



**TESTIMONY OF
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**ON
“THE IMPORTANCE OF GREAT LAKES ICEBREAKING
TO THE REGIONAL ECONOMY”**

**BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS, FISHERIES,
CLIMATE CHANGE, AND MANUFACTURING**

March 01, 2024

Introduction

Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, and distinguished subcommittee members. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today representing the Ninth District workforce to express our appreciation of your support for the United States Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard’s commitment in the Ninth District is to provide and optimize support to our members and their families. We recognize that work is necessary to achieve the quality of life they deserve. Personnel support challenges in the region are similar to those impacting members throughout the Service. Sufficient Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) to secure a home where our families can thrive, timely access to physical and behavioral healthcare, and access to childcare are the primary concerns of the Ninth District’s workforce. Our recently published Great Lakes Maritime Strategy and Action Plan will focus our efforts on providing the best individual services and workplaces for our members.

Housing

Securing adequate housing is a significant concern for Coast Guard members, particularly in the Ninth District. Many of our units are in seasonal tourist destinations and areas with limited housing. Both factors significantly impact housing availability and affordability for our members. Given the limitations of Coast Guard-owned housing, our members often rely on BAH entitlements, which may not fully cover the cost of housing in these high-demand and remote areas. We have worked with local partners to lease and manage housing units where possible. In areas where leases are unavailable, the difference between BAH rates and market prices leave some members in a difficult position, as seen in places like Sturgeon Bay and Bayfield, WI.

Recognizing these challenges, we have initiated a comprehensive Housing Action Plan as part of our Great Lakes Maritime Strategy. This plan, under the direction of Rear Admiral Hickey, aims to provide the best possible input to the BAH calculation process and expand the availability of leased housing. Our goal in the Ninth District is to ensure that every member has access to adequate and affordable housing, supporting their well-being and ability to serve. This initiative represents a critical step forward in addressing the unique housing needs of our service members, reinforcing our commitment to their quality of life and operational readiness.

Infrastructure

Investments in infrastructure are vital for enhancing the Coast Guard's operational performance, member satisfaction, pride, and retention rates. Over Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023, the Coast Guard invested \$17 million in projects that addressed emergent repairs and quality of life necessities here in the Ninth District. With an additional planned investment of \$65 million over the next five years, the Ninth District will still carry a substantial backlog.

Significant infrastructure challenges exist at the 18 boat stations constructed before 1970, with five boat stations over 100 years old. One of those units, Station Sturgeon Bay, was built in 1896 for the U.S. Lifesaving Service. Despite updates to the building over the last 128 years, its size restricts the comfort and operational capacity for personnel.

Our Strategic Action Plan in the Ninth District focuses on infrastructure investments to enhance our members' mission readiness and the quality of life. Following feedback from our station Officers in Charge, the Ninth District has allocated funding to install boat maintenance sheds at 10 stations, addressing winter protection needs for our response boats—a measure expected to improve mission readiness and crew comfort significantly. In Wisconsin, our focus is on recapitalizing Sector Lake Michigan's facility in Milwaukee to address space and utility shortcomings. Additionally, modernization of the Green Bay Station is nearly complete. The modernization will provide a robust location for targeted operations, signaling a step forward in operational capacity and resilience for the upcoming boating season.

Healthcare and Childcare

Timely healthcare near where our members live and work is a concern commonly expressed during unit visits. Many locations in the region have limited healthcare options and require long commutes to obtain care. This challenge affects medical readiness for our members as well as their families. To address medical readiness, we have leveraged a contract with Quality Timeliness Customer Service Medical Services to organize focused geographic readiness events to complete annual health assessments and provide limited dental care. While this allows us to better assess the health readiness of our members, more work is needed to address long-term care and care for dependents. Mental health providers are also in high demand everywhere, including many communities where our members are assigned. Undertreated mental wellness can have crippling effects on members that may, in turn, impact operational readiness and families. Mental telehealth services such as Telemynd and CGSUPRT service have increased access, and I thank you for the support provided to care for Coast Guard families. I echo Master Chief Jones' request for community and provider support to achieve the quality physical and mental care our Coast Guard families deserve.

Childcare challenges have a direct impact on the readiness of Ninth District units. Typically, members must secure individual care utilizing the established subsidy program to help offset the cost. Were it not for this subsidy program, quality childcare can be prohibitively expensive and unattainable for our members. Your continuing support of these subsidies is essential to safeguarding the readiness of our workforce and their families.

Conclusion

The Ninth District's senior leadership dedicates itself to providing our members the personal and professional resources to thrive and provide the best service to the Great Lakes and Nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and for all you do for the Coast Guard, including the Ninth District's workforce. Our Sentinels are committed to the mission, are impressively talented, and are why the U.S. Coast Guard is the world's best.