



Report to Committee on Transportation
and Infrastructure, House of
Representatives

May 2025

COAST GUARD

Progress Made to Address Recruiting Challenges but Additional Actions Needed

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107224](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard is a multi-mission maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security. In fiscal year 2024, it employed over 39,000 active-duty service members; about 30,600 were enlisted personnel. The service's ability to recruit qualified enlisted personnel is critical to maintaining its readiness and morale. However, the Coast Guard missed its military recruiting targets from fiscal years 2019 through 2023.

GAO was asked to examine the Coast Guard's recruitment efforts. This report examines Coast Guard actions taken to (1) meet recruitment goals for enlisted personnel, and (2) enhance recruiter effectiveness.

GAO identified Coast Guard recruiting office locations and reviewed recent outreach efforts and initiatives. GAO also reviewed recruitment-related documentation. This included policies and guidance on enlistment eligibility, medical standards, and eligibility waivers. In addition, GAO interviewed officials at headquarters and at five selected recruiting offices about recruitment processes and challenges.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to the Coast Guard: (1) further assess how recruiting and outreach activities contribute to annual results, (2) implement recruiter training in an in-person or hybrid format, (3) implement mechanisms to monitor and resolve IT issues with recruiter tools and systems, and (4) develop a process to routinely monitor and analyze recruiting website availability. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with these recommendations.

For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at MacLeodH@gao.gov.

May 2025

COAST GUARD

Progress Made to Address Recruiting Challenges, but Additional Actions Needed

What GAO Found

In 2024, the Coast Guard took additional actions to reach potential recruits by expanding the number of recruiting office locations, initiating new outreach efforts, offering bonuses to eligible recruits, and increasing marketing efforts. In recent years, it also revised enlistment eligibility standards and began to address challenges with the medical waiver review process, such as hiring additional medical staff to review waiver requests. Collectively, these efforts contributed to the Coast Guard exceeding its recruiting target of 4200 enlisted personnel by more than 200 in fiscal year 2024, but additional opportunities and challenges remain. For example, the Coast Guard has not fully assessed how its initiatives contribute to recruiting results. Additional data collection or analyses, such as determining the cost effectiveness of certain efforts, could help the Coast Guard make evidence-based decisions regarding any further changes needed.

Example of Coast Guard Recruiting Outreach



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo by 2nd class Gabriel Wisdom. | GAO-25-107224

The Coast Guard also took steps in fiscal year 2024 to enhance recruiter effectiveness. This entailed initiating a recruiter incentive pay program, offering a new career track for recruiting specialists, and increasing recruiter support resources. However, recruiter training has been conducted virtually since the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruiters stated that the virtual format was not as effective as in-person training, especially for practicing key skills such as public speaking. Returning to an in-person or hybrid format would help recruiters model real-world interactions and would better align with other military services.

In addition, recruiters stated that their offices faced a variety of IT challenges, including issues with computers, equipment, and system outages, but the Coast Guard does not have a mechanism to monitor or fully address them. Further, the recruiting website had persistent technical challenges, and the service does not routinely monitor the site to ensure it is properly functioning. As a primary access point for potential recruits, maintaining a fully operational website and addressing any technical issues in a timely manner is critical. By monitoring data on technology issues and downtime, the Coast Guard would be better positioned to identify and resolve IT-related challenges and help prevent extended service delays that may impact recruiter effectiveness.

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Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|--|
| ADHD | attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder |
| AFQT | Armed Forces Qualification Test |
| ASVAB | Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery |
| DOD | Department of Defense |
| DHS | Department of Homeland Security |
| GED | General Education Development |

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May 14, 2025

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman
The Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
House of Representatives

The Coast Guard, a multi-mission military service within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is the principal federal entity responsible for maritime safety, security, and environmental stewardship. The Coast Guard's workforce includes over 39,000 active-duty military service members (officers and enlisted), as well as reserve and civilian personnel. These personnel are responsible for multiple operational missions, including search and rescue, aids to navigation, marine environmental protection, and more.

The Coast Guard's ability to recruit qualified enlisted personnel is critical to maintaining service readiness and morale. Each year, the service establishes annual targets for recruiting thousands of applicants to replace personnel losses resulting from retirement, discharge, and other reasons for attrition. However, the Coast Guard has reported persistent personnel shortages and missed its military recruiting targets from fiscal years 2019 through 2023.

We previously reported that the Coast Guard faces challenges recruiting its workforce, in part, due to declining interest in military service and competition with higher paying jobs in the private sector.¹ In addition, according to the Department of Defense (DOD), only about one in four people in the United States between age 17 and 24 are able to meet the recruitment requirements for military service.² These include education, medical eligibility, and physical fitness standards. We have also previously reported that the Coast Guard has conducted limited assessments of its workforce needs, which could help inform the Coast

¹GAO, *Coast Guard: Recruitment and Retention Challenges Persist*, [GAO-23-106750](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2023).

²For related information, see GAO, *National Security Snapshot: DOD Active-Duty Recruitment and Retention Challenges*, [GAO-23-106551](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 2023).

Guard's future recruiting goals.³ Given its persistent recruiting shortfalls and previously reported challenges, you asked us to review the Coast Guard's recruiting efforts and any related challenges.⁴ This report addresses (1) Coast Guard actions to meet recruitment goals for enlisted personnel and (2) Coast Guard actions to enhance recruiter effectiveness.

To address Coast Guard actions taken to meet recruitment goals and enhance recruiter effectiveness, we reviewed relevant Coast Guard policies and documentation related to enlisted recruiting efforts.⁵ This included strategic planning documents (such as Ready Workforce 2030 and the Mission Support Action Plan 2022-2026), the Coast Guard Recruiting instruction, and other relevant Commandant instructions and communications.⁶ In addition, we reviewed the Coast Guard's recruiting office locations, annual recruiting targets and results, and recent outreach efforts and initiatives. We also analyzed the Coast Guard's recruitment incentives, marketing budget and metrics, and recruiter incentive pay program, and how these have changed over time. We evaluated Coast Guard's recruitment efforts against the Coast Guard's internal control framework and selected human capital recruitment strategies that we identified in our previous work.⁷

³Specifically, as of March 2023, the service reported completing analyses of its workforce requirements for 15 percent of its units. For more information on these analyses, see GAO, *Coast Guard: Increasing Mission Demands Highlight Importance of Assessing Its Workforce Needs*, [GAO-22-106135](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2022).

⁴We also reported on the Coast Guard's retention efforts and related challenges. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Enhanced Data Collection and an Action Plan Can Help Assess Retention Issues and Track Initiative Progress*, [GAO-25-107869](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 14, 2025).

⁵We did not include Coast Guard officer recruiting within the scope of our review. According to senior Coast Guard officials, the Officer Candidate School and U.S. Coast Guard Academy are highly competitive and there are many more applicants than positions available each year. For example, the Coast Guard received 429 applications for the Officer Candidate School program in fiscal year 2024 and accepted 172 applicants into the program.

⁶For example, Coast Guard, *Military Bonus and Incentive Programs*, COMDTINST 7220.2A (August 2022); and ALCOAST 373/24, *FY25 Special Duty Pay and Assignment Pay* (Sept. 24, 2024).

⁷For example, United States Coast Guard, Deputy Commandant for Operations, *Framework for Strategic Mission Management, Enterprise Risk Stewardship, and Internal Control* (July 2020) and GAO, *Federal Workforce: Key Talent Management Strategies for Agencies to Better Meet Their Missions*, [GAO-19-181](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 2019).

We reviewed relevant DOD policy documentation applicable to the Coast Guard related to enlistment eligibility, medical standards, and waiver authorities.⁸ We also reviewed the number and type of eligibility waivers that recruiters submitted and the Coast Guard approved, and how this process has changed over time.

In addition, we interviewed officials from relevant Coast Guard headquarters offices to discuss recruitment-related roles, including any applicable efforts underway or planned to address recruitment challenges. These offices included Coast Guard Recruiting Command and the Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office. We also conducted in-person site visits to a nongeneralizable sample of five Coast Guard recruiting offices across four states (Seattle, WA; Hampton Roads, VA; Charlotte, NC; Durham, NC; and Columbia, SC). During our site visits, we interviewed recruiters to obtain their perspectives on the recruiting program and identify any associated challenges or potential improvements needed. We selected these offices to represent a combination of different states, recruiting regions, office sizes, annual recruiting results, and proximity to coastal regions where Coast Guard units mostly operate. While the information obtained during the site visits is not generalizable to all Coast Guard recruiters, it provided valuable context for recruiting office challenges. In addition, we interviewed two of the five recruiting regional leaders (Western and South Central) to obtain their perspectives on recruiting processes and challenges for the recruiting offices located within their respective regions. We selected these regions to represent variation from locations where we conducted our in-person site visits. These regions also represented several recruiting offices located outside of the continental United States, including Alaska and Guam.

To inform our understanding of some of the technical issues Coast Guard recruiters identified, we collected information on the accessibility and functionality of the Coast Guard recruiting website (gocoastguard.com) using multiple website browsers and mobile devices from August 2024 to October 2024. We evaluated the accessibility of the Coast Guard's

⁸For example, DOD Instruction 1304.26, *Qualification Standards for Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction* (Mar. 23, 2015 [incorporating Change 3, Oct. 26, 2018]); and DOD Instruction 6130.03, Volume 1, *Medical Standards for Military Service: Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction* (May 6, 2018 [incorporating Change 5, May 28, 2024]).

website against Office of Management and Budget criteria on federal websites.⁹

We conducted this performance audit from December 2023 to May 2025, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Coast Guard Personnel The Coast Guard workforce consists of both military and civilian personnel. Its military workforce consists of active-duty service members (enlisted personnel and officers) and reservists. Table 1 describes the Coast Guard workforce.

Table 1: Descriptions of the Coast Guard Workforce

| Coast Guard workforce | Description |
|------------------------|---|
| Active Duty - Enlisted | The enlisted workforce is comprised of personnel who have completed recruit training. Typically, they leave recruit training as an E-2 (Seaman Apprentice, Airman Apprentice or Fireman Apprentice) or an E-3 (Seaman, Airman or Fireman). Their first assignment may be to a Coast Guard unit (cutter, station, sector, etc.) or to a technical school ("A" school) to learn one of the Coast Guard's job specialties, commonly known as a "rating." According to the Coast Guard, there are 22 different ratings for enlisted personnel including Maritime Enforcement Specialists, Electrician's Mates, and Machinery Technicians. A new Talent Acquisition Specialist rating will be added in fiscal year 2025. |
| Active Duty - Officer | The officer corps is comprised of graduates from the United States Coast Guard Academy and the Officer Candidate School, personnel hired through direct commission programs, and warrant officers (prior enlisted members who hold a unique organizational position in a technical specialty, such as marine inspection). The officer corps is largely involved in duties that provide direct or indirect leadership for day-to-day activities of the deployable, mobile, or shore-based forces that execute service missions. |
| Reservists | The reserve workforce is comprised of part-time enlisted and officer personnel. They are trained and qualified to serve in times of war or national emergency, to augment Coast Guard forces, and to provide surge capacity for responding to natural or human-made disasters, accidents, and all other hazards. |
| Civilian | The civilian workforce is comprised of non-military personnel that the Office of Personnel Management classifies into an occupational series, which is a grouping of positions with a similar line of work and qualification requirements. There are many fields within the civilian workforce, including information technology, finance, engineering, marine safety, and medicine. |

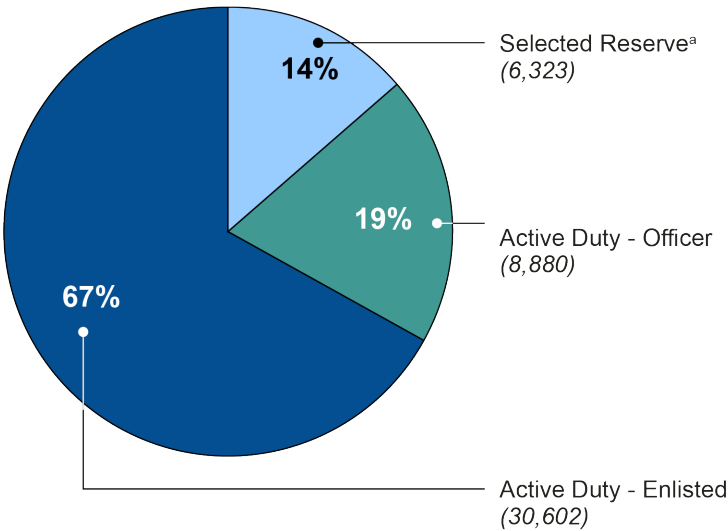
Source: GAO summary of Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

⁹Office of Management and Budget, *Delivering a Digital-First Public Experience: Memorandum for Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies*, M-23-22, September 2023.

Note: For the purposes of this report, we focus on the recruitment of active-duty enlisted personnel, which comprise 67 percent of the Coast Guard's military workforce.

As shown in figure 1, the Coast Guard's military workforce included approximately 30,600 enlisted members and 8,900 officers; as well as about 6,300 reserve members in fiscal year 2024. The Coast Guard also employed approximately 9,650 civilian staff in fiscal year 2024.

Figure 1: Composition of Coast Guard Military Workforce in Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

Note: The Coast Guard also employed about 9,650 civilian staff.

^aThe Coast Guard Selected Reserve is a part-time reserve component that provides a contingency-based workforce that can deploy to support missions.

Coast Guard Recruiting Command

According to the Coast Guard's recruiting instruction, the primary mission of Coast Guard Recruiting Command is to deliver a skilled and highly qualified military workforce that is capable of meeting Coast Guard active duty, reserve, and officer accession goals and military personnel requirements.¹⁰ Coast Guard Recruiting Command consists of four headquarters divisions: operations, accessions, marketing, and logistics.

¹⁰Recruiting and employment processes for civilian personnel are conducted by different Coast Guard units and are not included in the scope of this audit. Accession is the process by which enlisted or officer applicants are inducted into military service in the Coast Guard or Coast Guard Reserve.

According to the Coast Guard, the operations division oversees the network of Coast Guard recruiting offices, which are divided into five regions. Each local office is managed by a recruiter-in-charge. Most offices are staffed with two to five recruiters; however, some offices have as few as one (for example, in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico) and other offices have up to eleven (for example, in Miami, Florida). See figure 2 for examples of Coast Guard recruiting offices.

Figure 2: Examples of Coast Guard Recruiting Offices



Hampton Roads, VA



Durham, NC

Source: GAO (photos). | GAO-25-107224

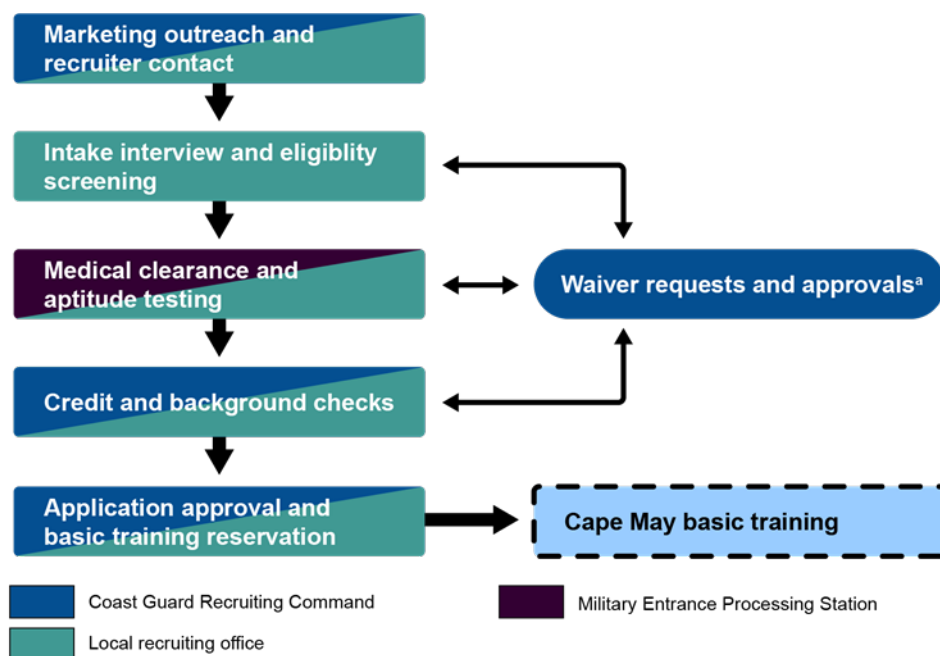
Recruiting is a special duty assignment within the Coast Guard and is subject to an application and screening process.¹¹ Coast Guard members desiring assignment to recruiting duty must meet the minimum standards for special duty and additional qualifications required for recruiting duty. Recruiting officials at headquarters screen applicants, and the Coast Guard's Enlisted Personnel Management Office finalizes recruiting assignments. According to Coast Guard officials, recruiting assignments are typically for a period of 4 years.

¹¹A special duty assignment is a temporary position where service members take on non-traditional roles outside their primary career field. These assignments are often highly competitive and involve special qualifications, additional training, or expertise.

Coast Guard Recruiting Process

The Coast Guard has a multi-step recruiting process designed to attract applicants and assess their physical and mental qualifications. See figure 3 for an overview of the Coast Guard's recruiting process.

Figure 3: Overview of the Coast Guard Recruiting Process



Source: GAO summary of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

^aThe Coast Guard is authorized to grant waivers to potential recruits who do not meet specific eligibility requirements on an individual basis. 32 C.F.R. § 66.7(a). Waivers are subject to a review of supporting documentation, as well as the specific needs of the service.

Marketing outreach and recruiter contact. The Coast Guard conducts a variety of outreach through advertising and recruiter engagements. An interested applicant generally submits a contact form through the Coast Guard's primary recruiting website (gocoastguard.com), or calls or visits their local recruiting office for further information.

Intake interview and eligibility screening. A Coast Guard recruiter conducts an interview and an initial eligibility screening with the applicant. Recruiters also conduct a medical pre-screening to ensure that applicants meet basic health standards and applicants submit a detailed and documented medical history.

Although DOD establishes general eligibility standards across all military services, each service may establish more stringent requirements for certain standards.¹² In addition, each service has the authority to grant waivers to potential recruits for specific eligibility requirements on an individual basis.¹³ A Coast Guard applicant may be eligible for a waiver under a variety of circumstances, for example, if they are over 41 but have prior military service, or if they are unmarried with dependents but have a dependent care plan.

Medical clearance and aptitude testing. After submitting their medical history, applicants go to a Military Entrance Processing Station—operated by DOD—for a medical evaluation. This evaluation involves a comprehensive physical examination, medical history review, and drug and alcohol screening.

If not completed previously, applicants also take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test, which measures aptitude in various areas such as math, science, and other technical skills. Overall aptitude requirements for enlistment are based on applicant scores on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), which is derived from the ASVAB. According to the Coast Guard, an applicant's AFQT score helps determine eligibility for enlistment and what job specialties applicants may qualify for.

Credit and background check. Once qualified through the Military Entrance Processing Station, applicants undergo additional background checks and screening, including a criminal history and credit check. Applicants with minor criminal infractions can also apply for a waiver, although serious crimes or repeated drug use may permanently disqualify them.

Application approval and basic training reservation. After completing all requirements, recruiters help applicants determine if they qualify for any monetary incentives and applicants review and sign a service contract. Once approved, recruiters assist in designating a date for applicants to begin their eight-week basic training requirement at the

¹²See appendix I for a summary of enlisted eligibility criteria across the U.S. military services.

¹³Waiver requests are submitted by recruiters and subject to a review and approval process by headquarters officials. Waiver determinations are to be made based on all available information regarding the issue or condition, as well as the specific needs of the service.

Coast Guard's training center in Cape May, New Jersey. See figure 4 for an example of Coast Guard recruits in training.

Figure 4: Coast Guard Recruits at the Cape May Training Center



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 2nd class Richard Brahm. | GAO-25-107224

Coast Guard Recruiting Results

In fiscal year 2024, the Coast Guard exceeded its annual recruitment target after falling short of its goals for fiscal years 2019 through 2023. Specifically, Coast Guard officials reported they recruited 4,422 enlisted personnel in fiscal year 2024, which exceeded their annual recruiting target of 4,200.¹⁴ This was a 41 percent increase over the Coast Guard's

¹⁴Recruitment results do not account for individuals who went to Cape May for basic training but were subsequently discharged for reasons such as failing medical or physical standards, difficulty adjusting, or misconduct. According to officials, 657 recruits (15 percent) were discharged from Cape May in fiscal year 2024. The annual discharge rate has ranged between 13 and 19 percent since 2018. Officials also noted there are a small number of recruits each year who are not required to attend Cape May basic training due to prior service experience.

fiscal year 2023 recruiting result of 3,126 enlisted personnel.¹⁵ According to officials, since the Coast Guard exceeded its fiscal year 2024 recruitment goals, it increased its fiscal year 2025 recruiting target for enlisted personnel to 4,300.¹⁶ Figure 5 shows the Coast Guard’s recruitment targets and results for enlisted personnel from fiscal years 2017 through 2025.



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

¹⁵According to officials, the Coast Guard also slightly exceeded its annual recruiting target of 725 reserve personnel in fiscal year 2024 with 737 recruits. Officials stated that reduced recruiting budgets and the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the services ability to recruit between 2019 and 2022.

¹⁶According to officials, the annual recruitment target is based on multiple factors including how many enlisted personnel leave the service each year; prior year recruiting performance; and level of recruiting staffing and resources.

Coast Guard Increased Efforts to Reach Its Recruiting Goals, but Opportunities and Challenges Remain

In fiscal year 2024, the Coast Guard increased its efforts to reach its recruiting goals for enlisted personnel. It did this by expanding the number of recruiting office locations, initiating multiple efforts for additional outreach and generating new recruiting leads, offering bonuses to eligible recruits, and increasing its marketing budget. Although these efforts represent positive steps to address recruiting shortfalls in recent years, the Coast Guard has not fully assessed how these efforts are contributing to recruiting results. The Coast Guard also initiated changes to its enlistment eligibility criteria in recent years to help increase its potential pool of applicants. In addition, the number of eligibility waivers has increased significantly since fiscal year 2022, most notably regarding medical eligibility. According to the Coast Guard, these increased medical waivers routinely resulted in delays during the medical clearance process.

Coast Guard Increased Its Recruiting Offices, Outreach, Incentives, and Marketing, but Has Not Fully Assessed the Results

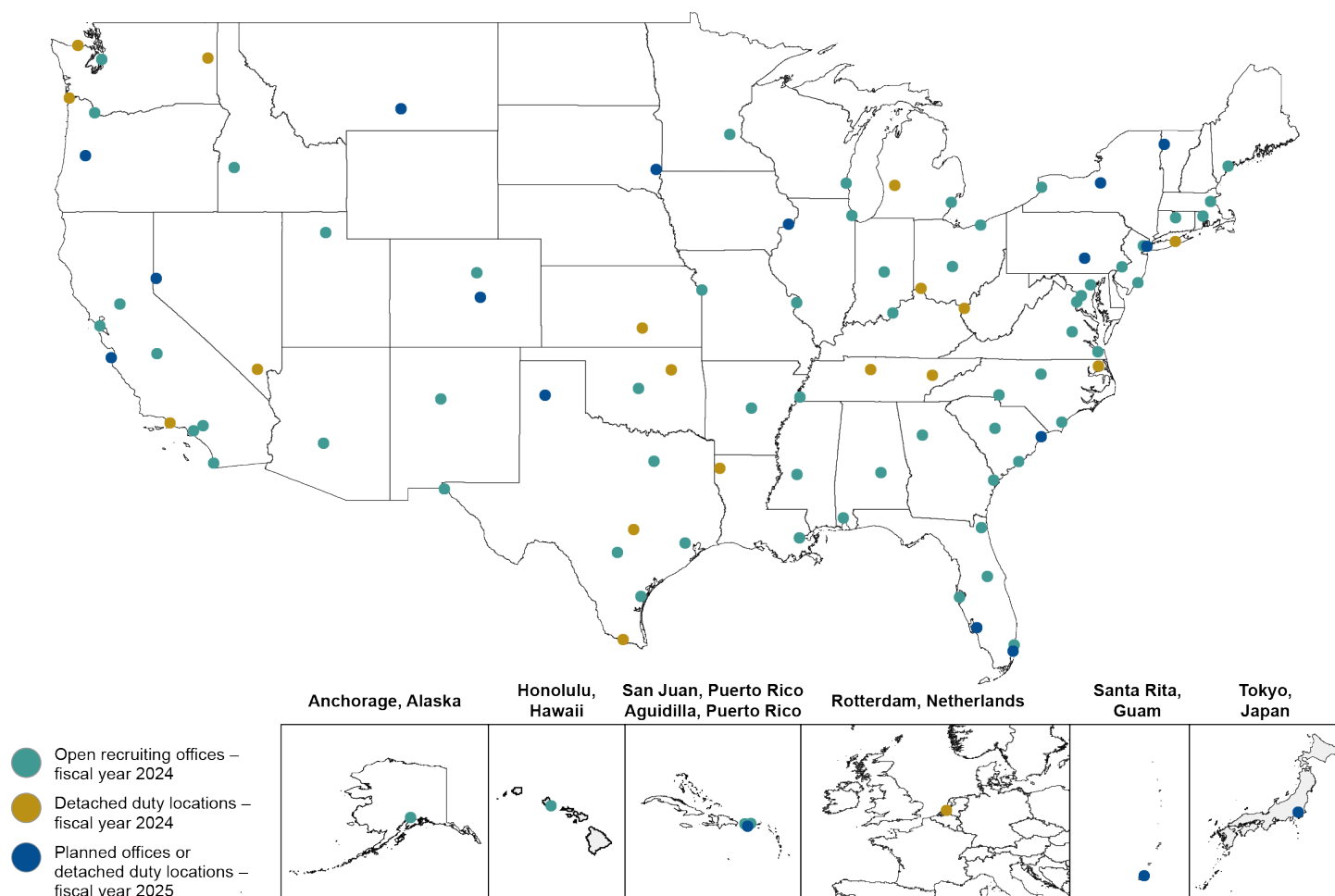
Increased Recruiting Offices

The Coast Guard opened seven new recruiting offices in fiscal year 2024 and, according to officials, approved plans to open seven more in fiscal year 2025.¹⁷ In fiscal year 2024, there were 65 recruiting offices across five regions in the United States and its territories, as well as a European presence.¹⁸ In addition to dedicated offices, the Coast Guard also operates detached duty locations. According to officials, these locations support geographic areas located further away from existing offices and may not have a public storefront. See figure 6 for information on the Coast Guard's recruiting office locations.

¹⁷Planned fiscal year 2025 office locations include: Southern Miami, Florida (second office); Northern Los Angeles, California (second office); Long Island/Queens, New York (second office); Austin, Texas; Davenport, Iowa; Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹⁸According to the Coast Guard, at the height of its recruiting presence there were 112 recruiting offices and, at its low in fiscal year 2021, there were 57. In comparison, the other branches of the U.S. armed services currently operate between 700 and 1400 recruiting offices each.

Figure 6: Coast Guard Recruiting Office Locations



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

Note: Detached duty locations may not have a public storefront and are intended to help support geographic areas located further away from existing offices.

According to Coast Guard officials, some of the newly opened and planned office locations are intended to provide an additional recruiting presence in areas that may be less aware of Coast Guard opportunities, such as those located inland. These officials noted that it can be more difficult to attract recruits in parts of the country where there are no Coast Guard units nearby to increase awareness of the service and where the nearest recruiting office may be 350 miles away. Specifically, five of the seven new recruiting locations opened in fiscal year 2024 were in the central region, including offices in Indianapolis, Indiana and Little Rock,

Arkansas. To determine new recruiting office locations, Coast Guard officials stated that they use population data, including density, trends, and overall size. They also stated that they analyze current recruiting office's areas of responsibility to mitigate overlap among offices.

A senior recruiting officials told us that, in conjunction with the opening of new offices, the Coast Guard also staffed over 70 additional recruiters in fiscal year 2024. According to this official, an additional 60 recruiter positions will be added in fiscal year 2025 with a goal to reach up to 500 recruiters by the summer of fiscal year 2026. This represents an almost 100 percent increase in recruiter staffing from its lowest number (257) in early fiscal year 2021.

In fiscal year 2024, a majority of the Coast Guard's recruiting offices met their individual goals. Specifically, 34 of 66 offices met or exceeded 100 percent of their annual recruiting targets. Of the 12 offices that fell below 70 percent of their recruiting target, five were newly opened offices. According to Coast Guard officials, establishing a new market takes time to develop local connections, which can be reflected in first year recruiting results.

According to Coast Guard officials, much of the recruiting success in fiscal year 2024 can be attributed to the addition of the new offices and recruiters, rather than a notable increase in the number of interested applicants. According to Congressional testimony provided by a representative of RAND in May 2023, expanding the size of the recruiter force is an important short-term strategy for military recruitment that is supported by available research. Specifically, this representative stated that studies consistently find that high-quality enlistments increase with the number of recruiters, and other factors held constant.¹⁹

Expanded Outreach Efforts

In addition to expanding its recruiting offices and increasing the number of recruiters, Coast Guard officials also identified multiple efforts initiated in recent years to conduct additional outreach and generate recruiting leads. These efforts include:

- **Virtual call center.** Initiated in fiscal year 2023, this effort involves employees who each make about 100 cold calls per week to potential

¹⁹Beth J. Asch, *Addressing the Recruiting Crisis in the Armed Services: Insights from Research*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. Testimony presented before the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation (May 11, 2023).

recruits who have expressed possible interest in military service (e.g., by completing the ASVAB test), according to recruiting officials. As of October 2024, the call center had 15 employees to meet the estimated future call load. According to Coast Guard data, in fiscal year 2024, the virtual call center initiated over 82,000 calls, which led to approximately 1,140 applications.²⁰

- **Mobile recruiters.** In fiscal year 2024, the Coast Guard implemented east and west coast teams to conduct mobile recruiting operations and provide surge capacity for outreach events. Examples of such events supported in fiscal year 2024 include regional job fairs and Fleet Week activities.²¹ According to the Coast Guard, due to the recent establishment of the mobile recruiting teams, the Coast Guard has not yet analyzed the effectiveness of this effort.
- **Scout talent and refer program.** Under this existing program, Coast Guard personnel are provided a \$1,000 bonus if a candidate they refer completes training at Cape May. According to officials, in early 2023, the Coast Guard expanded the program to also include referrals from civilian, auxiliary, and retired members of the Coast Guard. In fiscal year 2024, the service processed nearly 22 percent of new recruits as a result of the program.
- **Technical school partnerships.** As of June 2024, the Coast Guard had initiated 18 agreements with technical schools and training venues that provide specialized training commensurate with the Coast Guard's training for certain occupational ratings. The agreements allow for lateral entry into certain Coast Guard ratings for members that complete recognized programs, such as a culinary arts degree. According to Coast Guard information, in fiscal year 2024, the service processed three new recruits as a result of technical school partnerships, and as of February 2025, scheduled seven new recruits to attend recruit training in fiscal year 2025.
- **Delayed Decision program.** Under this new program, high school juniors can join the Coast Guard reserve and serve throughout their senior year. At graduation, they can decide whether they want to join the active-duty workforce or remain in the reserve. According to recruiting officials, the Coast Guard began pilot testing the program in

²⁰According to officials, virtual recruiting leads are provided to the nearest recruiting office based on the applicant's ZIP code. Recruiters in these locations assume responsibility for any further applicant processing and are credited for any recruit accessions.

²¹For Fleet Week events, the Coast Guard may participate with demonstrations, ship tours, and public displays of their capabilities, offering the public a chance to meet Coast Guard members and learn about their maritime services.

Monetary Incentives to Eligible Recruits

September 2024 in six locations with access to Coast Guard reserve units.²² These officials told us they plan to further assess the effectiveness of the program after the first group of students graduates in June 2025.

As part of its efforts to attract and recruit new applicants, the Coast Guard also offers a range of monetary recruiting bonuses. These bonuses are offered to new recruits who, for example, have prior military service (\$2,000), join the service with college credits (\$3,000-\$15,000), or who agree to attend the next available boot camp that is not at capacity (at least \$5,000). See table 2 for a summary of recruiting bonuses offered in fiscal year 2024.

| Table 2: Summary of Coast Guard Active Duty Enlistment Bonuses for Fiscal Year 2024 | |
|---|--|
| Type of recruitment bonus | Amount of bonus |
| “A” school enlistment bonus ^a (No prior military service) | \$20,000 – \$75,000 ^b (varies by training program) |
| Critical skills training bonus (Prior service) | \$20,000 – \$65,000 (varies by training program) |
| Non-rate/Prior service enlistment bonus ^c | \$2,000 |
| Quick-Ship enlistment bonus | \$5,000 – \$10,000 |
| College credit enlistment bonus | \$3,000 (30-59 credits) |
| | \$10,000 (60-119 credits) |
| | \$15,000 (120 or more credits) |

Source: Coast Guard. | GAO-25-107224

^aThe Coast Guard’s A-school provides specialized training for service members to learn job-specific skills.

^bThe Coast Guard is subject to a statutory cap of \$75,000 per individual who enlists, regardless of the combination of bonuses available. 37 U.S.C. § 331(c)(1)(A).

^cA “non-rate” refers to recruits who do not choose an occupational specialty, known as a “rating,” during their enlistment. This is the standard monetary bonus available to all new recruits.

To determine which bonuses should be offered each fiscal year, the Coast Guard’s Workforce Planning Team—which includes personnel from various ranks, units, and backgrounds—leads efforts to assess existing bonuses annually and determine future workforce needs. Specifically, according to the Workforce Planning Team’s charter, the team identifies critical ratings based on recruitment metrics, current A-school

²²The Coast Guard tested the Delayed Decision pilot program in the following six recruiting office locations: Boston, MA; Hampton Roads, VA; Tampa, FL; Houston, TX; Detroit, MI; and San Diego, CA.

enrollments, and future needs. Coast Guard officials also stated that they observe DOD and private sector bonus offerings to determine which ratings may warrant a bonus and at what levels. According to officials, the Coast Guard assesses the effectiveness of bonuses offered based on the service's ability to fill critical ratings and meet recruiting targets throughout the fiscal year.

In fiscal year 2024, the Coast Guard began to offer some new enlistment bonuses for certain critical ratings, such as a \$20,000 enlistment bonus for Damage Controlmen and Machinery Technicians. In addition, the Coast Guard increased the monetary value of several other enlistment bonuses to help address shortfalls for those critical ratings. For example, from fiscal year 2023 to 2024, enlistment bonuses increased for the following:

- Culinary Specialists from \$30,000 to \$65,000 (up to \$75,000 with a culinary degree)²³
- Electronics Technicians from \$20,000 to \$65,000
- Operations Specialists from \$15,000 to \$40,000

In our prior work, we have identified the use of existing pay authorities to offer monetary recruitment incentives as a key strategy for human capital management.²⁴ These enlistment bonuses can also help attract recruits who may be considering other career opportunities that offer higher starting pay. For example, the average starting salary for a new enlisted Coast Guard member after completing basic training is approximately \$28,000 annually, which may be lower than full time employment at the minimum wage in many U.S. states.²⁵

Increased Marketing Budget

The Coast Guard has also increased its marketing budget significantly since fiscal year 2020 to help reach potential recruits. Specifically, the annual marketing budget has risen to over \$24 million in fiscal year 2024, which represents more than a three-fold increase over fiscal year 2020 levels (\$7.1 million). As figure 7 shows, the Coast Guard allocates these funds across four broad categories, with media advertising comprising the

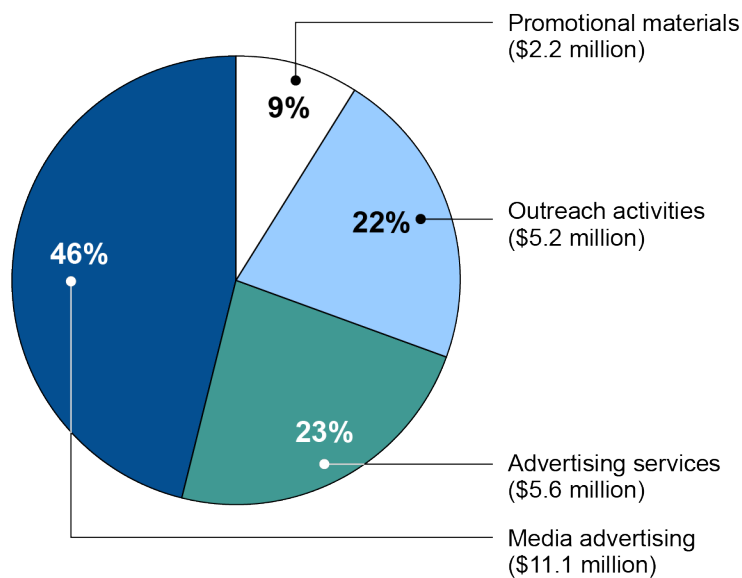
²³The Coast Guard is subject to a statutory cap of \$75,000 per individual who enlists, regardless of the combination of bonuses available. 37 U.S.C. § 331(c)(1)(A).

²⁴See, for example, [GAO-19-181](#).

²⁵The annual starting salary does not include service members total compensation package which includes a housing allowance and applicable medical, educational, and other military benefits.

greatest proportion of the total (e.g., social media and Google search ads).

Figure 7: Coast Guard Marketing Spending by Category, Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO summary of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

The Coast Guard collects marketing data and analyzes various metrics on a routine basis to assess the results of its efforts. For example, the Coast Guard develops monthly reports that include data on advertising impressions (e.g., Google and Facebook advertisements) and corresponding click rates. The reports also include visits to the gocoastguard.com recruiting website; and the number of online inquiry forms completed (see table 3). According to recruiting officials, the online inquiry form on the Coast Guard's recruiting website was shortened considerably in early 2024 to include only a potential recruit's name and contact information. Since this revision, officials stated there was a significant increase in the number of forms completed, which they attributed to the reduced time and effort required for potential applicants to complete the form.

Table 3: Annual Coast Guard Marketing Statistics, Fiscal Years 2020-2024

| Fiscal year | Total media advertising | Number of digital advertising impressions | Number of clicks on advertisements | Number of inquiry forms completed on website |
|-------------|-------------------------|---|------------------------------------|--|
| 2020 | \$2,620,264 | 422,994,080 | 1,117,739 | 11,433 |
| 2021 | \$5,591,658 | 477,995,882 | 2,800,715 | 10,773 |
| 2022 | \$9,143,329 | 1,096,053,892 | 2,887,213 | 16,018 |
| 2023 | \$9,618,761 | 949,272,353 | 3,714,657 | 15,716 |
| 2024 | \$11,138,110 | 1,270,013,467 | 5,381,314 | 48,560 |

Source: Coast Guard. | GAO-25-107224

Note: Advertising impressions are the number of times an advertisement is displayed on a digital platform.

According to Coast Guard officials, it can be difficult to directly track the effectiveness of various advertising platforms in producing future recruits. For example, they stated that the Coast Guard collects data on how many people see or click on an advertisement, but they have no way of knowing if the person who clicked on the advertisement eventually applied to the service.²⁶

The Coast Guard identified efforts to collect additional information regarding some of its outreach activities. For example, a senior Coast Guard official reported that they use QR codes at some recruiting events to help track leads and determine the success of the event.²⁷

In addition, the Coast Guard routinely collects information on its initial application intake form to help identify where applicants heard about opportunities to join the Coast Guard. According to recruiting officials, there is also a plan to survey recruits at Cape May to collect information about their recruit experience and the Coast Guard's marketing efforts. However, as of March 2025, this effort had not yet been implemented. More broadly, Coast Guard officials stated that the service participated in

²⁶We did not evaluate the Coast Guard's marketing strategy within the scope of this audit. However, congressional testimony by a RAND official in 2023 noted the importance of optimizing military marketing and advertising in the age of social media, including considering the use of nontraditional media, such as Instagram, video games, and other digital platforms, Asch (2023). See also GAO, *Military Recruiting: Actions Needed to Address Digital Marketing Challenges*, [GAO-25-106719](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 20, 2024).

²⁷Coast Guard officials noted these QR codes may be unique to certain recruiting events or be included on Coast Guard branded merchandise that the service can use for multiple events.

Limited Assessment of Recruiting Efforts

a survey administered by DOD's program on Joint Advertising, Market Research, and Studies. Although the results of this survey were not finalized as of February 2025, officials told us the survey will help assess the effectiveness of online and targeted marketing efforts on Coast Guard brand awareness.

Although the Coast Guard initiated many efforts in recent years to address its recruiting gaps, it has not yet fully assessed the factors that drive results to determine what efforts may be most effective. Some potential opportunities for additional data collection and evaluation that we identified for each of the various efforts and initiatives discussed above include the following:

- **New office locations.** The Coast Guard routinely assesses recruiting performance on national, regional, office, and individual recruiter levels. However, other than the size and density of the population, it is unclear what data or specific inputs the Coast Guard uses to inform decisions about recruiting office locations or how program officials assess if changes may be needed. For example, historical recruiting data from other military service branches in those locations could also potentially inform these decisions.
- **Expanded outreach efforts.** The Coast Guard has collected some information about the number of applications that can be attributed to specific outreach efforts, such as the virtual call center and the referral program. However, given its recent implementation, the Coast Guard did not identify any specific metrics to assess results for the mobile recruiting team. Such assessment will be important as the program is further implemented to help the Coast Guard evaluate the results of this effort and determine its cost effectiveness relative to other efforts.
- **Monetary incentives.** The Coast Guard tracks the number of recruits who accept specific types of monetary recruiting bonuses but has opportunities to collect additional information from recruits or enlisted personnel about how these bonuses affected their decision to join the Coast Guard. For example, this could include surveying new recruits shortly after completing the recruiting process or during boot camp at Cape May. These data sources could enhance the Coast Guard's ability to assess how effective the various incentives are to increasing recruiting results.
- **Marketing efforts.** Although we did not evaluate the Coast Guard's overall marketing strategy within the scope of this audit, we observed that additional data could also be collected from current or recent recruits regarding the factors that influenced their awareness of the

Coast Guard and their decision to join. Such information could enhance the Coast Guard's ability to obtain feedback on specific marketing strategies and assess their effectiveness.

The Coast Guard's Framework for Strategic Mission Management, Enterprise Risk Stewardship, and Internal Control emphasizes that evaluation and assessment of program strategies and performance is an essential aspect of strategic management.²⁸ This guidance also addresses the importance of regular reviews to help identify opportunities for improvement and areas where additional evaluation or other studies or analyses are needed. These reviews are to be informed by relevant and reliable data to help assess program performance. Moreover, the framework notes that identifying key drivers and trends is essential to determining which factors shape program results. This can help organizations choose these drivers over alternatives or identify other options that would provide the same capability at lower cost.

Additional assessment of its various recruiting efforts could help the Coast Guard determine the key drivers of its recruiting results and help inform future efforts. By conducting further analyses on how its recruiting and outreach activities contribute to annual recruitment results, the Coast Guard would be better positioned to make evidence-based decisions to expand or revise its recruiting efforts. Effective and data driven decisions for recruiting are particularly important given the Coast Guard's need to recruit and sustain the workforce necessary to successfully carry out its operational missions.

Coast Guard Revised Eligibility Criteria and Increased Waivers, but Medical Clearance Process Challenges Caused Delays

Coast Guard Revised Eligibility Criteria to Help Increase Applicant Pool

The Coast Guard initiated changes to its enlistment eligibility criteria in recent years to help increase its potential pool of applicants. According to Coast Guard officials, the changes to enlistment eligibility criteria led to an increased number of applicants, which helped support the service's ability

²⁸United States Coast Guard, Deputy Commandant for Operations, *Framework for Strategic Mission Management, Enterprise Risk Stewardship, and Internal Control* (July 2020).

to meeting its recruitment targets in fiscal year 2024. Specifically, the November 2023 update to the Coast Guard Recruiting instruction incorporated the following changes for enlisted members, among others:²⁹

- **Age limit.** The maximum age for active-duty enlisted personnel with no prior service experience was raised to 41 from 34.³⁰
- **AFQT score.** The minimum qualification score obtained on the AFQT for most individuals with a high school diploma or equivalent was reduced to 32 from 36.³¹ The Coast Guard reported that the average score for active-duty enlisted recruits in 2024 was 64.
- **Financial debt.** The allowable monthly debt-to-income ratio was increased from 30 percent to 80 percent.
- **Tattoo policy.** Tattoos and body markings have become more permissible since fiscal year 2022. For example, members may now have more visible tattoos on their hands and small tattoos behind each ear.³²

As a result of some of these changes, Coast Guard policy now aligns closely with the DOD's minimum standards for enlistment eligibility. See appendix I for a summary of enlisted eligibility criteria across the U.S. military services.

According to officials, the Coast Guard also requires applicants to meet certain physical fitness standards—called a forming standard—before reporting to Cape May for basic training. This standard, which varies by sex, consists of completing push-ups, sit ups, and a timed run. According to Coast Guard officials, the service eased some forming standard requirements in 2024. However, the officials also noted that the physical fitness requirements to graduate from Cape May and enter the Coast

²⁹Coast Guard, *Coast Guard Recruiting*, Commandant Instruction 1100.2H, November 2023.

³⁰An applicant cannot reach their 42nd birthday prior to enlisting. The maximum age for reserve personnel is 40. Maximum age may be different for individuals with prior service.

³¹Overall aptitude requirements for enlistment are based on applicant scores on the AFQT derived from the ASVAB. The minimum score is 47 for those with a General Education Development (GED) or other approved alternative credential holders. DOD policy establishes a minimum AFQT score of 31 as the lowest allowable without restriction. However, services are authorized to permit scores between 10 and 30 for up to 4 percent of each accession cohort. 10 U.S.C. § 520(a).

³²Content restrictions still apply for all tattoos regardless of location (e.g., racist, indecent, extremist, or sexually explicit tattoos are not permitted).

Guard (the accession standard) is more stringent than the forming standard and was not subject to any recent changes.³³

As of July 2024, the Coast Guard was also evaluating a new program to help prepare some recruits who may need additional physical training. According to officials, the Future Sentinel program, which is modeled after other DOD programs, is designed for applicants who are otherwise fully qualified for basic training apart from meeting body composition standards. These applicants receive up to 12 weeks of specialized support at Cape May including physical training and education on nutrition. At any point in those 12 weeks, if program participants have met the applicable forming standard they can join a company to begin basic training.³⁴ According to recruiting officials, the Future Sentinel program is tentatively planned to become a permanent part of recruit training in April 2025 and will include mechanisms to track the ongoing success rate of participants.

Recruitment Eligibility Waivers Have Increased Significantly Since Fiscal Year 2022

Despite the easing of some eligibility criteria in recent years, the number of eligibility waivers has increased significantly since fiscal year 2022, most notably regarding medical eligibility (see fig. 8). In fiscal year 2024, the number of non-medical waivers submitted totaled 1467—an increase of nearly 170 percent since fiscal year 2022. The Coast Guard approved 1321 of these waivers (90 percent approval rate). Waivers related to AFQT scores represented the greatest proportion of the non-medical submissions in fiscal year 2024 (663 of 1467).³⁵

Recruiters also submitted 4183 medical waiver requests in fiscal year 2024, which represents a nearly 280 percent increase since fiscal year 2022. The Coast Guard approved 2288 of the fiscal year 2024 medical waiver requests, about 60 percent—an approval rate slightly lower than

³³For recruits to graduate from Cape May, they are expected to perform one minute of push-ups (men: 29, women: 15); one minute of sit-ups (men: 38, women: 32); and a 1.5-mile timed run (men: 12:51, women: 15:26). Recruits are also expected to complete a swim circuit (recruits must tread water for 5 minutes, jump off a 5-foot platform, and swim 100 meters).

³⁴According to Coast Guard officials, 51 recruits participated in the Future Sentinel pilot program—45 recruits successfully met the forming standard to join recruit training at Cape May. As of January 2025, 31 recruits graduated from recruit training and 14 were still completing their recruit (basic) training.

³⁵As of March 2025, the Coast Guard has a minimum required score of 32 on the AFQT for applicants with a high school diploma or equivalent.

the 5-year average of 68 percent.³⁶ According to Coast Guard officials, the increase in medical waiver requests is due largely to the introduction of a new DOD electronic health records system in fiscal year 2022, which made recruits' medical histories more accessible. See below for additional information on the electronic health records system.

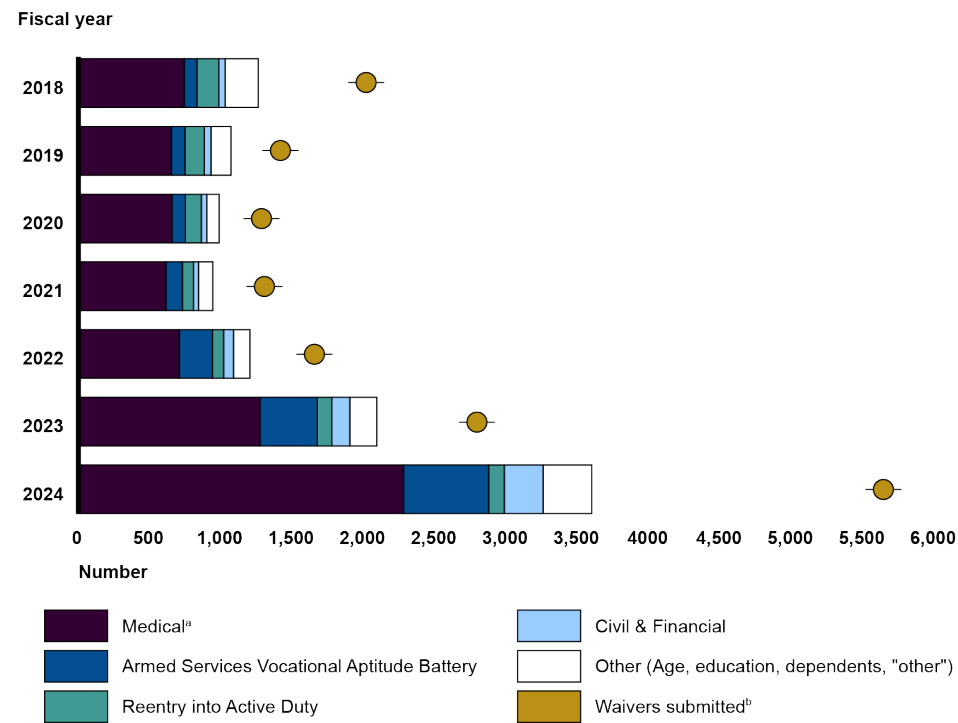
Recruitment Eligibility Waivers

The Coast Guard's Recruiting instruction (COMDTINST 1100.2H) identifies recruitment eligibility waiver requirements:

- Age—waivers of the maximum age requirement of 41 may only be authorized for applicants with prior military service.
- Civil—waivers may be considered for individuals charged with minor offenses or charged with but not convicted of a felony or major misdemeanor.
- Dependents—waivers for excess dependents may be considered based on the needs of the service.
- Education—waivers of the basic education requirements (a high school diploma, alternative credential, or equivalent) may be authorized.
- Financial—waivers may be considered for individuals who filed for bankruptcy within 10 years but no sooner than 5 years, or individuals who have a monthly debt ratio more than 80 percent of their projected pay.
- Medical—waivers for those who fail to meet certain established physical standards may be considered on an individual basis using all available information (per COMDTINST 6000.1 and DOD Instruction 6130.03).
- Reentry into Active Duty—waivers to reenter the service may be authorized for those who can prove that disqualifying conditions were resolved.

Source: GAO summary of Coast Guard and DOD information. | GAO-25-107224

Figure 8: Coast Guard Eligibility Waivers Approved by Type, Fiscal Years 2018-2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

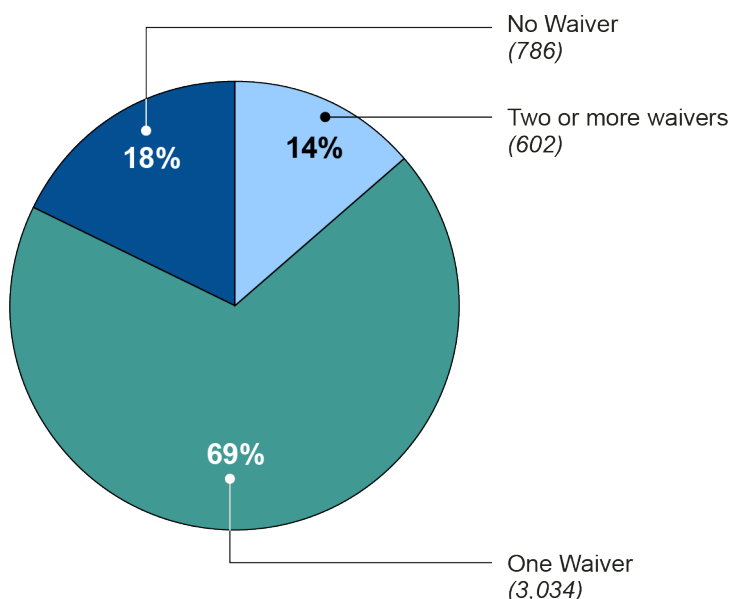
^aA new electronic health records system was introduced in fiscal year 2022.

^bRecruiters may submit more than one waiver request for each applicant.

According to recruiting officials, a decreasing number of 18–25-year-olds are eligible for military service without a waiver of some type. As shown in figure 9, 3,636 of the 4,422 recruits (82 percent) received at least one medical or non-medical waiver (14 percent received two or more).

³⁶The calculated percentage excludes 346 requests that were in a pending status awaiting additional medical documentation as of December 2024. 670 of the 4183 waiver requests were cancelled (applicants declined to continue after additional medical documentation was requested) and 879 were declined.

Figure 9: Coast Guard Recruits with Eligibility Waivers Approved in Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

Note: Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

Increased Medical Waiver Requests Delay the Medical Clearance Process

The increase in medical waiver requests has exceeded the ability of Coast Guard medical professionals to review requests and respond in a timely manner. Recruiting officials reported that it can take up to 2 months to receive a response from Coast Guard medical personnel responsible for reviewing waivers. According to recruiters we spoke to, such delays may create challenges by discouraging potential applicants from continuing the recruiting process or lead them to consider other DOD services or alternate career opportunities.

Impacts of the new electronic health records system. Recruiting officials repeatedly cited the medical clearance process as a significant challenge to completing the recruiting process. Officials reported that the introduction of the new DOD electronic health records system in fiscal year 2022 resulted in routine and extended delays obtaining medical clearances.³⁷ Specifically, the system may identify past injuries or medical

³⁷The version of the electronic health records system deployed to DOD sites and the U.S. Coast Guard is referred to as GENESIS. For more information on GENESIS, see GAO, *Electronic Health Records: DOD Has Deployed New System but Challenges Remain*, [GAO-24-106187](#) (Washington D.C., April 18, 2024).

diagnoses that can often require recruits (or their parents) to document that these conditions no longer exist, which could entail following up with former doctors from early childhood.

In our interviews at five recruiting offices, recruiters stated that the medical clearance process often takes considerable time, and the burden can discourage some recruits from continuing the enlistment process. Some recruiters noted that before the new system was introduced, applicants were largely responsible for self-disclosing their own medical histories via the required health questionnaire and were more likely to omit (or not remember) some of their past medical conditions. Although recruits could still be disqualified for ongoing medical issues or certain chronic conditions, such as asthma, it was less likely that potentially disqualifying medical conditions would be identified unless the applicant provided this information.³⁸

As discussed above, the introduction of the new electronic health records system has given rise to a substantial increase in the number of medical eligibility waivers submitted. A senior recruiting official told us that this increase is not unique to the Coast Guard, but rather, all military services are processing more medical waivers due to their access to electronic health records.

Additional medical reviewers. Recruiting officials we interviewed, including one regional leader, told us that some DOD services could process medical waivers more quickly, which they attributed to additional medical reviewers. In October 2024, a senior recruiting official reported the Coast Guard employed three medical professionals responsible for reviewing medical waiver requests on a full-time basis, and they were in the process of hiring a fourth. According to this official, after onboarding the fourth doctor they will have doubled the service's medical reviewer staffing since 2023. In addition, this official stated that the Coast Guard further increased medical waiver processing resources recently with the addition of surge support from part-time auxiliary doctors when needed.

The Coast Guard also recently made changes to expedite their medical waiver review process based on feedback from recruiting offices, according to a senior recruiting official. Specifically, in July 2024, doctors

³⁸All recruits also remain subject to a medical evaluation performed at a Military Entrance Processing Station during the recruiting process. This evaluation involves a comprehensive physical examination, medical history review, and drug and alcohol screening.

reviewing waivers began prioritizing their reviews by the number of diagnosis codes rather than by the order in which they received the waivers.³⁹ According to this official, waivers with fewer diagnosis codes are quicker to process and are more likely to be approved. For example, doctors can review approximately 15-20 waivers with only one diagnosis code each day, whereas they may only process two to three waivers per day when they have multiple codes.⁴⁰ This official reported that, under the new system, waivers with only one code should be processed within a week of receipt. A senior recruiting official noted that although the new system was primarily intended to process applicants more quickly, it likely contributed to the service's ability to meet its recruiting goal in 2024.

Mental health treatments. According to Coast Guard officials, the use of prescription medications for certain mental health conditions—including anxiety, depression, or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)—is a common reason for applicant disqualifications during the medical clearance process. Existing DOD policy, which is applicable to the Coast Guard, requires an individual to be off any medications for the treatment of anxiety or depression for at least 3 years before they are eligible to request a medical waiver.⁴¹ For anxiety and depression-related disorders, DOD policy also prohibits the enlistment of potential recruits who have accessed any outpatient treatment, including counseling, for a period of longer than 1 year.⁴²

³⁹Medical records routinely use the International Classification of Diseases system to code and classify diagnoses and reason for visits in all health care settings.

⁴⁰A Coast Guard senior recruiting official reported that the chief medical reviewer will also periodically process waivers from the bottom of the pile (i.e., waivers with the most diagnosis codes) so that they are still being reviewed, albeit slowly.

⁴¹DOD Instruction 6130.03, Volume 1, *Medical Standards for Military Service: Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction* (May 6, 2018 [incorporating Change 5, May 28, 2024]). According to officials, service members already in the Coast Guard are permitted to use prescription medications for these conditions and access psychological counseling services.

⁴²According to a 2024 report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 23 percent (or 59.2 million people) of those aged 18 or older received some form of mental health treatment, to include inpatient or outpatient care, or prescription medication in 2023. Approximately 32 percent of adolescents aged 12 to 17 also received some form of mental health treatment in 2023. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (HHS Publication No. PEP24-07-021, NSDUH Series H-59). Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 2024.

According to a senior recruiting official, Coast Guard medical professionals are responsible for reviewing DOD enlistment standards and making any applicable updates to Coast Guard policy. For example, in 2024, Coast Guard officials stated that they reduced restrictions related to applicants with ADHD-related histories from 2 years to 1 year, in accordance with a June 2024 DOD memorandum.⁴³ In addition, in October 2024, a senior Coast Guard recruiting official reported that there was an ongoing effort among DOD and Coast Guard medical personnel to further review medical accession standards, including various treatments and medications associated with ADHD and mental health diagnoses, such as anxiety or depression. Coast Guard officials said there is no set time frame for completing this review.

Coast Guard Has Taken Steps to Enhance Recruiter Effectiveness, but Faces Training and Technology Challenges

In fiscal year 2024, the Coast Guard began taking steps to enhance recruiter effectiveness, but training and technical support challenges have limited these efforts. Specifically, the service initiated a recruiter incentive pay program, offered a new career track for recruiting specialists, and increased recruiter support resources. However, recruiters in four out of five interviews we conducted with recruiting offices cited challenges with receiving effective training in a virtual environment.⁴⁴ Additionally, recruiters in all five interviews reported having a variety of IT challenges—including issues with computer equipment, printers—and system outages or delays, including those related to the primary recruiting website.

Coast Guard Established New Incentive Pay and Recruiter Career Track, but Cited Limitations with Virtual Recruiter Training

Recruiter Incentive Pay Program

Coast Guard officials stated that they established the first version of an incentive pay program for recruiters in October 2023 and updated it to a new version effective in October 2024. Prior to this program's

⁴³Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, *Memorandum: Medical Accession Records Pilot Standard List – Update*. June 5, 2024.

⁴⁴We conducted in-person site visits to a nongeneralizable sample of five Coast Guard recruiting offices across four states to obtain recruiters' perspectives on the recruiting program and identify any associated challenges or potential improvements needed. We selected these offices to represent a combination of different states, recruiting regions, office sizes, annual recruiting results, and proximity to the coastal regions where most Coast Guard units operate.

establishment, they said that recruitment goals were based on each recruitment office, rather than individual recruiters. For example, historically higher performing recruiting offices would have higher goals than lower performing offices. They further stated that under the first version of the incentive pay program, each Coast Guard recruiter had to process a minimum of three recruits per quarter to receive a quarterly incentive payment of approximately \$1000 (in addition to their base pay). Officials added that recruiters would also receive an increased payment for exceeding their 3-recruit goal; however, the increased amount was capped at four recruits.⁴⁵

Recruiters in all our interviews with recruiting offices reported that this initial incentive pay program encouraged Coast Guard recruiters to only meet (and not exceed) their mission target and may have encouraged some recruiters to delay a recruit until the subsequent quarter to achieve a future bonus. Headquarters officials acknowledged that this approach could have encouraged recruiters to hold over recruits until the next quarter to maximize their incentive benefits. In part to address these limitations, headquarters officials stated that they designed a second version of the incentive pay program, which was implemented for fiscal year 2025. According to officials, this version increased the maximum incentive pay bonus up to 10 recruits per quarter, with a decreasing incentive payment beyond five recruits. Officials stated that this change provides additional incentive for recruiters to exceed established targets and alleviates the potential for a recruiter to hold back applicants until a subsequent quarter.

The new version of the incentive pay program also includes several other changes, which address many of the concerns identified during our interviews with Coast Guard recruiters. According to officials, these include the following:

- **Annual bonus available despite missing quarterly goals.** A recruiter, or recruiting office, may miss some quarterly goals but can still receive a bonus for achieving their annual goal, which has remained at 12 recruits per year. Previously, recruiters who missed any of their quarterly goals would have been ineligible for an annual incentive payment.

⁴⁵According to a senior recruiting official, the increased incentive payment was capped at four recruits to help ensure that all recruiters across the Coast Guard had the opportunity to achieve the maximum payment available. The official also noted that incentive payments for recruiters-in-charge were based on overall office performance.

New Career Track for Recruiting Specialists

- **Pay incentive available as a new recruiter.** New recruiters may now earn an incentive payment even if they are still in training. Previously, new recruiters were not eligible for incentive payments until fully qualified, which is typically a 6-month process. This change incentivizes new recruiters to begin processing and sending recruits to Cape May as soon as possible.
- **Disincentive for recruits discharged from Cape May.** If a recruit is sent to Cape May and is subsequently discharged for a reason that should have been addressed at the recruiting office, the pay incentive for the recruiter is revoked. This change is intended to help ensure that candidates sent to Cape May are more likely to successfully complete basic training.

In January 2024, the Coast Guard established a new Talent Acquisition rating for members interested in pursuing a career in recruiting. Traditionally, recruiting has been treated as a special assignment, with recruiters generally completing just one recruiting assignment before returning to their normal duties. Prior to January 2024, the Coast Guard was the only military service without a permanent recruiting specialty for enlisted members.

The Coast Guard is currently implementing the first phase of the Talent Acquisition rating, with subsequent phases planned over the next 2 years. According to officials, the Talent Acquisition rating will be fully implemented in fiscal year 2026. In the first phase, applicants with experience in the Coast Guard's recruiting workforce were considered for selection into 80 designated Talent Acquisition billets. These billets included recruiters-in-charge and other key leadership positions. According to officials, approximately 64 individuals were selected for Talent Acquisition billets as of December 2024. Recruiting officials plan to convert about half of the existing special assignment recruiting positions into Talent Acquisition billets and keep the other half available for members with different ratings who may be interested in a special assignment. Upon completion of a special assignment in recruiting, service members will have the opportunity to apply for selection as a Talent Acquisition Specialist.

Recruiters in four out of five of our interviews with recruiting offices and regional leaders we spoke to agreed that the new Talent Acquisition rating is a positive development and would help ensure a cadre of experienced recruiters who want to pursue recruiting as a career. According to the Coast Guard, the new Talent Acquisition rating will improve efficiency and consistency in the Coast Guard's recruiting efforts.

Selected Recruiters Cited
Limitations with Virtual
Recruiter Training

According to Coast Guard officials, the service has used a virtual format for its 3-week recruiter training course since the COVID-19 pandemic. However, recruiters in four out of five of our interviews with recruiting offices stated that the virtual training they received was not as effective as in-person training due, in part, to limited opportunities for practicing public speaking, which is a key recruiter activity. They stated they would have strongly preferred an in-person, or even a hybrid option, for greater interaction with their peers and more opportunities to share knowledge and practice specific skills needed to successfully recruit. Senior recruiting officials also stated that they would prefer that recruiter training returned (wholly or in part) to an in-person format. As shown in table 4, other military services have returned to in-person recruiter training—with durations ranging between 5-7 weeks.

Table 4: Recruiter Training Format and Duration Across the U.S. Military Services (2024)

| | Service branch | | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| | Coast Guard | Army | Marine Corps | Navy | Air Force |
| Training format | Virtual | In-person | In-person | In-person | In-person |
| Training duration (approximate) | 21 days | 54 days | 35 days | 35 days | 49 days |

Source: GAO summary of service branch information. | GAO-25-107224

However, according to senior recruiting officials at Coast Guard headquarters, there is no longer dedicated space at the Cape May training center to hold the recurring recruiter training. Cape May training officials also confirmed that the prior training space had been repurposed in recent years; however, they reported that a training space could be made available if needed. In May 2024, recruiting officials stated they were considering options to potentially incorporate a training space into a preexisting recruiting office.

Despite this, as of December 2024, there were still no specific plans for identifying a potential training space or implementing an in-person component to the recruiter training.⁴⁶ Officials reported that the Coast Guard Force Readiness Command is in the process of reviewing recruiter and recruiter-in-charge training curricula, driven by a request from

⁴⁶During its review of our draft report in April 2025, the Coast Guard reported that it had identified a training location in St. Louis, Missouri for an in-person component of the recruiter training. However, the information the Coast Guard provided did not include additional details on implementation status or timing.

recruiting officials.⁴⁷ According to these officials, the results of this evaluation should help inform the need for any future changes.

In October 2024, we reported on challenges related to the Coast Guard's review of training courses.⁴⁸ Specifically, we found that Cape May had not met the requirement to review Coast Guard training courses every 3 years. Moreover, Cape May officials stated they did not have adequate resources and staff capacity to conduct all required annual evaluations on the degree to which training impacts job performance.⁴⁹ We previously identified that addressing critical gaps in skills and competencies through training and staff development is a key principle for effective workforce planning.⁵⁰

Given that communication and outreach are foundational skills for recruiters, training Coast Guard recruiters in a format that provides an opportunity to model real-world interactions could enhance recruiter effectiveness. By returning to an in-person, or hybrid format, recruiters would have increased opportunity to interact with peers and practice specific skills necessary to successfully recruit, such as public speaking. In addition, the Coast Guard would be responsive to concerns expressed by both field recruiters and senior recruiting leaders, and would better align with the recruiter training format all other DOD services use.

⁴⁷Coast Guard Force Readiness Command is responsible for developing and implementing training for a wide range of Coast Guard programs.

⁴⁸GAO, *Coast Guard: Additional Actions Needed to Guide Training and Assessment Efforts*, [GAO-25-107025](#) (Washington, D.C., Oct. 30, 2024).

⁴⁹We made three recommendations in this report, including that the Commander of the Force Readiness Command 1) document and implement an approach for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of training center data on triennial course review requirements and 2) assess whether the Force Readiness Command's Level 3 evaluation guidelines are reasonable for training centers and consider whether new guidelines could provide more useful data. These recommendations remain open.

⁵⁰GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C., Dec. 11, 2003).

Coast Guard Initiated
Some Recruiter Support
Initiatives, but Reported
Information Technology
Challenges

Increased Recruiter Support
Resources

According to headquarters officials, the Coast Guard has several initiatives underway to support recruiter effectiveness, including several new or expanded initiatives in fiscal year 2024 and 2025. These initiatives include recruiter development and information sharing, recruiter coaches, SharePoint website and job aids, Cape May visits, and recruiter workload support. See table 5 for a summary of Coast Guard’s initiatives to support recruiter effectiveness.

Table 5: Coast Guard Reported Initiatives to Support Recruiter Effectiveness

| Initiative | Coast Guard description of initiatives |
|---|---|
| Recruiter development and information sharing | <p>According to officials, the Coast Guard hosts various meetings to share information and best practices. For example, officials reported:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• All recruiters-in-charge attend an annual meeting for 3 days to collaborate and share best practices,• Headquarters hosts ongoing weekly calls to discuss updated policy information and other applicable updates, and• Regional leaders routinely host meetings to share information and best practices with the recruiting offices within their region. |
| Recruiter coaches | <p>According to officials, some Coast Guard recruiters travel as needed to help offices struggling to meet their recruiting goals. Recruiter coaches will stay with an office for 2 weeks to assist them and then follow up to check on progress. As of October 2024, the Coast Guard had one recruiter coach and was working to hire two more, with a longer-term goal of hiring one coach per region. According to recruiting officials, they plan to assess the effectiveness of recruiter coaches once the initial three positions have been filled.</p> |
| SharePoint website and job aids | <p>Coast Guard officials identified an effort to centralize recruiting resources and information on a new SharePoint site. This new site will help to consolidate recruiting policies, job aids, and relevant contact information, among other resources. As of March 2025, officials reported that all planned content was migrated to the SharePoint site.</p> |
| Cape May familiarization visits | <p>According to officials, Cape May, the Coast Guard’s recruit training location, hosts voluntary visits for recruiters after they complete their training and report to their respective recruiting offices. This program—in place about two years—hosts about 10 to 15 recruiters several times per year to refamiliarize them to Cape May and the new recruit experience.</p> |
| Additional recruiter support positions | <p>In October 2024, officials reported that the service staffed nearly all recruiting offices with an assistant to support general administrative activities. Officials were working to provide assistants with additional access and capabilities, such as the ability to process documents to support the medical clearance process. Additionally, in 2024, the Coast Guard expanded the number of dedicated officer recruiter positions from 10 to 15, with additional plans to increase the total number of officer recruiters to 30 in the future, according to officials.^a</p> |

Source: GAO summary of Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

Recruiters Reported Challenges with IT Tools and Support

^aAccording to the Coast Guard, these positions are divided between five recruiting offices that process the highest number of officer applicants, such as New York City.

Recruiters in all five of our interviews at recruiting offices stated that they faced a variety of IT challenges, including issues with computer equipment, printers, and system outages. For example, recruiters cited issues obtaining functioning SIM cards for their computers, and common access cards that allow access into DOD facilities and computer networks. Coast Guard officials stated that repairing printers can also be difficult due to necessary connections with a DOD network that has certain security requirements since recruiters often print and scan personally identifying information.

Headquarters officials noted that recruiting offices are often dependent on other Coast Guard units for technology support. However, these units may be several hours away from some recruiting offices. According to officials, the distance can pose delays in receiving technology support. For example, some recruiting offices are several hundred miles away from the closest Coast Guard unit and receiving technology support may take several days. In addition, these Coast Guard units also have their own workload priorities, which can further impact their response times. As noted previously, many of the newly opened and planned recruiting offices are also located further inland, which may exacerbate the potential for delays obtaining technical support.

According to recruiting officials, the service has initiated efforts to mitigate technology issues, such as working with the Coast Guard's technology command to adapt and use mobile capabilities. For example, recruiting officials are working to use a mobile IT system for processing documents. This mobile IT system will allow recruiting offices to use electronic signing, when in the past, recruiters or new recruits had to meet in person, fax, or express deliver signed documents.

Officials noted that electronic signing could also help bring the Coast Guard's technological capabilities up to the standards of those they are recruiting, who are mainly 17 to 18 years old with high expectations for technological functionality. For example, initial applicant packages, which contain 17 forms, will be included in the first version of the mobile IT system. According to officials, the electronic signing beta test for initial application packages began in November 2024 in five recruiting offices (one per region) and was rolled out to all recruiting offices by the end of February 2025.

Challenges Reported with the Coast Guard's Recruiting Website

Apart from this specific project, Coast Guard officials did not identify any other ongoing efforts to help address the IT challenges reported by recruiters. In addition, recruiting officials stated that there are no tracking mechanisms to help determine the scope of the technology issues or the average response times for repairs, and acknowledged that this is a potential area for improvement.

According to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, agencies should use appropriate tools and diagnostic devices to identify, monitor, and resolve issues with malfunctioning equipment and help detect issues with printers and computers, allowing for faster repairs and minimizing downtime.⁵¹ In addition, if computers or printers are malfunctioning, agencies should ensure that structured incident handling procedures are in place to address and resolve the problem efficiently.

Without mechanisms to monitor and resolve IT issues with recruiting tools and systems, recruiters may not be able to effectively perform their job duties and applicant processing could be delayed. By implementing such mechanisms, the Coast Guard would be better positioned to identify IT issues and provide additional tools or support services necessary to prevent extended service delays.

In addition to the IT challenges that limit recruiter support, the primary Coast Guard recruiting website has had persistent technical challenges. However, the service does not routinely monitor the site to ensure it is available as intended, according to Coast Guard officials and our analysis. The gocoastguard.com website serves as the primary entry point for new potential applicants and is referenced in advertisements, print media, and other marketing and outreach efforts. However, recruiters in four out of five interviews stated that this website was subject to extended outages in winter 2024, which impacted their ability to obtain leads during that period.

In May 2024, a senior recruiting official at Coast Guard headquarters reported that this outage affected other Coast Guard websites and was not limited to gocoastguard.com. Another recruiting official noted that this

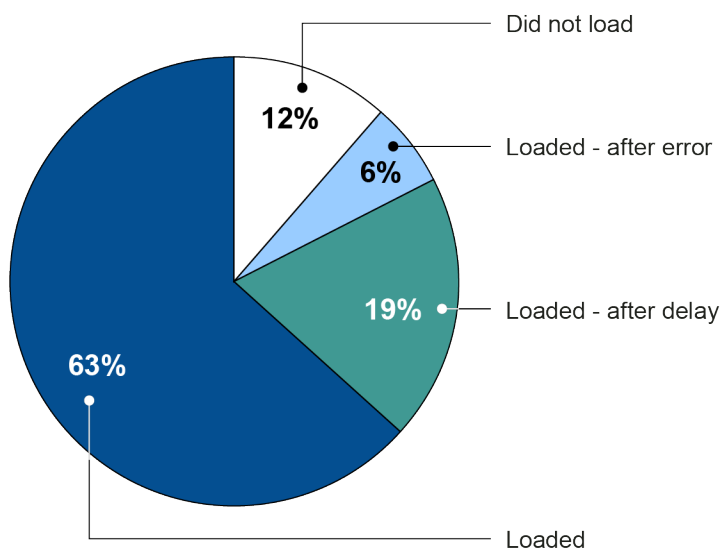
⁵¹National Institute of Standards and Technology, *Security and Privacy Controls for Information Systems and Organizations*, Special Publication 800-53 Revision 5, September 2020. This publication provides a catalog of security and privacy controls for information systems and organizations. However, the controls are intended to be flexible and customizable and implemented as part of an organization-wide process to manage risk, which may include application of IT-related controls outside of a security and privacy context.

was a “painful and costly” outage due to the inability to receive any leads for over a week—a potential loss of up to 300 leads each day or two. At the time of our interviews, the officials considered the issue resolved and did not identify any further technical challenges with the gocoastguard.com website.

However, our subsequent analysis of the gocoastguard.com website availability found that the website continued to experience routine technical issues, such as loading delays or error messages, particularly when using mobile devices. Specifically, during a 2-month period between August and October 2024, we observed that the website experienced delays (greater than 5 seconds) or error messages during loading an average of 25 percent of the time across all devices and web browsers, and failed to load an average of 12 percent of the time.⁵² Figure 10 describes the results of our assessment of the Coast Guard’s recruiting website accessibility.

⁵²We collected data on website functionality using a combination of computers and mobile phones. The website was accessed multiple times a day over a 2-month period, for a total of 130 access attempts. The website was accessed using multiple web browsers (Chrome, Firefox, and Edge) in two U.S. time zones. We experienced the highest number of loading delays and errors or loading failures using mobile phones (32 percent delays/errors and 16 percent failures) versus computers (22 percent and 9 percent, respectively).

Figure 10: GAO Assessment of Coast Guard Recruiting Website Accessibility (gocoastguard.com), August-October 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107224

Note: We collected data on website functionality using a combination of computers and mobile phones during a 2-month period between August and October 2024. The website was accessed multiple times a day for a total of 130 access attempts. The website was accessed using multiple web browsers (Chrome, Firefox, and Edge) across two different U.S. time zones.

Coast Guard officials acknowledged in October 2024 that they were aware of these related technical issues with the recruiting website; but they did not identify any mechanisms to routinely monitor the site's availability. According to officials, the website is hosted externally and is managed through the Coast Guard's Technology Command. Recruiting Command may be made aware of website availability issues on an ad-hoc basis, such as through word of mouth or if the marketing division recognizes a decline in website traffic. However, officials did not identify any specific efforts to collect data on the recruiting website's availability to more fully assess the scope of these issues or inform any remediation priorities.

According to the Office of Management and Budget, federal websites targeted at the public should be available, accessible, and usable on a wide range of devices and platforms.⁵³ Specifically, agencies should

⁵³Office of Management and Budget, *Delivering a Digital-First Public Experience: Memorandum for Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies*, M-23-22, September 2023.

routinely analyze websites for load speed and continually strive to optimize for performance. In addition, agencies must ensure that public-facing websites and digital services are mobile-friendly and developed in such a way that the website may be navigated, viewed, and accessed on a smartphone, tablet computer, or other mobile device.

According to a senior recruiting official, the primary reason for website availability challenges is due to the Coast Guard's transition from physical to cloud based servers around May 2024. After the transition, the Coast Guard recognized the need to redevelop the website to work more effectively on their cloud-based servers, according to this official. However, the timeframes of this effort are uncertain due to competing priorities for other cloud-based technology updates, which include the entirety of the Coast Guard's personnel management system (Direct Access).

Until the Coast Guard develops a process to monitor and resolve issues affecting the availability of its recruiting website, potential applicants could be discouraged or delayed from initiating contact with a recruiter. Given its potential impact and public facing nature, maintaining a fully operational website, and addressing any potential technical issues in a timely manner is critical. By routinely monitoring and analyzing the availability of its recruiting website, including load speeds on multiple device types, the Coast Guard would be better positioned to optimize website performance and help determine priorities for future technology updates.

Conclusions

The Coast Guard relies heavily on the recruiting process to replace departing members and ensure that adequate personnel are available to support its missions. Given the recruiting shortfalls experienced in recent years, it is critical that the Coast Guard continue to strengthen its efforts to attract new applicants and ensure they are effectively supported through the recruiting process. This endeavor requires a combination of targeting and outreach efforts, effective policies and processes, a skilled and incentivized recruiter workforce, and functional IT tools and resources.

The Coast Guard has taken many positive steps to address these components, including expanding the number of recruiting office locations, initiating new outreach efforts, and increasing available bonuses and marketing budgets. Although these are positive developments that help increase awareness of the Coast Guard and attract new recruits, the service has not fully evaluated how these efforts

contribute to recruiting results. Given the ongoing recruiting challenges, it is important to make evidence-based decisions about expanding or revising existing activities and determine how limited recruiting resources can be used most effectively.

The Coast Guard also recently lowered some of its eligibility standards for enlistment; however, waiver requests have increased significantly in recent years and most applicants require at least one waiver to join the service. The Coast Guard has taken steps to help address the backlog of eligibility waiver requests by adding additional medical professionals and establishing a new prioritization process to increase response times for medical reviews. Ongoing collaboration with DOD medical professionals also remains important to help ensure that medical eligibility policies do not adversely impact the Coast Guard's ability to recruit potentially qualified candidates.

In addition, the Coast Guard has recently implemented several new efforts to improve recruiter effectiveness, such as providing incentives for recruiters to meet their goals and establishing a cadre of career recruiters. However, the virtual format of the recruiter training potentially limits its effectiveness. Additional efforts to identify a location and implement an in-person component of this training would help recruiters model real-world interactions, such as public speaking. This could improve the ability of recruiters to conduct outreach activities and effectively engage with potential recruits.

While the Coast Guard has taken steps to provide recruiters with additional support—such as centralizing job resources and sharing best practices—recruiters reported that IT issues can pose challenges to carrying out their job duties. By implementing mechanisms to monitor and resolve these technical issues, the service would be better positioned to provide additional tools or support services necessary to prevent extended service delays. In addition, developing a process to monitor and analyze the availability and load speeds of the gocoastguard.com website could help the service ensure that recruits can effectively access the information from multiple devices and platforms, and would help inform priorities for any future technology updates needed.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following four recommendations to the Coast Guard:

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should further assess how its recruiting and outreach activities contribute to annual recruitment results. (Recommendation 1)

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should implement recruiter training in an in-person or hybrid format. (Recommendation 2)

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should implement mechanisms to monitor and resolve IT issues for recruiter tools and systems. (Recommendation 3)

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should develop a process to routinely monitor and analyze recruiting website availability and load speed to optimize performance, including on mobile devices. (Recommendation 4)

Agency Comments and our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Homeland Security and the Coast Guard for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix II, the Department of Homeland Security concurred with all four of our recommendations and described the Coast Guard's planned actions and proposed timeframes to address them. However, we observed that proposed actions for Recommendation 3 were related to the recruiting website, rather than the recruiter tools and systems discussed in this report. Additional actions will be needed to be responsive to this recommendation and we will continue to monitor related Coast Guard efforts to address these issues. The Department of Homeland Security also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Commandant of the Coast Guard. In addition, this report is available at no charge on the GAO website: <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at MacLeodH@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

//SIGNED//

Heather MacLeod
Director, Homeland Security and Justice

Appendix I: Enlistment Eligibility Criteria Across U.S. Military Service Branches

The Department of Defense (DOD) publishes standard eligibility criteria for enlistment to each military service branch, including the Coast Guard.¹ These criteria include age, citizenship, number of dependents, education, and Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) scores. As shown in figure 11, each service branch may also implement service-specific standards. Figure data is generally applicable to new recruits without prior service. Applicants may also be eligible to receive a waiver for some of the enlistment eligibility criteria below on a case-by-case basis.

¹DOD Instruction 13404.26, *Qualification Standards for Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction*, March 23, 2015 (incorporating Change 3, October 26, 2018).

Appendix I: Enlistment Eligibility Criteria
Across U.S. Military Service Branches

Figure 11: Selected Enlisted Eligibility Criteria Across U.S. Military Service Branches, 2025

| | Service branch ^a | | | | | Department of Defense ^b Basic entrance qualification standards for all service branches |
|---|---|---------------------------|------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| | Coast Guard | Army | Navy | Department of the Air Force ^c | Marine Corps | |
| Age | 17-41 | 17-34 | 17-41 | 17-41 | 17-28 | 17-41 |
| Citizenship | Enlistment is generally restricted to U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, U.S. nationals, and citizens of Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. 10 U.S.C. § 504(b). | | | | | |
| Dependents Maximum number of minor dependents for married members | Generally, the maximum number of minor dependents for married members without other dependents is two. ^d | | | | No minor dependents without a waiver | Generally, the maximum number of minor dependents for married members is two. ^d |
| Minimum education | Generally, minimum education requirements for enlistment include either a high school diploma, GED, or alternative equivalent credential. Individuals without alternative equivalent credentials may still be eligible to enlist, subject to additional service-based requirements. Each service utilizes a tiered system for evaluating educational qualifications, often in conjunction with Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) scores. | | | | | High school diploma desirable |
| AFQT score^e | | | | | | |
| - with high school diploma or equivalent | Generally 32 | Generally 31 ^g | 31 | 36 ^h | 21 | Generally 31 ⁱ |
| - with a GED or other alternative credential | 47 | | 50 | 50 | 31 | |
| - without an alternative credential | 65 ^j | | | 65 | 50 | |
| Tattoos^j | | | | | | |
| Prohibited locations | Head and face | | | | Head, face, neck, and hand | No published location restrictions |
| Permitted locations with limitations | Neck, hand, and finger | Neck | Neck, hand, and finger | Finger | | |

Source: GAO summary of Department of Defense, Coast Guard, and other military service branch information. | GAO-25-107224

Note: Information provided is generally applicable to new recruits without prior service and some enlistment eligibility criteria may be waived on a case-by-case basis.

^aFor service branch policies as of March 2025, see Coast Guard Instruction 1100.2H (2023); Army Regulation 601-210 (2023); Navy Recruiting Manual 1130.8N (2024); Department of the Air Force Manual 36-2032 (2024); Marine Corps Order 1100.1 (2011).

^bFor DOD policy as of March 2025, see DOD Instruction 13404.26 (2015).

^cThe Department of the Air Force Manual 36-2032, *Military Recruiting and Accessions*, is applicable to the Air Force Space Force, Air Force Reserve, and the Air National Guard. These components may impose additional criteria.

^dEach service has different standards for specific subsets of the population, including members with military spouses or in certain paygrades. Some services take custody status into consideration.

**Appendix I: Enlistment Eligibility Criteria
Across U.S. Military Service Branches**

^eAFQT scores are derived from the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). As discussed above, each service uses a tier-based system to evaluate applicant education. Generally, Tier I applicants will have a high school diploma or equivalent, Tier II applicants will have a GED or other alternative credential, and Tier III applicants will not have an alternative credential. However, the way in which education is evaluated varies by service.

^fAn AFQT score of 65 or higher is required for applicants with a secondary school diploma that is not recognized by the applicable State's board of education as a high school equivalent diploma.

^gSee Army Regulation 601-210 (2023) for test score categories used to determine enlistment.

^hApplicants must obtain an AFQT score of 36 or higher on the ASVAB. As determined by each component, applicants who otherwise meet all qualifications may enlist with an AFQT of 31 or higher. Department of the Air Force Manual 36-2032 (2024).

ⁱDOD policy establishes that the number of persons who enlist with a score below 31 cannot exceed 20 percent of the total number of persons enlisted by a service in a given year. Similarly, statute restricts the total number of enlisted members who do not meet the minimum required score to a maximum of four percent of the active-duty workforce. However, the Secretary of the applicable military service may request an increase up to 20 percent of the active-duty workforce in a given fiscal year. 10 U.S.C. § 520(a).

^jContent restrictions still apply for all tattoos regardless of location (e.g., racist, extremist, or sexist tattoos are not permitted). Services may permit tattoos in certain locations with restrictions, such as the size, number, and type of tattoos. Additional general location restrictions may apply by service, such as those concerning how many tattoos are visible while in uniform. Services may exempt some permanent makeup and cosmetic tattoos from general tattoo prohibitions. For current policies: Army Regulation 670-1 (2021); Army Directive 2022-09 (2022); NAVPERS 15665J (2021); Marine Corps Bulletin 1020 (2021); Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-2903 (2022); U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Instruction 1000.1E (2022). For more information, see GAO, *Military Personnel: Armed Forces Should Clarify Tattoo Policies' Waiver Guidance*, [GAO-22-105676](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 17, 2022).

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland
Security**

BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

May 6, 2025

Heather MacLeod
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-25-107224, "COAST GUARD:
Progress Made to Address Recruiting Challenges, but Additional Actions
Needed"

Dear Ms. MacLeod,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS, or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's recognition that the Coast Guard took actions to reach potential recruits by expanding the number of recruiting office locations, initiating new outreach efforts, offering bonuses to eligible recruits, and increasing marketing efforts. The Coast Guard remains committed to strengthening the effectiveness of recruiting and outreach activities to recruit qualified personnel critical to enhance the readiness and execution of its multiple statutory missions.

The draft report contained four recommendations with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO's consideration, as appropriate.

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Homeland Security**

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

JIM H CRUMPACKER

Digitally signed by JIM H
CRUMPACKER
Date: 2025.05.06 12:47:26 -04'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations
Contained in GAO-25-107224**

GAO recommended the Acting Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard:

Recommendation 1: Further assess how its recruiting and outreach activities contribute to annual recruitment results.

Response: Concur. The Coast Guard Recruiting Command (CG RC) will continue its efforts to modernize its operations. CG RC will also work with its partners, including the Command, Control, Communication, Computer, Cyber and Intelligence (C5I) Service Center, marketing contract vendor(s), and the Department of Defense Joint Advertising, Market Research & Studies (JAMRS) program, as appropriate, to develop surveys, analytic capabilities, and budget forecasting tools to maximize the impact of available funding, advertising, and personnel. The timeline for full implementation of these efforts will be impacted by the need to stabilize workforce projections and CG RC locations. CG RC will update related goals and projections by September 30, 2025. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): To be determined.

Recommendation 2: Implement recruiter training in an in-person or hybrid format.

Response: Concur. CG RC began work to develop a dedicated Recruiter Training location in fall 2024. Currently, the Coast Guard's Force Readiness Command (FORCEOM) evaluation staff is conducting a full-scale review of recruiter curriculum, considering a direct request from CG RC to evaluate the impact of returning to a hybrid training model for the person-to-person portion of talent acquisition efforts. The recruiter school is under construction. Further, CG RC anticipates FORCECOM will provide further guidance regarding whether and how best to utilize hybrid training following completion of its review of recruiter curriculum. ECD: March 31, 2026.

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Homeland Security**

Recommendation 3: Implement mechanisms to monitor and resolve IT issues for recruiter tools and systems.

Response: Concur. CG RC is leading implementation efforts in coordination with the C5I Service Center, contractor vendor(s), and others, as appropriate, to routinely monitor and analyze recruiting website availability and load speed, including on mobile devices. For example, the C5I Service Center is leading the following completed, ongoing, and planned actions:

| Action | ECD |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Migrating Coast Guard recruiting website, GoCoastGuard.com , from a traditional hosting environment to Amazon Web Services (AWS) to enhance performance, scalability, and resiliency.. | Completed on June 30, 2024 |
| Operating Coast Guard recruiting website, GoCoastGuard.com , within Elastic Compute Cloud (EC2) Auto Scaling Groups, allowing automatic adjustment of capacity based on demand. | Completed on September 30, 2024 |
| Implementing Network Load Balancers and Application Load Balancers to distribute traffic across multiple AWS Availability Zones, improving availability and response times. | Completed on January 31, 2025 |
| Migrating Coast Guard recruiting websites to Red Hat Enterprise Linux (RHEL). ¹ This will enable automated notifications and email alerts in the event of degraded performance or outages. | June 30, 2025 |
| Implementing baseline monitoring using Amazon CloudWatch and configuring alerting mechanisms for outages and load issues. | July 31, 2025 |
| Developing EC2 Image Pipelines to automate the provisioning of new server instances using monthly base images that are Security Technical Implementation Guide-compliant. Once implemented, this will allow us to roll out the latest security updates and performance enhancements into production environments more quickly and reliably. | August 29, 2025 |
| Upgrading the software stacks supporting Coast Guard recruiting websites, including the Drupal content management system and the Next.js frontend framework, to improve performance, enhance security, and ensure continued support from their respective communities. | October 31, 2025 |
| Working with Coast Guard Networking Teams and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate, to ensure that GoCoastGuard.com reflects best practices for high availability, resiliency, and performance. | November 28, 2025 |

¹ RHEL is a commercial, open-source Linux distribution designed for enterprise use to improve stability, security, and reliability, and is used in various industries for servers, workstations, and cloud deployments.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Homeland Security

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| Initiating efforts to define and implement a robust Disaster Recovery strategy to further strengthen operational continuity. | December 31, 2025 |
|--|-------------------|

Overall ECD: December 31, 2025.

Recommendation 4: Develop a process to routinely monitor and analyze recruiting website availability and load speed to optimize performance, including on mobile devices.

Response: Concur. The Coast Guard aims to implement real-time alerting systems to promptly notify when the [GoCoastGuard.com](https://www.go CoastGuard.com) website experiences performance degradation to ensure a seamless user experience. Additionally, the Coast Guard will explore the development of performance metrics and benchmarks to assess website availability and performance. By leveraging advanced monitoring tools, the Service seeks to proactively optimize the user experience and ensure consistent, high-quality service. Accordingly, the C5I Service Center will lead Coast Guard efforts to establish a process to routinely assess existing system monitoring to confirm it effectively identifies and prioritizes outages or degradations to ensure timely response to incidents impacting recruiter functions. ECD: December 31, 2025.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Heather MacLeod, MacLeodH@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Dawn Hoff (Assistant Director), Ryan Lambert (Analyst-in-Charge), Lauri Barnes, Daniel Bolton, Ben Crossley, Bethany Gracer, Amanda Miller, and Mary Offutt-Reagin made key contributions to this report.

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