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COAST GUARD

Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues

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 about 55,500 personnel across the service, about 30,600 of which were active duty enlisted service members. However, in recent years, the Coast Guard has reported operating below the workforce level it deems necessary to meet operational demands.

GAO was asked to review how the Coast Guard addresses service member retention issues. This report examines (1) trends in retention data for enlisted service members, (2) issues that may influence service member retention, and (3) how the Coast Guard addresses retention challenges.

GAO analyzed Coast Guard data on enlisted service member losses and reviewed documentation of Coast Guard efforts to address retention issues. This included its survey analyses, strategic plans, and implementation guidance on retention incentives and related initiatives. GAO also conducted discussion groups with service members in three Coast Guard districts about retention.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that the Coast Guard implement additional mechanisms to increase response rates and analyze the potential for nonresponse bias in its Career Intention Survey, and develop a clear plan to support its retention initiatives. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with these recommendations.

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What GAO Found

Coast Guard data shows that the service lost more enlisted service members than it recruited from fiscal years 2019 through 2023. For example, in fiscal year 2023, the Coast Guard lost more than 3,800 enlisted service members and recruited 3,126. This trend changed in fiscal year 2024, when the Coast Guard recruited over 1,000 more enlisted service members than it lost. However, even with this gain, it remained approximately 2,600 enlisted service members short of its enlisted workforce target.

Coast Guard enlisted and officer service members identified retention issues that GAO grouped into four categories: (1) rotations and support services, (2) work environment and culture, (3) compensation and career advancement, and (4) incentives and benefits (see figure). These results were based on GAO discussions with service members and the Coast Guard's Career Intention Survey (2021-2023).

Retention Issues Cited in GAO Discussion Groups with Coast Guard Service Members and Coast Guard Career Intention Survey Responses (2021-2023)
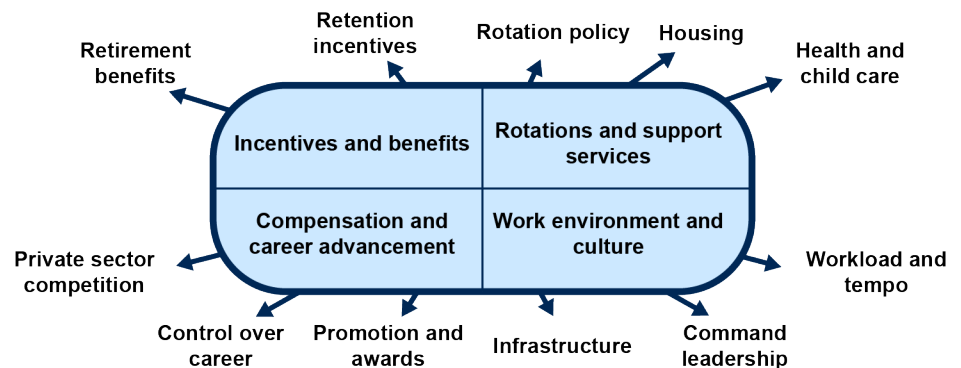
Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-25-107869

The Coast Guard has taken steps to address retention challenges by offering monetary and nonmonetary incentives. As of 2022, it also began to require service members to complete its Career Intention Survey to help identify key issues affecting retention. However, despite this requirement, response rates remained consistently low—at 39 percent in 2023—and the Coast Guard has not taken steps to analyze and improve response rates. By implementing additional mechanisms to increase survey response rates and completing a nonresponse bias analysis, the Coast Guard could better assess retention issues and enhance its ability to develop relevant initiatives.

In 2024, the Coast Guard established its Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office to enable, accelerate, and track human capital initiatives, including those focused on retention. However, this office has not developed a clear plan that aligns initiatives with strategic objectives and includes time frames and key milestones. With a clear plan, the office can more effectively support its initiatives and gauge program performance, which can help improve retention and enhance the Coast Guard's ability to carry out its missions.

United States Government Accountability Office