are effective by assessing progress toward its goal to improve transparency and accountability.

We acknowledge that measuring the effectiveness of actions taken to improve Coast Guard culture may be difficult. However, developing an evaluation plan and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of actions taken to improve its culture of accountability and transparency would better ensure that Coast Guard leadership has the information it needs to evaluate whether these actions are helping service members have an experience aligned with the Coast Guard’s core values and which is free from assault, harassment, and other harmful behaviors. Further, taking these steps would help ensure the service is improving its culture, which could assist in the recruitment and retention of its workforce.

More broadly, concerns about the military services’ implementation of effective controls to prevent and respond to sexual assault and harassment is long standing. Our reports since 2014 have identified DOD and Coast Guard internal controls deficiencies in this area (see figure 2).³¹

Figure 2: Internal Control Principles and Deficiencies Identified in GAO Reports since 2014 on Department of Defense and Coast Guard Efforts to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Assault and Harassment

<p>Control Environment</p> <p>The oversight body and management should demonstrate a commitment to integrity and ethical values.</p> <p>The oversight body should oversee the entity’s internal control system.</p> <p>Management should establish an organizational structure, assign responsibility, and delegate authority to achieve the entity’s objectives.</p> <p>Management should demonstrate a commitment to recruit, develop, and retain competent individuals.</p> <p>Monitoring</p> <p>Management should establish and operate monitoring activities to monitor the internal control system and evaluate the results.</p>	<p>Control Activities</p> <p>Management should design control activities to achieve objectives and respond to risks.</p> <p>Management should implement control activities through policies.</p> <p>Information and Communication</p> <p>Management should use quality information to achieve the entity’s objectives.</p> <p>Management should internally communicate the necessary quality information to achieve the entity’s objectives.</p>
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Source: GAO analysis of prior GAO reports. | GAO-24-107388

Note: The reports we assessed were GAO–23–105381, GAO–22–104673, GAO–22–103973, GAO–21–113, GAO–19–109, GAO–18–33, GAO–17–217, and GAO–15–284.

As shown in figure 2 above, assessing the effectiveness of sexual assault and harassment prevention and response efforts, which pertains to “monitoring” internal controls, has been a long standing deficiency across military services. For example:

- In August 2008, we found that DOD and the Coast Guard had not developed an oversight framework for their sexual assault prevention and response programs that included clear objectives, milestones, performance measures, and criteria for measuring progress.³²
- In March 2022, we found that DOD did not fully implement statutory requirements that directed DOD to assess the effectiveness of its sexual assault prevention and response programs, as it did not establish and implement an evaluation plan and standards for conducting evaluations.³³
- In May 2022, we found that the Army had not developed and implemented a continuous evaluation plan to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of its Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention program.³⁴

³¹ See, for example GAO–22–103973. See Related GAO Products, which references our prior work, at the conclusion of this statement.

³² We recommended that the DOD and the Coast Guard develop an oversight framework for their sexual assault prevention and response programs. While the Coast Guard developed such a framework, DOD did not. See GAO, *Military Personnel: DOD’s and the Coast Guard’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs Face Implementation and Oversight Challenges*, GAO–08–924 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 29, 2008).

³³ We recommended that DOD establish an evaluation plan. As of May 2023, the department stated this recommendation has a future estimated date of completion but did not provide the estimated date. See GAO–22–103973.

³⁴ We recommended that the Army develop and implement a continuous evaluation plan. See GAO, *Sexual Harassment and Assault: The Army Should Take Steps to Enhance Program Oversight, Evaluate Effectiveness, and Identify Reporting Barriers*, GAO–22–104673 (Washington, D.C.: May 27, 2022). As of January 2024, the Army continues its work to develop metrics related

Continued

Federal internal control standards call for entities to continually seek ways to improve accountability in achieving their mission.³⁵ In addition, as discussed above, developing an evaluation plan is key to accomplishing desired goals. As such, it is important that the Coast Guard develop an evaluation plan and mechanisms for assessing the results of its 33 initial accountability and transparency actions directed by the Commandant.³⁶

CONCLUSIONS

The Coast Guard's core values are honor, respect, and devotion to duty. However, there has been a disconnect between the workplace experience these values espouse and the service's long-standing challenges preventing and responding to sexual assault and harassment. Following media reports on Operation Fouled Anchor, the Coast Guard began implementing 33 initial actions to improve accountability and transparency in an effort to better prevent and respond to sexual assault and harassment. However, the service has not developed a plan to evaluate its efforts because measuring culture change is difficult, according to Coast Guard officials. But these officials identified certain resources, such as regularly administered employee surveys and DOD officials, that could prove useful in this effort. Developing an evaluation plan and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of actions taken to improve its culture of accountability and transparency would better ensure that Coast Guard management has the information it needs to evaluate whether its actions are helping to ensure service members have an experience aligned with the Coast Guard's core values and free from assault, harassment and other harmful behaviors and may assist in recruitment and retention efforts.

RECOMMENDATION FOR EXECUTIVE ACTION

The Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard should develop an evaluation plan with mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of actions taken to help ensure service members have an experience aligned with Coast Guard's core values and free from sexual assault and harassment. (Recommendation 1)

AGENCY COMMENTS

We requested comments on the contents of this statement, including our recommendation, from DHS. DHS provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

APPENDIX I: COAST GUARD COMMANDANT'S DIRECTED ACTIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY REVIEW

The issue of sexual assault and harassment in the Coast Guard is not new, according to the Coast Guard.¹ In a series of investigations called "Operation Fouled Anchor," the Coast Guard Investigative Service reported examining 102 separate allegations of sexual assault that occurred between 1990 and 2006 at the Coast Guard Academy, according to a 2020 Coast Guard report.² The investigations' final report concluded that the academy often mishandled these cases and failed to take sufficient action to ensure a safe environment and instill a culture intolerant of any form of sexual misconduct. In 2015, the Coast Guard conducted a gap analysis comparing the current and optimal state of Coast Guard culture and identified 41 gaps. At least 28 of these 41 gaps pertained to efforts to prevent or respond to sexual assault and harassment.

After media reporting on Operation Fouled Anchor in June 2023, the Commandant directed a 90-day Accountability and Transparency Review of policy processes, practices, and service culture relevant to countering sexual assault and harassment in the Coast Guard. The report from this effort focused on Coast Guard-wide actions and incorporated feedback from listening sessions held across the serv-

to sexual harassment and sexual assault as part of readiness tracking and reporting. They plan to implement this by 2028.

³⁵ GAO-14-704G.

³⁶ Coast Guard Commandant Instruction 5200.10A: *Management's Responsibility for Internal Controls and Reporting Requirements* (Nov. 2022).

¹ Coast Guard, *Accountability and Transparency Review Team Report*, (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2023).

² Coast Guard, *"Fouled Anchor" Investigation—Final Report*, (Jan. 2020).

ice along with anonymous comments submitted to the Accountability and Transparency Review team providing suggestions and recommendations. In November 2023, the Commandant of the Coast Guard issued a memorandum directing the implementation of 33 actions to address the issues identified in the Accountability and Transparency Review Team Report. The directed actions were divided into six categories: (1) workforce training, culture, and professional development; (2) Integrated Primary Prevention Program; (3) core values; (4) accountability; (5) Coast Guard Academy; and (6) information, data, and transparency.

WORKFORCE TRAINING, CULTURE, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DIRECTED ACTIONS

The workforce, training, culture, and professional development directed actions are intended to provide tailored training to personnel to better act on the Coast Guard's core values, understand organizational expectations, and cultivate a positive workplace climate. Table 1 describes the eight directed actions for this category.

Table 1: Workforce Training, Culture, and Professional Development Directed Actions, Results, and Due Dates

Action	Action description	Result of action	Due date
Senior Executive summit.	Convene a Senior Executive summit to review critical actions and hold in-person bystander intervention training.	Convene Summit	February 2024.
Preparatory course for new recruits.	Establish a Coast Guard enlisted service preparatory course to immediately follow new recruit training and serve as a continuation of acculturation and acclimation while providing fundamental followership/leadership training.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.
Workforce in-person training modules.	Develop tailored training modules on Coast Guard core values, Sexual Assault Prevention Response and Recovery (SAPRR), leadership expectations, bystander intervention training, and workplace climate. These modules should be incorporated into existing Coast Guard leadership courses.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	July 1, 2024.
Develop more effective career leadership courses.	Identify and develop phased options, including resources needed, to provide Coast Guard members with additional leadership courses across their careers.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	August 1, 2024.
Senior leader engagement.	Incorporate a robust leadership discussion, including case studies surrounding leadership/climate, into all 2024 Commanding Officer conferences.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	December 31, 2023.
Bystander intervention training.	Develop a plan to expand in-person bystander intervention training for all Coast Guard personnel beginning in calendar year 2025.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	October 1, 2024.
In-person SAPRR training.	Develop a plan to provide in-person SAPRR training to all Coast Guard personnel beginning in calendar year 2025.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	October 1, 2024.

Table 1: Workforce Training, Culture, and Professional Development Directed Actions, Results, and Due Dates—Continued

Action	Action description	Result of action	Due date
Online mandated training.	Separate SAPRR training from Resiliency Training to reestablish a stand-alone SAPRR module in the Coast Guard’s online Mandated Training.	Implementation of Action.	December 1, 2023.

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard documentation. GAO–24–107388

INTEGRATED PRIMARY PREVENTION PROGRAM

The Integrated Primary Prevention Program directed actions are intended to create a Coast Guard Integrated Primary Prevention Program modeled after the Department of Defense program.³ The directed actions memo states that scaled implementation should begin immediately. Table 2 describes the four directed actions for this category.

Table 2: Integrated Primary Prevention Program Directed Actions, Results, and Due Dates

Action	Action description	Result of action	Due date
Workforce Resiliency Organizational Structure.	Examine Coast Guard Headquarters program offices for opportunities to modernize organization, ensure continuity, and optimally align capabilities.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.
Victim Recovery	Identify and evaluate options to improve coordination and continuity of care for victims of sexual assault.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	May 1, 2024.
Victim Mentor ..	Utilizing the existing Coast Guard Mentorship program, develop a process by which victims of sexual assault and harassment can request to be paired with a mentor who has demonstrated requisite knowledge of Coast Guard Sexual Assault Prevention, Response, and Recovery (SAPRR) policies and procedures, and who can advise on available resources for recovery, continued service, etc.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	September 1, 2024.
SAPRR Strategic Plan.	Publish an updated SAPRR Strategic Plan	Published updated SAPRR Strategic Plan.	December 31, 2023.

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard documentation. GAO–24–107388

CORE VALUES

The core values directed actions are intended to reemphasize the Coast Guard’s core values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty and better incorporate them into enterprise communications, training, command philosophy statements, and officer and enlisted evaluations. Table 3 describes the four directed actions for this category.

³ Integrated Primary Prevention is a holistic approach for primary prevention of self-directed harm and prohibited abusive or harmful acts. See DOD Instruction 6400.11, *DOD Integrated Primary Prevention Policy for Prevention Workforce and Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 20, 2022).

Table 3: Core Values Directed Actions, Results, and Due Dates

Action	Action description	Result of action	Due date
Core values	Expand the core values definitions so they are clear and less likely to be subject to individual interpretation. Set up a process to ensure that all workforce messaging reinforces the service's core values.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	January 31, 2024.
Enlisted performance qualifications.	Review and update enlisted service member performance qualifications to include more robust discussion/training on core values.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	February 15, 2024.
Officer evaluation system.	Update the officer evaluation system to better emphasize core values.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	July 15, 2024.
Enlisted evaluation system.	Update the enlisted evaluation system to better emphasize core values.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	July 15, 2024.

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard documentation. GAO-24-107388

ACCOUNTABILITY DIRECTED ACTIONS

The accountability directed actions are intended to develop policies and proposals to improve accountability within the Coast Guard. The memo notes that the accountability directed actions will not address historical cases. Table 4 describes the five directed actions in this category.

Table 4: Accountability Directed Actions, Results, and Due Dates

Action	Action description	Result of action	Due date
Highest grade held.	Examine whether policy should be updated to more effectively implement the authority found in 14 U.S. Code § 2501, grade on retirement. Review should specifically address whether the criteria is clear for determining unsatisfactory performance, addressing misconduct in a lower grade, and reopening determinations for retired officers.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.
Characterization of service.	Review policy and procedures to ensure that substantiated cases of sexual assault and harassment are appropriately taken into account when determining characterization of service upon discharge for both officers and enlisted members.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.
Enhancing rights of crime victims.	Develop policy to implement a "Safe-to-Report" framework that addresses certain minor misconduct if that misconduct is collateral to a sexual assault.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.
Enhancing rights of crime victims.	Develop policy to allow a victim of sexual assault the right to be present and the right to be heard at an administrative separation proceeding where conduct related to the sexual assault is a basis for separation.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.

Table 4: Accountability Directed Actions, Results, and Due Dates—Continued

Action	Action description	Result of action	Due date
Addressing improper conduct.	Clarify in policy the obligation of commanders to take action to address improper conduct that falls short of our core values even if it fails to establish the elements of sexual harassment, sexual assault, or other violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and clarify tools available to the commander to do so.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard documentation. GAO–24–107388

COAST GUARD ACADEMY DIRECTED ACTIONS

The Coast Guard Academy directed actions are intended to improve accountability at the Coast Guard Academy. Table 5 describes the seven directed actions in this category.

Table 5: Coast Guard Academy Directed Actions, Results, and Due Dates

Action	Action description	Result of action	Due date
Academy reporting structure.	Make the Coast Guard Academy Superintendent a direct report to the Vice Commandant.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	December 31, 2023.
Academy Board of Visitors and Board of Trustees.	Examine roles, responsibilities, and membership of the Board of Visitors and Board of Trustees to invigorate diverse oversight of the Coast Guard Academy. Recommend improvements and associated resources to strengthen and enhance the Board of Trustees, including changes to oversight, advisory functions, and authorities.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 31, 2024.
Cadet swab summer.	Improve the cadet summer training program and increase the supervision of cadet leadership.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.
Cadet oversight	Increase oversight of the corps of cadets and identify the resources required for these improvements.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.
Cadet conduct system.	Revise the cadet conduct system for implementation in the 2024–2025 academic year, including improving overall transparency and transparency regarding retention criteria.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	May 1, 2024.
Victim support	Explore courses of action to provide expedited transfer options to allow a cadet victim access to the officer ranks. Identify any potential gaps in existing authorities to inform future legislative efforts.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	July 1, 2024.
Physical security in Chase Hall.	Immediately explore options to enhance physical security throughout Chase Hall including, but not limited to, upgrading locks on cadet barracks rooms.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	January 1, 2024.

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard documentation. GAO–24–107388

INFORMATION, DATA, AND TRANSPARENCY DIRECTED ACTIONS

The information, data, and transparency directed actions are intended to improve and centralize information available to personnel: identify options to improve human resources data collection; and complete service-wide command climate surveys to improve accountability and transparency. Table 6 describes the five directed actions in this category.

Table 6: Information, Data, and Transparency Directed Actions, Results, and Due Dates

Action	Action description	Result of action	Due date
Coast Guard-wide climate survey.	Coast Guard units, directorates, and offices with at least 16 members must complete a Defense Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS) by January 31, 2024. Units that initiated a DEOCS after August 1, 2023 and completed or expect to complete the survey before January 31, 2024, do not need to initiate a new survey.	Deputy Commandant of Mission Support release to all Coast Guard with amplifying information.	December 15, 2023.
Survey analysis and trend development.	Explore the use of surveys (including DEOCS) and environmental and location data to develop climate trend indicators. Recommend resources and processes for commands to receive assistance in interpreting and addressing climate.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	June 1, 2024.
Direct access ...	Identify immediate investments to improve the functionality of Direct Access—a key component in the Coast Guard’s personnel and pay system—to enhance accountability and transparency across the enterprise, particularly with regards to personnel analytics and force management.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	January 31, 2024.
Command transparency toolkit.	Create a tool kit to guide commands in how and when to talk about SAPRR/climate incidents with members of their command.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	March 1, 2024.
Resources hub	Develop a Resources Hub for the entire workforce to have ready access to information regarding awareness, prevention, accountability, victim support, and recovery. The Resources Hub should also include resiliency resources.	Briefing to Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.	August 1, 2024.

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard documentation. GAO–24–107388

RELATED GAO PRODUCTS

Unwanted Sexual Behavior: Improved Guidance, Access to Care, and Training Needed to Better Address Victims’ Behavioral Health Needs, GAO–23–105381 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2, 2023)

Sexual Harassment and Assault: The Army Should Take Steps to Enhance Program Oversight, Evaluate Effectiveness, and Identify Reporting Barriers, GAO–22–104673 (Washington, D.C.: May 27, 2022).

Sexual Assault: DOD and Coast Guard Should Ensure Laws Are Implemented to Improve Oversight of Key Prevention and Response Efforts, GAO–22–103973 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 2022).

Sexual Harassment and Assault: Guidance Needed to Ensure Consistent Tracking, Response, and Training for DOD Civilians, GAO–21–113 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 09, 2021).

National Guard: Office of Complex Investigations Should Update Policies to Require Additional Documentation for Sexual Assault Cases, GAO-19-109 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 12, 2018).

Sexual Violence: Actions Needed to Improve DOD's Efforts to Address the Continuum of Unwanted Sexual Behaviors, GAO-18-33 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 18, 2017).

Sexual Assault: Better Resource Management Needed to Improve Prevention and Response in the Army National Guard and Army Reserve, GAO-17-217 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2017).

Military Personnel: Actions Needed to Address Sexual Assaults of Male Servicemembers, GAO-15-284 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 19, 2015).

Military Personnel: DOD's and the Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs Face Implementation and Oversight Challenges, GAO-08-924 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 29, 2008).

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Thank you so much for your presentation, both of you. And so, it's time for questions. I recognize myself for 5 minutes to start off the questions. And Vice Admiral Thomas, I will begin with you.

First of all, have you ever considered or are you considering being like the rest of the military's service schools in that they require a congressional appointment in order to be admitted into the Academy?

Admiral THOMAS. Thank you for the question, Congressman. That is a topic that comes up periodically. We have looked at it. The fact of the matter is that our class size is so small that we couldn't have a nominee from every Congressman and Senator. But also, what we found is the most diverse academy in our Nation is the one that doesn't have congressional appointments. That is the Coast Guard Academy. And so, that issue has been studied several times, and we feel like we have got the right mix right now.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. So, I introduced, along with Ranking Member Carbajal, Chairman Graves, and ranking member of the full committee, Mr. Larsen, a bill called the Coast Guard Accountability and Transparency Act. And I don't know if you are familiar with that yet, but having their support and the support of, I guess they call it the Big Four, would be part—just to—how to implement the Commandant's Directed Actions and require metrics to track that effectiveness.

As has been said before, to date, 5 of the 33 actions have been completed. What is the timeline to complete the rest of these actions, and how will you measure the effectiveness of those actions?

Admiral THOMAS. Thank you, Congressman. I am familiar with the bill. We appreciate the committee's work on that bill and the opportunity to help contribute to it.

So, the 33 Directed Actions are really just the beginning. Five of those are complete. About nine will be complete in a matter of weeks. Fourteen are going to take about 6 months to 1 year, and then the remaining five would require a lot of investment, so, they will take longer.

The bill that you mentioned requires us to report back to this committee on the progress on the Directed Actions. We welcome that and look forward to it.

The bill does a number of other things that we have asked for, as well, and so, we appreciate that, particularly with regard to

transfer of cadets who are victims and professionalization of our prosecutors.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. So, Vice Admiral, the infrastructure at Cape May and the Academy is literally crumbling. And what impact, if any, does the dated barracks facilities at the Academy on which the Coast Guard's ability to attract applicants—does it make it harder to attract applicants?

Admiral THOMAS. I am sorry, sir, I couldn't hear you.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. I am sorry. The infrastructure at the Academy, because it is dilapidated in some cases, does that hinder your attraction of new—

Admiral THOMAS [interrupting]. Absolutely. We need to modernize both our Coast Guard Academy and our boot camp. We want to continue to attract the best and brightest, and when people come to visit the Academy, particularly compared to West Point and Annapolis, our facilities don't match up. So, we definitely need to invest there.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Ms. MacLeod, why is it important to develop a performance plan to assess the Coast Guard's actions in response to Operation Fouled Anchor?

And what are some of the ways the Coast Guard can effectively measure the effectiveness of the Commandant's Directed Actions?

Ms. MACLEOD. Yes. I mean, it's really important to have the actions, and that's a great first step for the Coast Guard. But to ensure that these actions are having the intended impact is also an equally important step.

And I think that, through our discussions with the Coast Guard, there are resources such as employee surveys, their communication with experts over at DoD. There are ways to measure the impact of these actions. Employee surveys is just one example of a tool that could be used to do this.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Thank you very much.

My time is expired so, Mr. Carbajal, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Admiral Thomas, since the period covered under OFA, the Coast Guard has changed laws, policies, and procedures to better protect its membership.

I also believe that the Directed Actions in the ATR put the Service on the right path moving forward. Where the Coast Guard continues to struggle, though, is trust. What are you doing to regain the trust of servicemembers and prospective servicemembers?

Admiral THOMAS. Thank you, Congressman, and thank you for all the visits that you make to Coast Guard units around the Service.

We are focused on restoring trust. We have lost trust with this committee. We have lost trust with the American public and with our workforce. The effort that we have—and will be a sustained effort—is different than what we have done in the past in three important ways.

The first one is that we are focused on more than just sexual assault and sexual harassment because most Coasties, as you mentioned, don't engage in those activities, and so, if you focus on that, they check out. But we have to focus on our core value of respect,

and respect across the full spectrum of behavior. So, we are focusing on behaviors to the left of sexual assault.

The second way that it's different is, we can't do this from top down like we have tried before. Our culture needs to be owned by our most junior people, and we will get after it through the mess deck.

And then the third way, which you have mentioned as well, is we need to invest, and we are working with this committee. We will invest in the workforce that will help us not only get after the full spectrum of harmful behaviors, but restore trust with our workforce.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you. Not to be redundant, but building on that, Admiral Thomas, the Coast Guard is under immense pressure across all missions. Culture change in any organization can take a very long time, and it's oftentimes very difficult. While Admiral Fagan has made sexual assault, sexual harassment, and the culture change a priority, what systems are in place or have been put in place to ensure that the effort continues beyond her leadership for the institution?

Admiral THOMAS. Yes, sir. So, as I said, the question that we are asking ourselves and senior leadership is, how do we make this time different? And the way we are going to do that is focusing on behaviors that we know are harmful on the spectrum that lead to sexual assault and sexual—that we call gateway behaviors. We are going to do that, we are going to build a workforce with investment and the help of this committee that focuses on those things. And then we are going to make sure that we initiate this effort not top-down, but bottom-up. And that is how we will sustain it.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you. I was hoping for more specifics, so, I will let you submit more information to me later on about those specifics, because it's about those specific systems changes and systems procedures that I think, at the end of the day, will yield the result that we are hoping to achieve.

Heather, Ms. MacLeod, the ATR includes a comprehensive list of Directed Actions. How important is tracking implementation, and how could the Coast Guard measure culture change other than surveys?

Ms. MACLEOD. It is critical to track the actions. Without that, it's just basically a checklist, right? They can measure this not only through surveys, as I previously mentioned, but by analyzing the data that they already collect.

In our previous studies, we found that Coast Guard collects a range of data points and information that could be really helpful to understanding how widespread these actions are and the effect of the potential new actions.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you. I never thought my graduate studies would help me as much as it has when it comes to organizational culture change, which was the subject of my studies. But that couldn't be more front and center as it relates to this specific issue and this specific subject.

So, I appreciate your testimony, and I do want to encourage real, tangible actions that can be quantifiable, that can get us the result that I think we are all seeking for. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Mr. Babin, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Dr. BABIN. Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to thank our witnesses, as well, Vice Admiral Thomas and Ms. MacLeod.

Thank you for being here.

Admiral Thomas, my questions today will be for you. Operation Fouled Anchor made it very clear that the Coast Guard needs to be doing much more to protect its own folks after 102 allegations of sexual harassment, including—I think rape was in there, as well.

Recently, I was informed that the Coast Guard Academy has approved a biological male's requested transition to being a transgender female student. This individual believes that they are a woman, and the Coast Guard has decided that this young man should be able to use the ladies berthing, bathroom, and shower facilities. Admiral Thomas, do you believe, in the wake of a scandal involving dozens of serious reports of sexual misconduct and a widespread failure to protect young female cadets at the Coast Guard Academy, that allowing a young man with male anatomy into the female facilities at the Academy reflects positively on the Coast Guard's efforts to protect their young cadets?

Admiral THOMAS. Congressman, thanks for the question. I am not aware of any linkage in literature or research between transgender members and sexual assault or harassment.

I will say that the Coast Guard follows the exact same policies as the Department of Defense with regard to transgender members, and that policy that applies at the Academy applies across our Service, and that is simply that if a member has a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria with medically necessary gender transition—

Dr. BABIN [interposing]. I hear you, I hear you.

Admiral THOMAS [continuing]. We support them through that.

Dr. BABIN. But I will tell you right over here in Virginia—and that is just one episode—in a public school, we had a rape by a transgender of a young female going into the facilities. That student was sent to another school, where he raped another female student. It happens. And I hope that you don't close your eyes or your ears, and I hope the policies will change at the Coast Guard. It should be a DoD-wide policy to not have this kind of stuff going on in the military at all. But we are here talking about the Coast Guard.

Recruitment is a major problem across the whole military, but also, specifically today, in the Coast Guard. People pay attention. The Coast Guard's policies will drive or push away potential recruits. It's a mystery to me how we can think that recruitment is—if we continue these woke policies, that recruitment is going to improve. It won't. I would encourage you to think very hard about how your policies might impact prospective recruits.

Do you really think allowing men into the ladies restrooms at the Academy will inspire more female recruits or, quite frankly, allowing any transgender policies? Is this going to improve recruitment, in your opinion?

Admiral THOMAS. I don't think anything that limits the pool of potential candidates will help us in our recruiting. And we have a number of transgender members in the Coast Guard who are exceptional performers and contribute to our Service and to our Nation every single day.

Dr. BABIN. Between the House legislation to improve transparency and the Coast Guard's own new policies to prevent another Operation Fouled Anchor, I am hopeful that the Coast Guard will make serious strides and changes in the future.

I would ask you to take a few moments as we close to tell the committee and the people watching at home how and what strides and changes that you are making. And it sounds from your conversation today like you have no intentions of changing this. But I would like to hear it, if that is the case, though, how it will impact recruitment numbers going forward. That's what we are here for today to discuss.

Admiral THOMAS. Yes, sir. I think the national dialogue about service in the military is potentially harming all the services with regard to the recruiting efforts.

Dr. BABIN. What's the national dialogue?

Admiral THOMAS. Well, I mean, there is a dialogue around joining the military and getting harmed. There is a dialogue around joining the military and being woke. And those are not helpful to us.

Dr. BABIN. If you can join the military and there are 102 allegations of sexual harassment at the Coast Guard Academy, and you are going to have a male using female facilities, I would think that's not going to improve your recruitment.

Admiral THOMAS. Well, I absolutely agree with you, sir. That is why we are so laser-focused on eradicating sexual assault and sexual harassment from our Service and providing the best support we possibly can when there are victims.

**Post-Hearing Clarification of Remarks from Vice Admiral Paul F. Thomas,
Deputy Commandant for Mission Support, U.S. Coast Guard**

Admiral THOMAS. As I stated earlier sir, the Coast Guard follows DoD policy with regard to transgender members, and the policy applies at the Academy and across our Service. If a member has a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria with medically necessary gender transition, the Coast Guard will support them. Regarding your point that the sexual harassment allegations at the Academy are not good for recruitment, I absolutely agree with you, sir. That is why we are so laser-focused on eradicating sexual assault and sexual harassment from our Service and providing the best support we possibly can when there are victims.

Dr. BABIN. Without changes I don't think recruitment is going to improve.

I will yield back.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Mr. Larsen, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think it should be clear there is not a relationship. There is not a relationship between gender dysphoria, transgender people, and sexual assault and sexual harassment. There is no evidence at the Coast

Guard of that, there is no evidence in the DoD of that. There is just no evidence that that is the case.

We have a serious recruitment problem in the Coast Guard for a variety of reasons, transgendered individuals who—I think there's possibly a total of five throughout the entire Coast Guard—is not the issue with regards to recruitment at the Coast Guard. There are a lot of issues. One of them we are here to talk about today.

And I would encourage all committee members to go to the Academy and to meet with the student groups that represent the broad diversity at the Academy to hear their views on this issue and many other issues, and to understand that the Academy is recruiting the finest individuals that we have here in the United States to serve in the U.S. Coast Guard.

I would also want to be sure that we be careful about attacking the 10,000 other transgender individuals who serve in the Active Duty component and Selected Reserve in the U.S. military, as well, and tying sexual harassment and sexual assault to them without any evidence at all. They are serving proudly. We need to support them.

But Admiral Thomas, we are here to talk about Operation Fouled Anchor and what the Coast Guard is doing to address that. Can the plan, this very ambitious plan the Commandant has put forward in the Accountability and Transparency Review, can that plan be implemented with the current funding and workforce levels?

Admiral THOMAS. No, sir. Without investing differently, we will get the same results. And we have been focused for the last two decades on responding to investigating sexual assaults and supporting victims. We need to continue to do that.

We also need to focus on those precursor behaviors that we know can eventually lead to sexual harassment and sexual assault. That requires investment in Integrated Primary Prevention. As you mentioned, the other services have invested. The National Guard alone has over 800 people involved in that. So, no, without investment we will not get a different result.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Do you have an estimate of the minimum number of folks the U.S. Coast Guard would need to implement this type of program?

Admiral THOMAS. Preliminarily, we think it is between 50 and 80 across our Service.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Say it again.

Admiral THOMAS. We think it's between 50 and 80 people across our Service.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Fifty and eighty, sure.

What role are you asking the cadets at the Academy to play in addressing this problem?

Admiral THOMAS. Great question, sir. So, I mean, not just the cadets at the Academy, but across our Service, we need everyone in the Service to own our culture, and particularly to own our culture of respect.

The Coast Guard Academy, as you mentioned, is the one place in the Service where that is strongest. And we have groups of cadets, Cadets Against Sexual Assault, they hold each other account-

able, and that is the activity that we need to see across our Service. When a second-class petty officer on the mess deck of a ship holds his peer accountable for inappropriate behavior, we are making progress. I don't know how to measure that, but I will know it when I see it.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Well, I would encourage you, as well, to help those cadets hold the Academy and the Coast Guard leadership accountable, as well, not just taking direction, but using those skills to hold leadership accountable, as well.

Admiral THOMAS. Yes, sir. And if you saw Cadet Holmstrup testify in front of the Senate, you saw that in action.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Ms. MacLeod, the status of the 81 recommendations, I didn't quite—it wasn't quite clear to me. Are all those recommendations for the U.S. Coast Guard and DoD, or were there DoD recommendations and U.S. Coast Guard recommendations?

Ms. MACLEOD. Yes, that is a terrific question. So, a lot of our work to this point at GAO on sexual assault and harassment in the military has focused on the DoD services. So, that is the cumulative number of recommendations. We currently have four to the Coast Guard. The remaining are DoD, and both DoD and the Coast Guard are actively working to close those recommendations.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Now, I know you are trying to come up with measurements. Does this response from the current Coast Guard leadership feel different as you evaluate the response to Operation Fouled Anchor, or does GAO get into the feeling business, or do you just like strictly numbers?

Ms. MACLEOD. Yes, and I think we have future work lined up in this area that will really tell us.

I mean, I think that in other areas that we have examined in the Coast Guard, we have seen a lot of actions and actions to be implemented. And then, when we take a closer look at how they are following through and evaluating whether those actions are having an impact or are even fully implemented in a timely way, is where we have had recommendations in other areas to the Coast Guard.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Thank you.

I yield back, thank you.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Mr. Ezell, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Vice Admiral Thomas and Ms. MacLeod, thank you for your testimony today on the Coast Guard's recruitment challenges. We cannot allow the manpower shortage to continue affecting the Service's ability to carry out its critical missions.

Vice Admiral Thomas, we are all too familiar with the challenges caused by this shortage, and how it's causing the Coast Guard to wrestle with tough decisions regarding personnel reassignments and station closures. Could you guide us through that difficult process and how you go about prioritizing these decisions?

Admiral THOMAS. Thank you for the question.

We recently conducted what we call a Force Alignment Initiative, and that was so that we could maintain readiness across our Service. We looked at areas, particularly with regard to our small boat stations, where there is redundant cover in our search and rescue

system, and we collapsed some crews so we could fully man one station and not reduce our coverage or our response time for search and rescue. So, that's how we did it. We looked around the Nation. Where can we do that and not increase risk to the public?

Mr. EZELL. Thank you. As personnel are reassigned and stations are closed, I want to ensure that our Nation's coasts, such as the gulf coast, are fully protected.

I recently became aware of an incident where a vessel capsized 31 miles off the Mississippi gulf coast. Thankfully, the Coast Guard, alongside the Civil Air Patrol, responded quickly and managed to rescue the stranded individuals. The incident shows the Coast Guard's ability to adapt and use partnerships to help cover these shortfalls. Can you share any other examples with us where you have had some partner-sharing and accomplished your mission?

Admiral THOMAS. Sure. The expertise the Coast Guard brings to the search and rescue system, particularly in inland waters, is the ability to coordinate searches across all available assets.

So, just recently, we had a vessel missing off of the coastline of Corpus Christi. We were able to employ a CBP unmanned aerial system, and they were able to locate that vessel for us, and we could get a boat out to help them quickly. We do that all the time. That's how we do search and rescue.

Mr. EZELL. Very good. Yes, when I was a sheriff in my former life, we spent a great deal of time working with the Coast Guard, so, I really appreciate that.

Unmanned vessels are being used more in both civil and defense industries. A lot of this innovation is happening in my district. How can these and similar technologies help address some of the Coast Guard's manpower issues?

Admiral THOMAS. So, we currently employ unmanned systems off of our cutters. They are smaller UAS. We definitely need to get into larger UAS for persistent surveillance and search capability.

And I don't know that it helps our manning issue. If you look at the other services, they have large crews to fly just one unmanned system. But it certainly will help us in terms of mission effectiveness.

Mr. EZELL. I would like to invite you down to see some of the shipyards that are building these things in my district. I think you would really enjoy that.

Vice Admiral, I want to ensure the Coast Guard keeps its recruitment standards high and continues to accept only the most qualified candidates. What steps are you taking to widen the pool of potential recruits without lowering standards?

Admiral THOMAS. Well, so, we have increased the population from which we can recruit by changing some of the entry barriers, but we have not decreased the standard from which you complete boot camp, or you complete A School, or you complete the Academy. So, we open the doors wider to come in, but it's still the same standard to get out.

Mr. EZELL. Very good. Thank you both for your time today.

And Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Let's see, Mr. Auchincloss, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS. Thank you, Chairman.

Vice Admiral, I appreciate the testimony. You noted in your testimony that the current 10-percent workforce shortage is one of the most significant in the Coast Guard's history, and it's likely to get worse in 2024. And as a result of this shortage, personnel at Station Boston and Station Cape Cod Canal have been prioritized elsewhere, and the seasonal Station Scituate has been transitioned to a forward-operating location.

How is the Coast Guard reprioritizing missions to account for the current staffing shortfall?

I know you, in some of the notes I have from correspondence ahead of this hearing, talked about collapsing redundant search and rescue missions. Is there now a degradation in operational readiness on the coast of Massachusetts?

Admiral THOMAS. So, the Massachusetts coast—I am from Massachusetts, so, I watch that State carefully.

But the coast of Massachusetts is about 192 miles long and has over a dozen Coast Guard stations. So, it is one of the areas of our search and rescue system that has the greatest redundancy. In the case of Scituate, we are still covering that from the parent station in Boston and Cape Cod. We have the same response capability that we had before from other stations.

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS. So, help me understand, then. You have a workforce shortage. You say that's a problem. You make changes, but then you tell me that the changes are not affecting operational readiness. So, why—connect those dots for me. Why is the workforce shortage a problem then?

Admiral THOMAS. So, in a place like Massachusetts, in particular, our stations are still located where they were when we used to row to save people. And so, now we have much more capable assets that are faster and have longer ranges. So, we have overlap coverage.

So, whereas before three different stations could respond in the same amount of time to a search and rescue case, now it's down to one because we have collapsed those crews.

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS. So, scarcity was the handmaiden of efficiency for you.

Admiral THOMAS. In some cases—

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS [interrupting]. But Vice Admiral, you are not doing a great job, then, of pitching us on a bigger budget.

Admiral THOMAS. Well, you asked the logic by which we made the decisions on where we should shift our forces, and we looked at where we can maintain our response standards and still shift those forces.

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS. So, I am always happy to see efficiencies in the provision of services and that we can get the same for less.

So, now let's have the second conversation. What do you need the personnel and the money for, then? Where is the shortfall being manifested in operational degradation?

Admiral THOMAS. We have shortfalls across our fleet, particularly with regard to depot-level maintenance on our aircraft and our cutters.

We have shortfalls with regard to, you know, no accounting for inflation in our budgets. We have got 40 percent inflation, for example, just on aviation parts. So, there are definitely—

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS [interrupting]. All right, but in plain speak here, you are saying that the shortfall is being seen as we are not maintaining our assets as well as we should. Is that what you are saying?

Admiral THOMAS. We are struggling to maintain our assets to our standards.

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS. So, we are kind of taking on technical debt, as it were. We are going to be paying more in the future because we are maintaining our assets more poorly right now because of the workforce shortage?

Admiral THOMAS. No, sir, not because of the workforce shortage.

You asked me where—I thought you asked me where are our budget shortfalls. Workforce shortage will also impact our ability to maintain our assets, and we are mitigating that. But eventually, of course, that will become an issue, as well.

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS. OK, so, lack of money is hurting the maintenance of assets we have. Lack of workforce is hurting what?

Admiral THOMAS. Lack of workforce is hurting our ability to conduct the missions at the same places and levels that we have in the past.

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS. But Vice Admiral, you just told me that we are doing the mission fine and—at least in my home State, because of efficiencies from an outdated operating model. So, what States are we not doing as good of a job as we should be because of the workforce shortage?

Admiral THOMAS. One of the things that the Coast Guard does often, many times a year, is surge to different operations. So, we are losing our surge force. If we had to respond to a hurricane or oilspill or a crisis on the southwest border like we have in the past, then you would see some real problems with regard to our ability to maintain our regular missions.

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS. OK. So, baseline operational readiness is kind of OK, but if there were these outlier events, maybe we don't have the same bandwidth to respond to them.

In the last 20 seconds, Ms. MacLeod, do you want to add anything to that?

Ms. MACLEOD. Yes, I think we have talked about this before in a prior hearing, but the Coast Guard has a process to evaluate its workforce needs—

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS [interrupting]. And they haven't done it.

Ms. MACLEOD [continuing]. And is well behind in them, yes.

Mr. AUCHINCLOSS. Thank you.

Mr. EZELL [presiding]. The gentleman yields back. The Chair now recognizes Ms. Scholten for 5 minutes.

Ms. SCHOLTEN. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I really want to thank the witnesses for being here today. This is a critical hearing.

I proudly represent Coast Guard City, USA. We take the safety and security of our Coast Guard members very seriously. Everyone deserves to feel safe in their workspace, especially those who put their lives on the line to keep us safe. They also deserve to be

taken seriously when they come forward, and their courage must be met with actions towards bringing perpetrators to justice.

The coverup and lack of transparency that Operation Fouled Anchor revealed is putting a dark, dark cloud over the Coast Guard that no one deserves. It's unacceptable. My first question: In response to Operation Fouled Anchor, the Coast Guard Commandant Linda Fagan—of course, as we had discussed—chartered a 90-day Accountability and Transparency Review in July of 2023 outlining the Coast Guard's actions moving forward to prevent these actions from happening again.

Vice Admiral Thomas, we've got a 95-page report here. We've got five different recommendations that we had talked about. But I would like to hear from you in plain language, how can people feel safe in the Coast Guard today?

Admiral THOMAS. Well, Congresswoman, first, thank you. I know your passion for our people, and I really do appreciate that.

And I also want to acknowledge your statement about the Coast Guard failing victims in this case. There is no question about that. And it goes beyond the failure to disclose Operation Fouled Anchor; it was the original mishandling of those cases. So, we have been focused intensely on doing that better over the last two decades, and we have a list of resources that we have put after that.

As I mentioned, we have to restore trust with our workforce. And we are working to do that through our culture—in particular, our culture of respect. One of the indicators that I look at is, what is the time between when an assault occurs and when a report is made? And there are a lot of things that affect that, but overall, that number is going down, which indicates to me that trust in the system, trust that we will investigate and we will support, is going up. But we need to continue to work on that.

Ms. SCHOLTEN. I couldn't agree with you more that culture change has to be at the top of the list.

I think one of the ways we change that culture is by honoring victims when they come forward and getting justice for them. How is the Coast Guard working to make that happen, and how have we gotten justice for these victims?

Admiral THOMAS. Yes, so, a lot of things have changed since the Fouled Anchor days with regard to our ability to hold people accountable: the laws have changed, the definition of rape has changed, the statute of limitations has changed. We are just now changing our policies so that we can change the characterization of service for members who have been substantiated to have sexually harassed or assaulted a person so they cannot leave the Service with a discharge higher than general.

And we are working to implement all of the authority that we have for highest grade held boards, which allow us to go back and retire someone at a lower grade because they have been substantiated for sexual assault and sexual harassment. So, we are strengthening our ability to hold people accountable.

More important, though, I think, is we are being more transparent about how we hold the people accountable. And we are talking to our workforce not in ways that violates due process or privacy rights, but in ways that people can see the consequences for

these activities, and then understand that we do hold people accountable.

Ms. SCHOLTEN. Operation Fouled Anchor covered a period from 1990 to 2006. Almost 20 years has passed in that time. What are we doing now to keep track of incidents of sexual harassment and assault that are happening?

And how can the American people know that these—we are actually having measurable impact in lowering these instances, and that the actions that you are taking are actually being implemented?

Admiral THOMAS. So, I mean, we track sexual assaults and report them to Congress. And you can see trends. And I am never really sure what to make of the numbers with regard to number of reports, because in a given year, you might get reports from 5 years ago, 10 years ago.

I think the real key is, we do hold people accountable. And when we do, we let the Service know what happened—not names—and how we held them accountable.

Ms. SCHOLTEN. Thank you. My time is expiring, so, I will yield back.

Thank you.

Mr. EZELL. The gentlelady yields back.

Mr. Van Drew, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Dr. VAN DREW. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The United States Coast Guard is currently operating at approximately a 4,800-member deficit, and it's across its workforce. Mostly, most of them are Active Duty personnel, to the best of my knowledge.

Why do you think this is the case? It isn't for the lack of opportunity in the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard provides members with a lot of opportunity, and there are more resources available, seemingly, by the day. It's not because of the lack of opportunity for growth, because the Coast Guard affords all worthy men and women the skills to succeed in both the Service and in civilian life.

I believe, in my opinion, it's due to this administration's woke military agenda, which prioritizes DEI initiatives instead of continuing the tradition of seeking the best of the best.

And let me be clear. Our military should be the smartest, the best, the sharpest, the toughest, the most focused. We are dealing with a great number of bad actors out there, and it's not just happening in the Coast Guard. It's happening in each and every one of the branches of the United States military. I speak with people who are Marines that are leaving early, people in the Army, the Navy, and the Coast Guard. They've had it. They didn't get into these services for those reasons.

And there have been attempts to alleviate the issue of the shortages by expanding the eligible candidates to include individuals—and I want to verify this—who may not typically qualify for service due to physical fitness, criminal history, and possible drug use.

What's going on? Where are the—and I don't blame you all. You get directives from above. I am glad you are here, and I appreciate you, and I always appreciate the Coast Guard. But where are the golden standards of which the United States military and the Coast Guard has always operated?

Vice Admiral Thomas, is there any concern? And I know this is a hard question. I get it. But is there any concern that the inclusion of previously ineligible candidates will degrade the capabilities of the Coast Guard operations? They were ineligible for a reason. You can answer that.

Admiral THOMAS. So, we have expanded the pool of eligible people to recruit into our Service, as have all the services. We have not seen a degradation of readiness or performance because we haven't changed the exit criteria from places like boot camp.

A lot of the criteria that made someone ineligible previously really doesn't impact their ability to serve in the military, things like where do they have tattoos, things like certain medical conditions that we previously ruled them out, now we allow them in.

Dr. VAN DREW. Vice Admiral, are they as physically fit when they leave Cape May? It is in my district and—

Admiral THOMAS [interrupting]. Absolutely. They are—

Dr. VAN DREW [continuing]. I am very familiar with—they are every bit as physically fit—and I hope the answer is yes—as those individuals 5, 10, 15 years ago?

Admiral THOMAS. Absolutely, same standards.

One of the things that we will kick off in May at Cape May is a pre-recruit training session so that we can take recruits who don't meet our forming standards, and give them a chance to get in shape and get their test scores up, and then we move them into boot camp. The other services are doing that, as well. It just expands opportunity for our—

Dr. VAN DREW [interrupting]. So, do you have to do some remedial training? I know that is even true—I speak to people—we had a hearing with county colleges throughout the country, and they say one of the things they have to do is people are coming out of high school, and they don't have the skills that they should, so, they have got to go back and do remedial training because we are falling so short. Is that true here, you have to train them, bring them up to snuff?

Admiral THOMAS. Yes, sir, that is—

Dr. VAN DREW [interrupting]. You can say undoubtedly, though—and I am not questioning you, I just want to make sure I am clear—that these men and women are every bit as good when they graduate as they were before?

Admiral THOMAS. Congressman, I am going to be at a boot camp graduation this spring. I invite you to show up there with me.

Dr. VAN DREW. Oh, I have been there for that.

Admiral THOMAS. And you will see—

Dr. VAN DREW [interrupting]. I am very be proud to be there—

Admiral THOMAS [continuing]. You will see the men and women that we graduate are top notch.

Dr. VAN DREW. If I am available—let me know as far as you can in advance. If I am available, I will be there. And I have been there in the past before I was a Congressman. I was there when I was a county commissioner, I was there when I was a mayor, I was there when I was a State assemblyman, I was there when I was a State senator. I am really proud of you guys. I want you to understand that. And when I say “guys,” I mean men and women. I

am proud of you. I just want to make sure we keep that, that we are the best.

Due to the shortages, there is going to be a temporary transition of personnel from Western Rivers units, leaving 1,500 positions temporarily vacant. Vice Admiral, how will these vacancies affect the Coast Guard's mission in these areas and elsewhere?

Admiral THOMAS. Sorry, sir, are you talking about the Western Rivers?

Dr. VAN DREW. Yes. I am sorry, I said it quickly because I am running out of time.

Admiral THOMAS. Oh, yes. So, yes, we temporarily suspended some small boat operations in Western Rivers. We are not the primary search and rescue provider there, in any case. It's always great to be able to operate our boats there, but that was one of the lowest risk areas, and so, that's where we adjusted our forces.

Dr. VAN DREW. OK. I thank you for your answers.

Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA [presiding]. Thank you, and no further questions that come from any member of the committee—I don't see anybody to recognize, there isn't anybody here.

[Discussion off the record.]

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. So, seeing none, this concludes the hearing today. I would like to thank each of the witnesses for coming and appearing and their testimony.

[Discussion off the record.]

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. OK, Mr. Carbajal would like to talk, so, we are going to—I will hold my last—

Mr. CARBAJAL [interrupting]. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am sorry I didn't make myself as clear as I could have.

I just wanted to address—one of our colleagues previously touched on the transgender issue. And as a veteran myself, I wanted to just address that briefly.

Once upon a time in our country, we were concerned that—we heard a lot of the same arguments about African Americans. We heard those arguments about Latinos. We heard those arguments about women, most recently the arguments about gay men and women. And the latest now is transgender.

And I think the evidence bears out that there is no negative impact in our recruitment and readiness with individuals that are transgender serving in our military.

As a matter of fact, a comprehensive study was done by DoD and the RAND Corporation in 2015 that said, of the other 18 countries that allow transgender personnel to openly serve, in no one case was there any evidence of an effect on operational effectiveness, readiness, and cohesion of force. And I share that because I think, when you consider all the services have a recruitment challenge, we need to be doing everything possible not only to support our men and women that are serving now, but to make sure that we are inviting all of those Americans that want to serve and can serve able and can perform as any other servicemember.

And so, I only make my comments to remind us that it is, I think, wrong, again, to single out transgender individuals as being a drag on our services. I think they have been serving, they perform ably, and they are as American as everyone else.

And I think a lot of the arguments being made are not on point. I know an example was given of somebody who committed a certain crime, but no one incident characterizes a whole class of people. We have bad actors with every group, with every race, and it's important to keep that in mind.

So, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate you letting me make those comments. It was more than a question, but I appreciate the opportunity to provide the counterargument on that point and that issue. Thank you.

Dr. VAN DREW. Mr. Chairman, may I respond to that?

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Sure.

Dr. VAN DREW. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will be brief.

Nobody would ever say that somebody shouldn't be admitted because they are male, female, transgender, gay, straight. It's not what I am speaking about. I am speaking about standards.

And I will tell you, because of some of the changes that have occurred in the military—and I have to admit, I didn't serve in the military, but I served in the VA, and I saw the men and women who sacrificed with broken hearts, broken minds, broken spirits, broken souls from branches of the military.

And I know a lot of individuals and have a lot of support in the military and New Jersey with the people I work with. And they are the ones that tell me this.

So, I don't need you to answer, I don't mean to put you on the spot, but it is a concern. And all I merely say is we want the fastest, best, smartest, most focused, and toughest military on the face of the globe. Because if we do not have that, we will fail. And that includes the Coast Guard.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for your lenience. I yield back.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. OK. I would like to again thank the witnesses for coming. We appreciated your testimony, and the committee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:18 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]