



**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**

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Introduction

Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today and echo the Commandant’s appreciation for your enduring support of the United States Coast Guard. I would like to personally thank each of you for your unwavering support of our workforce here in the Great Lakes and everywhere your Coast Guard serves. Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to serve alongside members of the most capable and dedicated workforce in the U.S. Government, and I am thankful for the privilege to discuss their needs with you today.

As America’s maritime first responder, the Coast Guard is woven into communities across the Great Lakes, along the Pacific, Atlantic, Arctic, and Gulf Coasts, and throughout our inland rivers. I am proud of the ways we contribute to national security and prosperity: we rescue mariners in distress, protect vital marine natural resources, break ice to facilitate commerce, inspect ships to verify safety and pollution controls, deliver aid after disasters, mark navigable waterways to keep mariners safe from hazards, secure our ports and harbors, and interdict illegal drugs far from our shores. Across these Lakes, in the ports, on the seas, throughout cyberspace, and around the globe, we are the world’s premier maritime Service, positioned to protect, defend, and save. I am extremely proud of our Coast Guard Active Duty, Reserve, Civilian, and Auxiliary workforce and humbled to serve as their Senior Enlisted Leader. The Coast Guard workforce delivers when called upon.

Workforce

The Coast Guard workforce is the heart and soul of our organization, and their dedication and sacrifices keep our Nation safe and secure. These Sentinels have the right to a safe workplace, free from harassment, bullying, retaliation, and assault. They deserve nothing less, and the Coast Guard leadership team is committed to strengthening our Service culture to achieve this end.

Every day, the Coast Guard workforce in the Ninth District puts themselves at risk to protect our natural resources, defend our maritime transportation system, and save lives. For those who serve here and everywhere I am committed to modernizing our talent management system so that we can best recruit and retain Sentinels in the 21st century. The Coast Guard workforce must reflect the American public we serve and requires the tools, policy, training, and support to succeed across all our mission areas. As we expand our reach and capabilities, we are committed to enhancing support structures to ensure the well-being and effectiveness of our workforce.

Those joining our Service today have new expectations, and we are taking this to heart as we adjust how we recruit, train, and retain them and their families. We must expand access to high-quality physical and mental healthcare, childcare, and affordable housing especially for units in idyllic, close-knit, but often high cost, communities. We continue to revisit policies that prevent otherwise qualified applicants from beginning their careers, and we are implementing policy changes designed to retain the best our Nation has to offer. Similarly, we are pursuing new training designs focused on meaningful learning, both in classrooms and in the field. I am committed to pursuing this necessary, transformational work.

Infrastructure

Investing in the workforce means providing modern working, living and training facilities. Coast Guard facilities must be functional and resilient enough to meet both daily and emergent mission demands. The Nation's reliance on the Coast Guard as a first responder after natural disasters underscores the importance of resilient facilities to all our operations. Based on the nature of our missions, Coast Guard facilities are in areas prone to hurricanes, flooding, earthquakes, deadly wildfires, and other natural disasters. Your support for a stable, predictable budget and continued investments in modernizing facilities and infrastructure are crucial for our mission readiness, effectiveness, and success.

Housing is a concern for our Sentinels and their families. All servicemembers and their dependents deserve access to safe, quality, and affordable housing within a reasonable commute of their workplace. Unlike the other Armed Services whose workforce is often centralized around large military bases, many Coast Guard personnel are stationed in small communities across the country. Forty percent of Coast Guard units are in small coastal communities or areas with a high percentage of vacation rentals. Many of those units are located right here in the Ninth District. While these amazing communities are supportive of their Coast Guard, many members struggle to find affordable and available housing in the areas where they serve. We monitor locations that are often impacted by short-term rental markets and are working to provide additional housing options and resources to members here in the Ninth District and across the Service. In locations such as Sault St. Marie, Michigan; Neah Bay, Washington; and Jonesport, Maine, the Service provides Coast Guard-owned family-type housing for members with dependents to supplement rentals in the communities.

We are currently exploring ten Department of Defense (DoD) housing authorities that could potentially benefit the Service and our families and we continue to participate in processes that contribute to how Basic Allowance for Housing is calculated. I look forward to the results of the 14th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation and the recommended changes to Basic Pay and housing allowances to better support our Sentinels and their families in these areas.

A modernized approach to project planning, prioritizing, and execution coupled with additional investments is necessary to ensure the Service has the facilities we need to meet the operational demands of a recapitalized fleet. We must proceed with diligence, as this work will provide the future facilities to meet the needs of Sentinels for generations to come.

Healthcare

Healthcare is a pillar of the Armed Services quality-of-life benefit system. When I visit cutter and shore commands, I hear the same concerns from our Sentinels and families about timely access to healthcare in close proximity to where they live and work. Acceptable, consistent, available, and timely healthcare for our service members is the minimum standard. Access to quality healthcare, mental and physical, is one of the most important issues affecting Coast Guard families today. The Coast Guard is unique among the Armed Services in that our mission set often dictates that a very high percentage of our workforce is geographically dispersed, sometimes at very small commands like our units along Great Lakes coastlines.

Coast Guard families often find themselves spending days to identify and access healthcare providers within Tricare's network to obtain specialty care when there is a shortage of local doctors and practitioners participating in the system. To mitigate this challenge, the Service is leveraging and expanding telehealth capabilities to provide medical care to members in remote locations. However, additional support is critical to meet the needs of our Coast Guard families. The Coast Guard needs the support of local health institutions and practitioners, and community leaders, to address these critical support services in remote locations.

In FY 2023, the Service released the Coast Guard Behavioral Health Playbook, which provides supervisors and command leadership with tools, guidance, and tips to respond sensitively, professionally, and respectfully to behavioral health concerns. The Service is committed to supporting clinical resources and full-time, permanently staffed positions to meet deployment and readiness demands. We must ensure members have timely access to high quality health care.

Childcare

Access to childcare is a significant concern of our workforce and impacts our ability to recruit and retain. This is not just a Coast Guard or military issue, and shortages have a direct impact on the readiness of our units. High childcare costs impact our workforce across the Nation, particularly here in the Ninth District and other areas without the large bases that allow access to DoD or Coast Guard Child Development Centers. We have found that in some areas, childcare subsidies can minimize financial burdens, increase accessible options, reduce significant stressors, and improve the quality of life for our Coast Guard families. Your continuing support of these subsidies is vital to ensuring our workforce and their families are supported and able to continue to meet the Coast Guard's mission.

Conclusion

I am inspired by the Service's focus on improving the quality of life for our Coast Guard families here in the Ninth District and across the Service. Change in Coast Guard policy can only move the needle so far for our workforce. The Service appreciates the continued support of Congressional assistance to ensure we can continue to make improvements. I am humbled to have the privilege to serve with and represent our Sentinels and am grateful for your support.