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COAST GUARD

Enhancements Needed to Strengthen Marine Inspection Workforce Planning Efforts

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard serves as the principal federal agency responsible for marine safety. A key element of this mission is the marine inspection program, which employs marine inspectors to conduct vessel inspections. However, for decades, the program has faced challenges maintaining an adequate staff of experienced marine safety personnel.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 includes a provision for GAO to review marine inspection workforce issues. This report examines the extent to which the Coast Guard has (1) assessed its marine inspection workforce needs and (2) addressed these needs.

To address these objectives, GAO reviewed Coast Guard policies, workforce assessments, and performance plans; analyzed staffing level data from 2012 through 2020 (the years with comparable data); and interviewed Coast Guard officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to strengthen the Coast Guard's workforce planning efforts, including to collect additional data to forecast future industry and workforce trends and to establish performance measures with targets and to use them to assess outcomes. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with these recommendations.

View GAO-22-104465. For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777or macleodh@gao.gov.

## What GAO Found

The safe operation of vessels is critical to the maritime sector, which contributes nearly $5.4 trillion annually to the U.S. economy. The U.S. Coast Guard uses a tool called the Sector Staffing Model to assess its marine inspection staffing levels at operational field units for the upcoming year. GAO's analysis of the tool's data shows that the supply of marine inspectors has consistently not met the estimated need (see fig.). However, the Coast Guard collects and analyzes limited data to forecast future workforce and industry trends that could affect the supply and demand for marine inspectors. For example, the Coast Guard collects industry data to forecast workforce needs for certain vessel types (e.g., cruise ships) but not others (e.g., freight vessels). Further, the Coast Guard does not regularly collect and analyze other data, such as future potential retirements, that could affect the supply of marine inspectors. Collecting additional data to forecast future trends in the maritime industry and its marine inspection workforce would enhance the Coast Guard's ability to identify potential future workforce needs.

Percentage of Coast Guard Marine Inspection Workforce Staffed Compared with the Sector Staffing Model's Full Capacity Estimates, 2012 through 2020
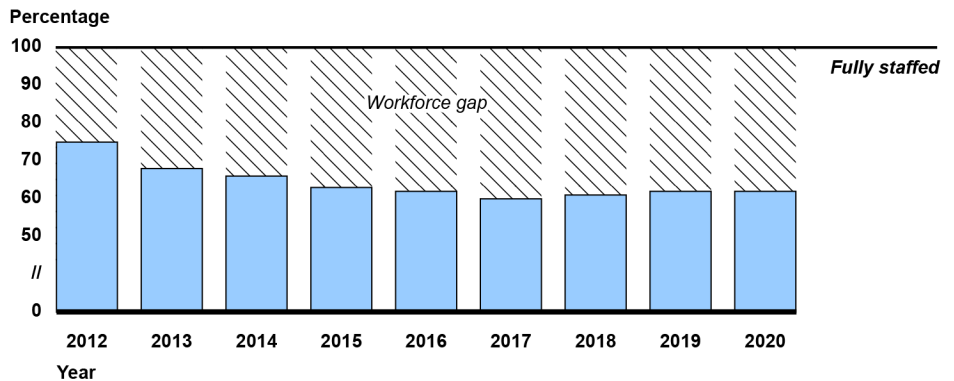
Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard Sector Staffing Model data. | GAO-22-104465

The Coast Guard has initiatives as part of its workforce improvement plan to address long-standing marine inspection workforce needs, but they are at varying stages of completion. For example, the Coast Guard began implementing initiatives to address challenges in four key areas—training and skills, technology, workforce staffing levels, and workforce structure. Specifically, in 2020 and 2021, the Coast Guard developed new training courses, deployed a mobile application that allows remote access to its inspection database, and added 65 new marine inspector positions to help address its shortfall of over 400 inspectors. Other initiatives remain ongoing. However, the Coast Guard has not established performance measures with targets for its marine inspection workforce improvement plan and associated initiatives that would identify desired outcomes and provide a means to measure how its efforts help close workforce gaps over time. Doing so would better position the Coast Guard to determine the effectiveness of its efforts to address its marine inspection workforce challenges.

United States Government Accountability Office