



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

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Ranking Member

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May 5, 2023

SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER

TO: Members, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
FROM: Staff, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
RE: Subcommittee Hearing on “*Assessing the Shortage of United States Mariners and Recruitment and Retention in the United States Coast Guard*”

I. PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation will hold a hearing on Thursday, May 11, 2023, at 10:00 a.m. ET in 2253 Rayburn House Office Building to receive testimony on the “*Assessing the Shortage of United States Mariners and Recruitment and Retention in the United States Coast Guard*.” The Subcommittee will hear testimony from the United States Coast Guard (Coast Guard or Service), the Maritime Administration (MARAD), the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and the RAND Corporation.

II. BACKGROUND

The United States Coast Guard

The Coast Guard is currently authorized for an active duty end-strength of 44,500.¹ However, it is operating with a deficit of approximately 4,800 members across its workforce.² Approximately 3,000 of the 4,800 are active-duty personnel.³ In fiscal year (FY) 2023, the Coast Guard sought a total of 59,854 personnel positions to carry out its statutory missions.⁴ Despite increased mission demands, the Coast Guard has faced limited growth in its ranks, and faces a

¹ 14 U.S.C. § 4904.

² 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.

³ United States Coast Guard Briefing to Congress, Coast Guard Recruiting & Retention (on file with Comm.).

⁴ COAST GUARD, REPORT TO CONGRESS, MANPOWER REQUIREMENTS PLAN (on file with Comm.).

personnel deficit, which is discussed in greater detail below. The following chart illustrates the Coast Guard's manpower requests over the last five years.⁵

Coast Guard Manpower Requests FY 19'–23'

FY	Officer	Warrant Officer	Enlisted	Civilian	Reserve	Total
2019	7,020	1,727	32,292	9,730	7,015	57,785
2020	7,151	1,781	32,532	9,873	7,039	58,376
2021	7,144	1,718	32,424	10,185	7,029	58,500
2022	7,274	1,785	33,063	10,673	7,015	59,810
2023	7,399	1,811	33,102	10,525	7,017	59,854

The United States Merchant Marine

The United States Merchant Marine is composed of the civilian mariners that serve aboard United States flagged vessels operating in the domestic and foreign maritime trades of the United States.⁶ MARAD is the Federal agency responsible for fostering the development and maintenance of the United States Merchant Marine to ensure there is a sufficient number of mariners needed for national security and economic purposes.⁷ To this end, MARAD administers several programs that help support the employment of United States mariners aboard United States flagged vessels, including the Maritime Security Program, the Tanker Security Program, and the Cable Security Fleet.⁸ MARAD also is responsible for the administration of the United States Merchant Marine Academy as well as providing support to the six State Maritime Academies.⁹ These academies provide the necessary training and certifications required to serve as a licensed Merchant Marine Officer upon graduation.¹⁰ MARAD also works in collaboration with the Coast Guard and the Department of Defense on the Military to Mariner program which helps veterans capitalize on military experience and receive merchant marine credentials after separation from the Armed Forces.¹¹

Merchant Mariner Credentials

The Coast Guard is also responsible for issuing Merchant Mariner Credentials.¹² The Information Technology (IT) infrastructure for the Coast Guard's Merchant Mariner Licensing and Documentation System was established in the early 1990s and has significant limitations. The system is used to issue approximately 200,000 merchant mariner credentials to mariners

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ MARAD, *Military to Mariner*, available at <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/outreach/military-mariner> (last updated July 19, 2021) [hereinafter DOT Military to Mariner].

⁷ 49 C.F.R. § 1.92.

⁸ See 46 U.S.C. §§ 53101–54012.

⁹ MARAD, *Maritime Academies*, available at <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/education/maritime-academies/maritime-academies> (last updated Jun. 22, 2022).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ DOT Military to Mariner, *supra* note 6.

¹² 46 U.S.C. § 7302.

serving on United States vessels. In its FY 2024 Unfunded Priorities List, the Coast Guard requested \$11 million to upgrade and modernize its credentialling system.,¹³ and the *Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2023* as reported by the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure authorizes that new credentialling system.¹⁴

III. RECRUITING AND RETENTION CHALLENGES IN THE UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

Like other military services, the Coast Guard has fallen short of its recruiting targets, failing to meet its goals on an average of 20 percent each year since 2018.¹⁵ The gap is expected to increase in 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.¹⁶

The Service is confronting a landscape where the pool of eligible candidates for military service is shrinking. According to the Department of Defense, 23 percent of Americans ages 17 to 24 are qualified to serve without a waiver; with physical fitness concerns, criminal history, and prescription and illegal drug-related issues being the primary disqualifiers for many.¹⁷ Moreover, just 9 percent of those eligible to serve have an interest in doing so.¹⁸ Compounding on these challenges is the current 3.5 percent unemployment rate.¹⁹ Historically, military recruiting suffers when the nation has a robust economy and low unemployment.²⁰

To address these challenges, the Coast Guard sought in this year's budget request \$12 million to fund additional personnel and offices to augment its recruiting efforts.²¹ Additionally, the Coast Guard intends to implement a multi-tiered strategy to address its recruiting and retention challenges, that includes relaxing certain requirements 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.²² To support the Coast Guard's efforts, the *Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2023*, as reported by Committee, authorizes for FY2024 and

¹³ COAST GUARD, FY 2024 UNFUNDED PRIORITIES LIST (2023), *available at* https://www.uscg.mil/Portals/0/documents/budget/2024/Unfunded_Priorities_List_FY2024.pdf.

¹⁴ *Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2023*, H.R. 2741, 118th Cong. (2023) [hereinafter *2023 CGAA*].

¹⁵ Caitlin Yilek, Norah O'Donnell, & 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/>.

¹⁶ United States Coast Guard Briefing to Congress, Coast Guard Recruiting & Retention (on file with Comm.).

¹⁷ 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>.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Employment Situation—March 2023, *available at* <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empst.pdf>.

²⁰ Heather Mongilio, *Tough Military Recruiting Environment is About More than Low Unemployment, Experts Say*, USNI NEWS, (Dec. 2, 2022), *available at* <https://news.usni.org/2022/12/01/tough-military-recruiting-environment-is-about-much-more-than-low-unemployment-experts-say>.

²¹ COAST GUARD, 2024 BUDGET FACT SHEET, *available at* https://www.uscg.mil/Portals/0/documents/budget/2024/Coast_Guard_FY2024_Posture_Statement_FINAL.pdf.

²² See 46 U.S.C. §§ 53101–54012.

FY2025, \$11.98 million to fund additional recruiting personnel and offices for the Coast Guard recruiting Command and \$9 million to enhance Coast Guard recruiting capabilities.²³

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, 2025.²⁴ To date, the Coast Guard maintains six JROTC units at high schools in the East Coast.²⁵ It has plans to launch four more programs this year, including the first program to be stood up on the West Coast.²⁶ The expectation is that such programs will raise the Coast Guard's visibility and augment recruiting numbers.

IV. SHORTAGES IN THE MARITIME WORKFORCE

In 2017, MARAD estimated that the United States Merchant Marine faced a shortfall of 1,800 qualified licensed and unlicensed mariners needed in the event of a full mobilization to operate sealift assets.²⁷ A full mobilization in this sense refers to the activation of all militarily useful sealift assets in the commercial fleet and the Ready Reserve Force (RRF) for a period exceeding four to six months.²⁸ MARAD has since indicated that the shortage has likely grown.²⁹ For the purposes of ensuring that a sufficient number of civilian mariners are available for surge sealift scenarios, MARAD needs access to reliable mariner credential data, which is maintained in the Coast Guard's Merchant Mariner Licensing and Documentation System.³⁰ Unfortunately, limitations in the system leaves it as an unreliable source for MARAD to determine the accurate number of appropriately credentialed and healthy mariners, underscoring the need for modernization of the system.³¹ Section 11511, Modernizing Merchant Mariner Credentialing System, of the *Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022*, requires the Coast Guard to establish an electronic merchant mariner credentialing system by the end of 2025.³²

The *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023* (P.L. 117-263) included a provision codifying a requirement for the United States Department of Transportation (DOT), in

²³ CGAA 2023, *supra* note 14.

²⁴ *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023*, Pub. L. No. 117-263 [hereinafter *NDAA FY23*].

²⁵ Coast Guard, *JROTC Units*, available at <https://www.uscg.mil/Community/JROTC/JROTC-Units/>.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Mobility and Transportation Command Posture*, Hearing before the Subcomm. on Seapower and Projection Forces and the Subcomm. on Readiness of the H. Comm. on Armed Services, 115th Cong. (2018) (statement of Rear Admiral Mark H. Buzby), available at <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS03/20180308/106952/HHRG-115-AS03-Wstate-BuzbyM-20180308.PDF>.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Posture and Readiness of the Mobility Enterprise*, Hearing before the Subcomm. on Readiness and the Subcomm. on Seapower and Protection Forces of the H. Comm. on Armed Services, 118th Cong. (2023) (Statement of Rear Admiral Ann C. Phillips), available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Administrator%20Phillips%20Witness%20Statement.pdf>.

³⁰ MARAD, *Opportunities and Challenges to Increasing the Number of United States Coast Guard Credential Mariners*, DOT, available at <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/sites/marad.dot.gov/files/2020-07/Mariner%20Opportunities%20and%20Challenges%20Report%20%28002%29.pdf>.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *FY23 NDAA*, *supra* note 24.

consultation with the Coast Guard and the United States Transportation Command, to develop a national maritime strategy that promotes the United States maritime industry's ability to meet national security and economic needs.³³ To better inform this strategy, DOT and the Coast Guard must enter into an agreement with a federally funded research and development center to conduct a study that will identify the key elements needed for the national maritime strategy.³⁴ Among these elements, the study will review the availability of United States' mariners, including the number of mariners needed in the United States over the next 30 years, the policies and programs in place for recruiting and training mariners, potential improvements for these policies and programs, and the estimated resource needs to implement these improved programs.³⁵

V. WITNESSES

Vice Admiral Paul Thomas
Deputy Commandant for Mission Support
United States Coast Guard

Rear Admiral Ann Phillips, USN (Ret.)
Administrator
United States Maritime Administration

Ms. Heather MacLeod
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
United States Government Accountability Office

Dr. Beth Asch, Ph.D.
Senior Economist
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³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*