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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

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LILA HELMS, MAJORITY STAFF DIRECTOR
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June 28, 2023

VADM Joanna Nunan
Superintendent
United States Merchant Marine Academy
300 Steamboat Road
Kings Point, NY 11024

Dear Vice Admiral Nunan:

The U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (“USMMA” or “the Academy”) plays a vital role in training future U.S. military officers and mariners. I am proud to have recommended many Texans for USMMA appointments during my Senate career. These current appointees and their fellow cadets are owed a safe environment to study, learn, and train. However, recently discovered statements from the USMMA’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (“SAPR”) office director have raised serious questions about USMMA’s commitment to cadet safety and about the Academy’s culture overall. The remarks in question were at best offensive and at worst nothing short of full-on racism. They raise genuine concerns about whether the SAPR office can promote and ensure an environment that is free from sexual misconduct for *all* cadets. Furthermore, since these remarks occurred prior to the director’s hiring, I have a number of questions about the USMMA’s hiring process.

As you are aware, the Academy has struggled for many years with issues of sexual assault and harassment. According to USMMA’s annual reports on sexual assault and harassment, there were 69 cases of sexual assault reported to USMMA during academic years 2012 through 2023. Over the past five years, eight sexual assault cases reported to USMMA involved a male victim, amounting to over one-fifth of all reported cases during that time span.

In the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, Congress required USMMA to employ a full time SAPR coordinator,¹ a position that is supervised by USMMA’s SAPR office director. However, there have been major gaps in USMMA’s fulfillment of this requirement, including an eight-month period in 2019 when there was no SAPR coordinator at USMMA. Given the important role the SAPR office plays in ensuring the safety of cadets—a role that Congress recognized by mandating that USMMA employ a full-time SAPR coordinator—it is essential that the Academy carefully recruit, vet, and hire SAPR office staff who can fairly and effectively advance the office’s mission.

¹ P.L. 114-328.

Federal law requires USMMA’s SAPR office to “represent the interests of *any* cadet at the Academy who reports being a victim of sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking, even if such interests are in conflict with the interests of the Academy.”² However, as referenced previously, it has recently come to light that the current director of the Academy’s SAPR office, Anton Tripolskii—who was hired in 2022 for the \$142,595 salaried position—made a litany of public statements indicating gender and racial bias.³ Specifically, on June 6, 2020, Mr. Tripolskii tweeted: “We don’t have forces who do right by survivors of intimate partner and sexual violence because we don’t have forces who don’t abuse Brown and Black people. Same forces, same reasons. Misogyny and racism grow from the same white, male root.”⁴

Mr. Tripolskii’s statements are troubling for obvious reasons. They are both bigoted and objectively false. It is empirically inaccurate to claim that the sole source of misogyny and racism are white males, and for cadets who happen to fall into those categories, it is difficult to see how they could believe they would be treated fairly by Mr. Tripolskii. Moreover, historical data shows that in previous years, both male and female cadets have reported being victims of sexual assault and harassment at the Academy. In fact, one of the most recent high-profile sexual assault cases at USMMA involved multiple freshman male cadets who were sexually assaulted during hazing by upperclassmen on the Academy’s soccer team.

Cadets who are victims of sexual assault or harassment are directed to contact the office that Mr. Tripolskii leads. It stands to reason that his discriminatory statements may, at a minimum, make some cadets less likely to trust USMMA’s SAPR office, report sexual assault and harassment, and seek assistance. Even in circumstances where a cadet reports sexual assault or harassment, they may not be confident that Mr. Tripolskii’s investigative reports will be free of his own discriminatory biases. The worst outcome would be if Mr. Tripolskii’s personal views about gender or race prejudice a complaint or investigation and lead to a criminal evading justice. The mishandling of an investigation or the reluctance of a cadet to report an assault would jeopardize the safety of all cadets at USMMA.

In light of these concerns, please provide separate written answers to each of the following questions no later than July 12, 2023:

1. Does the Academy teach cadets that “[m]isogyny and racism” are the fault of a single racial group?
2. Has the Academy taken any disciplinary action against Mr. Tripolskii for any of his public statements, including his June 6, 2020 tweet?

- i. If so, please explain what disciplinary action the Academy has taken against Mr.

² 46 U.S.C. § 51319(a)(5)(C) (emphasis added).

³ Jon Brown, *US Merchant Marine Academy Official Under Fire for Tweet on ‘White, Male’ Roots of Racism, Misogyny*, Fox News (May 9, 2023), <https://www.foxnews.com/us/us-merchant-marine-academy-official-under-fire-for-tweet-on-white-male-roots-of-racism-misogyny>.

⁴ @antontripolskii, Twitter (Jun. 6, 2020), <https://twitter.com/antontripolskii/status/1269125504558391297?s=20>.

Tripolskii.

- ii. If no disciplinary has been taken, please explain why.
3. Please identify what actions, if any, the Academy is taking to ensure that all survivors of sexual assault and harassment feel safe to report their experiences to the SAPR office.
4. Please detail the steps, if any, the Academy is taking to ensure that the SAPR office's investigations of sexual assault and harassment are not influenced by Mr. Tripolskii's discriminatory views.
5. Will the Academy commit to conducting a review to determine whether Mr. Tripolskii's leadership of the SAPR office undermines the safety of cadets?
 - i. If the Academy determines that Mr. Tripolskii's leadership of the SAPR office undermines the safety of cadets, will it remove him from that position?
 - ii. In the event the Academy removes Mr. Tripolskii, how will it ensure that a new SAPR director is quickly hired?
6. What due diligence did USMMA conduct prior to hiring Mr. Tripolskii to serve as director of the Academy's SAPR office? As part of that due diligence, did USMMA review Mr. Tripolskii's social media posts and public statements?
7. Was anyone at USMMA who had any role in hiring Mr. Tripolskii aware of the June 6, 2020 tweet prior to hiring him? If so, please explain why the Academy nevertheless hired him.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter concerning the safety of USMMA cadets.

Sincerely,



Ted Cruz
Ranking Member