



**TESTIMONY OF  
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**ON  
ASSESSING THE SHORTAGE OF U.S. MARINERS  
AND  
RECRUITMENT & RETENTION CHALLENGES IN THE U.S. COAST GUARD**

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

**MAY 11, 2023**

**Introduction**

Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I appreciate 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 vital homeland security and defense missions around the globe on a 24/7 basis 365 days a year. The Coast Guard's workforce is vital to maintaining a fully operational service and our status as the world's best Coast Guard depends on the ability to attract, recruit, and retain talented people. Unfortunately, the Coast Guard has been unable to meet its recruiting goals for the past four years and is unlikely to meet targeted goals again this year. Recruiting difficulties began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and then worsened, resulting in a recruiting environment today that is significantly more complicated than it was before the pandemic.

The current Coast Guard workforce shortage threatens the Service's ability to conduct missions which are vital to national security and prosperity. America's economic prosperity requires the safe, secure, and efficient flow of cargo through the Marine Transportation System (MTS), which includes over 360 ports and more than 25,000 miles of river and coastal waterways that serve as a gateway for 90 percent of all overseas trade.

The Coast Guard's workforce supports seamless transportation operations through the nation's waterways, facilitating \$5.4 trillion of economic activity each year<sup>1</sup> and supporting over 30 million American jobs.<sup>2</sup> The Coast Guard's partners in the U.S. Merchant Marine are another essential part of this economic flow.

Unfortunately, like the Coast Guard, the U.S. maritime industry faces an ongoing shortage of credentialed mariners at all levels. Although the Coast Guard is limited in its ability to address many of the reasons for the mariner shortage, the Service is the primary regulatory agency for the U.S. Merchant Marine and must be attentive and adaptive to the maritime industry's changing needs and dynamic challenges. Without an appropriate number of qualified U.S. mariners to operate vessels, our ports will not flourish, essential cargos will not reach their destinations, and the Nation's sealift capability is at risk. The Coast Guard is committed to pursuing initiatives which support a robust maritime industry and ensure a safe, secure, and economically viable MTS.

Accessing a pipeline of high-quality and motivated Americans to serve in the Coast Guard and U.S. Merchant Marine is essential to maintain the nation's economic prosperity and national security.

## **Challenges**

Like many employers, the Coast Guard is facing unprecedented workforce shortages. Competition for talent in today's economy is fierce.

The Coast Guard is currently 10 percent below our authorized position strength within the enlisted workforce and projections show this shortage will grow to nearly 13 percent by the end of the fiscal year (FY). While mission execution both at home and abroad continues, our workforce is feeling the strain.

The low unemployment rate tightens competition in the labor market and negatively impacts military recruiting. Non-military employers can provide more attractive pay, college tuition assistance, workplace flexibility, expanded healthcare services, lucrative retirement options, and childcare benefits. Further exacerbating military recruiting challenges are historically low rates of eligibility and lack of understanding of military service. Medical history is the largest category limiting eligibility, but cultural shifts around drug use and body modifications, criminal records, and indebtedness also contribute to lower eligibility levels. Currently over 75 percent of 17 to 21-year-old Americans are ineligible for military service without a waiver (Department of Defense (DoD) 2020 Qualified Military Available Study). A large portion of those who are eligible seek higher education and DoD's recent Joint Advertising Market Research and Studies research indicates only 9 percent of Generation Z's adults have a propensity to serve, the lowest it has been in over a decade.

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<sup>1</sup> Ports' Value to the U.S. Economy: Exports, Jobs & Economic Growth." American Association of Port Authorities, <http://www.aapa-ports.org/advocating/content.aspx?ItemNumber=21150>. Accessed May 8, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Announces Historic Investment to America's Port and Waterway Infrastructure | The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/19/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-historic-investment-to-americas-port-and-waterway-infrastructure/>. Accessed May 8, 2023.

The COVID-19 pandemic restricted recruiting, hiring, and onboarding, in nearly all industries, including the Coast Guard. The Service's highly technical workforce depends on in-person training and mission execution. The challenges presented by the pandemic slowed recruiting and onboarding, and the current conditions described above make it difficult to rebuild recruiting momentum.

### **Actions Taken - Coast Guard Recruiting**

In May 2022, the Coast Guard established an Incident Management Team (IMT) to focus Service-wide resources on recruiting. The IMT is working with the Coast Guard Recruiting Command (CGRC) on three lines of effort to bolster recruiting efforts: generate more leads, improve the recruiting process, and increase recruiting capacity and performance.

To generate more leads the Coast Guard must identify and deliver more candidates to the Service's recruiters. As a part of that effort, the Service upgraded messaging and recruiting logos to ensure the Coast Guard brand resonates with Generation Z and is surging marketing efforts into non-traditional media spaces, delivering targeted content across the web, social media, and streaming platforms where the target audience spends time.

To improve the recruiting process, we are focused on removing barriers to entry, as well as adopting an all-digital capable recruiting process. In November 2022, the Coast Guard changed accession standards, expanding, and editing the standards of maximum age, debt-to-income ratio, and dependency status. The Service also adopted DoD medical standards as it conducts reviews of over 1,600 medical waivers each year. To date in 2023, approximately 70 percent of waiver packages have been approved. The CGRC also created a digital application to modernize the recruiting process. This tool will include digital forms and signatures, and has the capacity to track application package details, improving transparency and management of Coast Guard applications.

To increase the Coast Guard's recruiting capacity and performance, we are opening additional recruiting offices and placing independent duty recruiters in locations where data suggests there is a high propensity to serve. Virtual recruiters and a call center further our capability to reach and recruit individuals across the country, particularly those not located near a physical recruiting office. To modernize the performance of recruiters across the country, the CGRC Recruiter Selection Panel was established with an updated evaluation process to better identify servicemembers with the highest potential to succeed as a recruiter. The new evaluation criteria will evaluate members applying this summer and fall for placement in summer 2024. Further, the Coast Guard is working to establish additional training resources and to provide incentive pay to recruiters like other Armed Services. These efforts are increasing the recruiting footprint across the nation efficiently and effectively, maximizing exposure of the Service and contact with individuals showing a propensity toward service.

### **Actions Taken - Retention**

Retention of members of the Coast Guard is also essential to continue to conduct and support missions around the globe. Under the direction of the Commandant, the Coast Guard is taking action to transform its talent management system and ensure 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 reducing personnel loss. The Coast Guard has enhanced our 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 our parental leave policy, 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 offering expansions to key health services such as physical therapy and behavioral health services.

Finally, the Coast Guard's Workforce Planning Teams (WPTs) monitor and evaluate the total active duty, reserve, and civilian workforce to identifying trends, assessing gaps, and providing recommendations for policy modifications, as well as monetary and non-monetary interventions to ensure the Coast Guard is best positioned to meet future needs. The WPTs 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 - Merchant Marine Support**

The maritime industry and MTS connect America's consumers, producers, manufacturers, and farmers to domestic and global markets. Similarly, our national security depends on the health and reliability of the MTS and the supporting maritime industry. The majority of U.S. military equipment is loaded in U.S. ports and delivered to theater on Coast Guard-inspected merchant vessels that are manned by credentialed civilian merchant mariners.

U.S. Merchant Mariners are essential to the dynamic operation of the MTS, our economic prosperity, and our national security. The Coast Guard develops standards for safe, secure, and environmentally sound operations in the MTS, including the credentialing of U.S. Merchant Mariners. There are currently 198,000 credentialed U.S. mariners, and the Coast Guard issues approximately 55,000 merchant mariner credentials (MMCs) and 60,000 mariner medical certificates annually. Although the Coast Guard is limited in its ability to address many of the reasons for the mariner shortage, the Coast Guard continues to work on a number of long- and short-term initiatives to support mariners.

Improvements to the processing of credentials, as well as reviewing credentialing regulations and policies to eliminate duplication and provide flexibility in meeting the requirements for an MMC, are primary focuses for the Coast Guard. The Service is working to modernize the mariner credentialing system including the development of information technology infrastructure to replace the aging and inefficient Merchant Mariner Licensing Documentation (MMLD) database used to manage mariner information and issue MMCs to qualified mariners.

Because the Coast Guard believes that every mariner has a right to work in an environment free from fear and harassment, the Service has taken several steps to prevent and eradicate bullying, harassment, and assault from the Merchant Marine. Workplace violence and harassment, including sexual assault and sexual harassment, have negative effects on a workforce, threaten safety of life at sea, and challenge the continued maritime excellence of our nation.

Removing barriers to reporting; standardizing intake reports; using trained agents to review and investigate potential criminal misconduct; launching education and outreach campaigns; engaging experts from Federal Advisory Committees (FACAs); enhancing background screening of applicants for a MMC; and promulgating updated suspension and revocation (S&R) policies are a few actions the Service has taken. The Coast Guard is also working to implement the provisions of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2023 that expand the Coast Guard's authority to respond to and handle allegations of sexual misconduct in the maritime industry.

Finally, the Coast Guard continues to work to improve the ability of members of the uniformed services to obtain an MMC. For over 20 years the Coast Guard has been actively working with FACAs to identify pathways for utilizing Military Education, Training, and Assessments to qualify for Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping (STCW) and national MMC endorsements. The Coast Guard has approved 110 courses which provide military applicants credit for MMC requirements through the training they have received while on active duty. A policy implementing a waiver of MMC fees for members of the uniformed services was published in May 2022. Since then, the Coast Guard has waived 4,302 fees for 1,580 applicants of the uniformed services and. In addition, in September 2020, the Coast Guard published a Final Rule extending the period to meet recent sea service requirements for an MMC from five to seven years for personnel with service on vessels of the uniformed services. As a result of these efforts, the number of MMC applicants with military service has doubled since 2016.

## **Conclusion**

The U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Merchant Marine provide essential services that benefit the American public, the global economy, and national security. The challenges of recruiting and retaining a Coast Guard workforce, and assisting, regulating, and promoting a strong U.S. Merchant Marine are opportunities to revitalize and overhaul existing processes to improve the operations of these vital maritime services. Preserving American prosperity and global stability requires focus and the continued evolution of key initiatives to build strong and robust Coast Guard and U.S. Merchant Marine workforces.

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.