



**TESTIMONY OF
THE MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER OF THE COAST GUARD
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**ON
“U.S. COAST GUARD OVERSIGHT”**

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

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Introduction

Chairman 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. This is likely my final appearance before you due to my impending retirement from the Coast Guard after 34 years of service, and I would like to personally thank each of you for your efforts on behalf of our workforce. Throughout my career I have been fortunate to serve alongside some of the most capable and dedicated men and women in the U.S. Government, and I am thankful for the privilege to discuss their needs with you today.

The Coast Guard is America’s oldest continuous seagoing service. We are one of the six Armed Forces, and the only one located within the Department of Homeland Security. We are responsible for the safety and security of the Nation’s maritime domain. The Coast Guard’s day-to-day operations include saving lives of those in peril at sea, enforcing maritime law, protecting the environment, and defending the Nation at home and abroad alongside the other Armed Forces. In the last 19 months, however, we have added the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic to these demanding missions.

I am extremely proud of our workforce and humbled to serve as their Senior Enlisted Leader through these especially trying times. Over the first nine months of this year, the Coast Guard responded to more than 12,500 search and rescue cases resulting in 3,755 lives saved; removed 111,000 kgs of cocaine, 40,000 lbs of marijuana, and detained 430 suspected smugglers during at sea drug interdictions; interdicted 2,600 migrants at sea; and responded to 8,500 pollution incident reports, mitigating the impacts of 85,000 gallons of oil and 14,000 gallons of hazardous substances discharged within the coastal zone. All of those missions were executed in demanding, oftentimes harrowing conditions. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “*a smooth sea never made a skilled sailor.*” Your “Always Ready” Coast Guard lives this each day. Across the heartland, in the ports, on the seas, throughout cyberspace, and around the globe, we are the world’s premier maritime Service, positioned to protect and ready to rescue.

Restoring Readiness

We are committed to ensuring that our workforce is prepared now and in the future. Our people deserve operational assets that are equipped to meet twenty-first century standards and requirements. However, updated assets alone cannot overcome the readiness challenges we face. In my 34 years of service, I have been astounded by the wealth of character present at every level of our organization. Powerful traits like devotion to duty, bias for action, and on-scene initiative are cultivated at each level of the chain of command. These traits serve our “always ready” mentality and are integral to our international reputation as the world’s greatest Coast Guard. But when resources are lean, the same bias for action and devotion to duty can place the strain of mission execution on the backs of our people. Countless times I have witnessed our dedicated workforce sacrifice their well-being, health, and home-life to ensure mission success.

That is why we must furnish our talented workforce with the tools, resources, and policies that enable them to carry out their diverse and dangerous missions. The President’s FY 2022 budget requests increases of \$170 million for pay and benefits as well as \$44 million to address workforce gaps that will modernize the Service’s antiquated training system, enhance recruiting and retention initiatives, expand diversity and inclusion efforts, and continue the transition to electronic health records. The FY 2021 appropriation enabled us to begin these updates, and the FY 2022 budget builds upon that support to address workforce mental health needs, hire additional recruiters, strengthen our childcare subsidy program, and invest in distance learning course development while accelerating the modernization of our training system.

Recruiting a Diverse Workforce

As with the other Armed Services, the COVID-19 pandemic hampered our efforts to meet recruiting goals. By the end of FY 2021, the enlisted active duty workforce will be approximately 900 personnel below target strength compared to our Personnel Allowance List. Our FY 2021 Enlisted Training and Accession Plan called for an Active Duty Enlisted accession of 4,000. Demonstrating remarkable resolve and resourcefulness, Coast Guard recruiting command was able to add 3,200 new recruits in FY 2021, but reducing the gap of nearly 800 new recruits is a top Service priority to resolve in FY 2022. To that end, we have made great investments in recruiting, amounting to \$10 million over the last two years, and launched a mobile recruiting app, tailor-made to engage the next generation of Coast Guard leaders. The FY 2022 President’s budget includes \$2.7 million to license, host, and support this app.

We are making a sustained effort meet our overall recruiting targets but are also focused on increasing the percentage of female and underrepresented minorities (URM) entering the Service to meet our diversity and inclusion goals. Over 17 percent of our active duty accessions were women and 35 percent of our active duty accessions were from diverse communities in FY 2021. We are making progress, but this mission is not complete.

Last year, we convened a study with the RAND Corporation to identify barriers in recruitment and retention of underrepresented racial, ethnic, and gender minorities in the active-duty Coast Guard. I am happy to report that the URM study was delivered in August, and we have started to implement policy changes based on its findings and recommendations. In an effort to recruit diverse future leaders, we have assigned new recruiters in Washington, D.C., Hampton Roads, Atlanta, Miami, and New Orleans.

We look forward to implementing these and many more initiatives to ensure members from URM groups can thrive in the United States Coast Guard.

Retaining our Diverse Workforce

In order to remain a premier maritime Service and an employer of choice, we must be the world's most inclusive and increasingly diverse Coast Guard. A Coast Guard where every member can contribute the full power of their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and thoughts. Anything less, and we will fail to garner the talent, innovation, creativity, and performance necessary to meet the challenges of an increasingly complex and technically sophisticated maritime operating environment.

The previously mentioned URM study also indicated access to mentors is important. In response, our Office of Leadership launched a new "mobile enabled" mentoring program to better connect mentors with mentees through traditional "one-on-one" mentoring. The "app based" mentoring program allows flexibility to foster inclusion and connection within and across our many Coast Guard communities.

Another essential element of our approach to achieve the highest levels of recruitment, retention, and mentorship, is our robust partnership with affinity groups. These diverse groups provide support for individuals entering the service through Coast Guard recruitment programs. Overall, affinity groups enrich the personal and professional development of all Coast Guard employees by fostering an inclusive community that values the rich diversity of the United States. We recently updated our affinity group policy, and I am impressed at how these groups are providing real solutions that increase recruiting and retention of a more diverse Coast Guard.

Housing

Housing remains a major issue for our military members and their families, and the historically challenging economy we face today places extra stress on our workforce. We are grateful for your continued support of annual basic allowance for housing (BAH) review. Adequate BAH permits our members and their loved ones to obtain housing on the local economy, which in turn reduces the need for Coast Guard owned and leased housing. We also appreciate the flexibility granted by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 that allows the Service to reinvest funds deposited in the Coast Guard's Housing Fund from the sale of excess property back into military family and unaccompanied personnel housing. With the funds deposited in FY 2021 we have identified 14 projects throughout the nation that will have a positive impact on over 200 Coast Guard families and single active duty members.

The state of Coast Guard-owned housing continues to be of particular concern to me. While the vast majority of Coast Guard personnel reside in private sector housing, there are locations where the private sector inventory is insufficient and necessitates that the Coast Guard provide housing for its members. Currently, the Coast Guard owns approximately 3,200 family housing units and 1,523 rooms for permanent party unaccompanied/single personnel at 94 facilities throughout the United States. The average age of Coast Guard housing exceeds 50 years, and we have been challenged to keep up with maintenance and recapitalization needs. Importantly, the FY 2022 President's budget contains \$7 million to address a critical housing project in Houghton, MI, for our members at Coast Guard Station Portage.

The safety and habitability of Coast Guard housing facilities depend on an agile approach to timely maintenance and repair, especially for smaller and more remote housing sites. Certified, deployable housing maintenance teams enable the Coast Guard to improve living conditions for service members and their families by addressing critical maintenance and repair concerns. The FY 2022 President's budget includes \$1.1 million to support these teams in Districts 1 (New England Region), 13 (Pacific Northwest), and 17 (Alaska).

Healthcare

Available healthcare, and more importantly access to available healthcare, is one of the most important issues affecting Coast Guard families today. Military healthcare is the cornerstone of our quality of life benefit system and is critical to our people. The U.S. 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 spread out, sometimes at very small commands in especially remote locations in the country. Approximately 50 percent of our members and their families are located more than an hour from the nearest Department of Defense (DoD) military treatment facility, and are reliant upon Tricare Prime Remote.

In these unique and demanding times, access to and availability of healthcare is a challenge for many. The mental health of our workforce is a particular concern to me. The appropriations you provided in FY 2021 expanded access to mental health resources, including licensed social workers and nurse case managers dedicated to the management of behavioral health cases.

Additionally, we were able to make investments in our new telehealth program, which allowed high quality healthcare to continue to be delivered to our workforce despite the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. This year we deployed a new, web-based telehealth solution called Coast Guard Care Anywhere (CGCA) across 42 clinics and 160 sickbays, including those members enrolled in Tricare Prime Remote. Accessible by internet browser on personal computing devices or Coast Guard-issued iPad, this app enables a Coast Guard Health professional to care for those members and families in remote locations.

Child Care

Available, affordable, and accessible childcare is another serious quality of life issue for Coast Guard personnel. As previously noted, due to the locations in which we serve, our people are very often located in remote, high-cost areas. High child care costs impact our workforce throughout all geographical areas, but particularly those without access to DoD or Coast Guard Child Development Centers. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain parity with the other armed services with respect to providing our people with quality and affordable child care options.

We thank the committee for their advocacy in the Senate's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The \$120 million included in the bill to build Child Development Centers would be a profound and sustainable benefit to Coast Guard members and their families.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and for all that you do for the men and women of the Coast Guard. I am honored to have had the privilege to serve with and represent our workforce during the last four years and am grateful for your support and understanding of the importance of our mission and the people who execute it. I am very proud of the accomplishments of our service members.

The Coast Guard succeeds through the courage, sacrifice, and devotion of our people. We ask and expect much of our Coast Guard men and women. By asking more of them, we are also asking more from their families. We must continue to evolve our work life programs and initiatives as the needs of our families change, and your enduring support has been vital to our continual evolution.

I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.