



**TESTIMONY OF
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**ON
“ALWAYS READY:
A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A UNITED STATES COAST GUARD SENTINEL”**

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

SEPTEMBER 25, 2024

Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and thank you for your continued support of the United States Coast Guard and our workforce.

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. 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.

Our people are our most valuable resource. The Coast Guard workforce is the heart and soul of our organization, and their dedication and sacrifice keep our Nation safe and secure. Every day, Coast Guard members put their lives on the line to protect, defend, and save. Though we have made considerable progress, the Coast Guard continues to face one of the largest workforce shortages in the Service’s 233-year history, operating 10 percent below authorized strength within our enlisted ranks. This workforce shortage threatens our daily operations and challenges our ability to adapt to future mission demands.

I am incredibly proud of our Coast Guard Active Duty, Reserve, Civilian, and Auxiliary workforce and remain optimistic about our future. We must continually scan the horizon and intentionally plot a course to move forward in the face of growing demand and evolving threats. Our status as the world’s best Coast Guard rests on our ability to recruit, train, equip, and employ our Nation’s best and most motivated people to stand the watch and answer the call.

Recruiting Our Workforce

In the past year, the Coast Guard made significant strides in recruitment, launching several impactful initiatives aimed at building a robust and diverse workforce ready to meet future mission demands.

One notable advancement was introducing a "Talent Acquisition" (TA) rating earlier this year. This new rating creates a specialized corps of recruiters whose sole focus is honing their skills and growing the Coast Guard's talent pool. The first wave of positions converted to TA billets included leadership roles such as recruiter-in-charge and regional supervisors, marking a shift toward professionalizing recruiting as a dedicated career path. This initiative lays the foundation for a more future-ready Service by ensuring skilled and motivated individuals are at the helm of recruiting efforts.

The Coast Guard greatly appreciates the support of Congress in its efforts to resource recruitment initiatives, facilitating innovative approaches to attract talent and expand lateral entry opportunities to access applicants with advanced skills. Additionally, with Congress's support, the Service is establishing new recruiting offices and offering targeted incentives to recruit and retain members in high-demand fields like cyberspace and maritime law enforcement. These initiatives are key to drawing new talent, particularly in specialized areas where private sector competition is fierce.

Looking forward, the Coast Guard will continue to leverage improved analytics to build our workforce and refine our recruitment processes, including modernizing accession standards, removing ineffective and obsolete barriers to entry, and creating pathways to service. For example, the Coast Guard instituted the Future Sentinel Preparatory Course to assist previously ineligible individuals to meet Coast Guard body composition standards. This program is designed to unlock potential and improve quality of life by teaching healthy habits while preparing new recruits for service.

Our enhanced recruiting efforts are making an impact. This year, the Coast Guard achieved its active duty recruiting goals for the first time since 2017 and all three of our goals for officers, enlisted, and reserve for the first time since 2007. We will not take one year of success for granted and we will continue to support the total workforce by investing in every effort to attract the people our units need to deliver the mission our Nation expects.

Training Our Workforce

To remain the world's greatest Coast Guard, we must cultivate, value, and retain the talent the Service needs to meet tomorrow's challenges.

We continue to make significant progress modernizing training systems to deliver tailored, on-demand training at the point of need and ensure continuous growth of a mission-ready workforce. By implementing agile training courses, personalized to the unique needs of each member, we reduced overall training time and improved efficiency in several courses. Additionally, our new augmented reality and simulation technology tools significantly improved both safety and training effectiveness at our training centers. Furthermore, the Coast Guard is investing in a modernized online learning management system to deliver flexible, accessible, and personalized learning opportunities to our entire workforce. To support these essential efforts, the Coast Guard established the Talent Management Transformation - Program Integration Office to guide the Service towards sustained workforce modernization.

Cultivating our future workforce requires we provide our members with the workplace climate they expect and deserve. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2025, the Coast Guard will establish the Sentinel Transformation and Readiness Training (START) program, an enlisted service preparatory course to immediately follow recruit training. This course will strengthen Service culture by building upon Recruit Training to strengthen our newest members with a foundational understanding of our Core Values of Honor, Respect and Devotion to Duty, as well as further equipping them with tools and knowledge to prevent sexual assault and harassment and increase individual resilience.

Coast Guard training centers remain a foundation for our workforce development programs, instilling leadership, professionalism, and excellence across our future officer and enlisted ranks. The Coast Guard greatly appreciates the support of Congress for recent investments in recruit barracks at Training Center Cape May and continued improvements to the Coast Guard Academy's Chase Hall. While we made significant progress, much work remains to provide recruits and cadets the facilities necessary to sustain training performance and prepare our workforce for Coast Guard service. The FY 2025 Unfunded Priorities List includes critical improvements at the Coast Guard Academy and Training Center Cape May – investments necessary to provide appropriate infrastructure to bring new members into the Coast Guard workforce.

Supporting Our Workforce

People joining our Service today have different needs, desires, and expectations than those who served in previous generations. Improving quality of life results in higher professional motivation, retention, performance, and resilience. However, the Coast Guard is unique among the military services, as our members are generally dispersed and embedded in small communities throughout the Nation, often far removed from large military installations and amenities. For the Coast Guard, this creates a distinct readiness challenge to resource and address. We must work with Congress and the communities that our members reside in to meet the unique and multifaceted needs of our service members and their families to ensure they remain Always Ready.

Childcare

As we forge ahead with our mission to support and uplift our workforce, our investments in childcare help ensure our personnel remain resilient and mission-ready each day. We recognize the significant challenges of balancing demanding roles and family responsibilities. When our members have access to reliable and affordable childcare, along with other essential support services, they can focus on mission and are better equipped to excel in their duties and contribute effectively to our operational responsibilities.

We are strengthening our partnership with the Navy to streamline and expand access to childcare fee assistance programs. This collaboration will introduce direct payment options to members and extend eligibility to include civilians, enhancing our support for those with special needs children or non-standard work hours. By investing in these support services, we are not just addressing immediate needs but also laying the groundwork for long-term success.

However, high childcare costs continue to impact our workforce across the country, but particularly those without access to Department of Defense (DoD) or Coast Guard Child Development Centers. Serving on our coasts often means living in high cost-of-living coastal communities but without affordable, quality childcare options like those available to DoD.

While we are thankful to Congress for its support of our Child Development Centers and childcare subsidies, we must continue to find ways to enhance these vital services and ensure our workforce and their families are supported and able to meet mission requirements.

Access to Healthcare

Access to quality healthcare—both mental and physical—is one of the most critical issues currently affecting Coast Guard families. Families stationed in small or remote communities often experience very limited access to primary and specialty care. Recognizing this need, the Coast Guard made significant strides through the Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022, which mandated an expansion in behavioral health resources. The Service trained over a dozen enlisted behavioral health technicians and 13 Medical Behavioral Health Providers currently serving at units across the Nation.

Furthermore, the Coast Guard made investments to increase mental health capabilities throughout the Service, representing a long-term commitment to monitor, detect, and coordinate timely and appropriate care for all aspects of mental and behavioral health needs. In addition, the Service continues to bolster clinical resources to provide staffing positions to meet deployment demands.

These advancements align with the Coast Guard's broader initiative to enhance healthcare access and support systems for our workforce. Investments in mental health capabilities demonstrate a long-term commitment to addressing mental and behavioral health needs. Additionally, the Coast Guard leverages innovative solutions such as telemedicine and electronic health records to improve service delivery. Much work remains and Congressional support is essential to ensuring Coast Guard service members can focus on their critical missions while their health and family needs are well-supported.

Housing

Housing remains a pressing concern. All service members and their dependents deserve adequate housing within a reasonable commute. However, many small coastal communities in which our members reside are vacation destinations with extremely high cost of living and scarcity in long-term rental housing. Due to the proliferation of short-term vacation rentals and rapid price appreciation in coastal communities post-COVID, I am aware of Coast Guard members and their families who were forced out of their homes and left with commutes to their duty stations of upwards of 90 minutes each way. Our workforce is resilient and dedicated to the mission; however, we must do more to ensure affordable, quality housing is available to each Coast Guard family.

Our ongoing efforts focus on enhancing housing options and increasing resources. For example, in remote locations such as Neah Bay, Washington, Jonesport, Maine, and Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, the Coast Guard is providing government-owned family housing, a step essential in addressing the severe shortage of rental properties in these isolated communities.

The Coast Guard is extremely grateful for the support of Congress for housing projects in places like Kodiak and Seward, Alaska, Portage Bay, Michigan, Novato, California, Rio Bayamon, Puerto Rico, and Fort Wadsworth, New York. The FY 2025 Unfunded Priorities List includes an additional request for \$10 million for the continued recapitalization of housing units at Fort Wadsworth to support Coast Guard members in the New York City area.

Assets and Facilities

We must continue to equip our workforce – investing in the places they work and the assets they use to accomplish the mission. Coast Guard facilities are in areas prone to hurricanes, flooding, sea level rise, erosion, earthquakes, deadly wildfires, and other natural disasters. Those facilities must be safe and resilient to meet mission demands and allow our workforce to do the work they joined the Service to do. The Nation’s reliance upon the Coast Guard to serve as a first responder after disasters, underscores the importance of resilient facilities. Investments in modern facilities will enhance mission capabilities, empower our workforce, and secure our Nation.

Similarly, the Coast Guard appreciates Congressional support to continue the largest fleet recapitalization effort since World War II. Equipping our exceptional workforce with the modern cutters, aircraft, boats, and facilities they require to complete their vital missions remains one of our Commandant’s highest strategic priorities. The FY 2025 President’s Budget and Unfunded Priorities List contain essential investments in current and future readiness to ensure the Coast Guard remains responsive to evolving threats and growing global demand.

Conclusion

Our exceptional Coast Guard members join the Service to conduct Coast Guard operations and execute Coast Guard missions. Drawn to our unique value proposition to the Nation, our workforce is motivated and eager to rescue mariners, patrol the seas, and protect our shores. As the Coast Guard recruits, trains, and equips our workforce, mission excellence thrives. We must continue to enhance recruitment efforts, pursue a modernized talent management system, and expand support services for our members and their families to ensure they are prepared to execute difficult and demanding missions. Such investments will ensure that our personnel are well-prepared and fully supported, enabling the Coast Guard to confidently employ and deploy our crews to successfully execute their critical missions.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and for all your support for the Coast Guard. I am humbled by the privilege to serve with and represent our workforce. I look forward to answering your questions.