



Report to the Committee on
Transportation and Infrastructure, House
of Representatives

April 2025

COAST GUARD

Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107869](#), 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 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.

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

April 2025

COAST GUARD

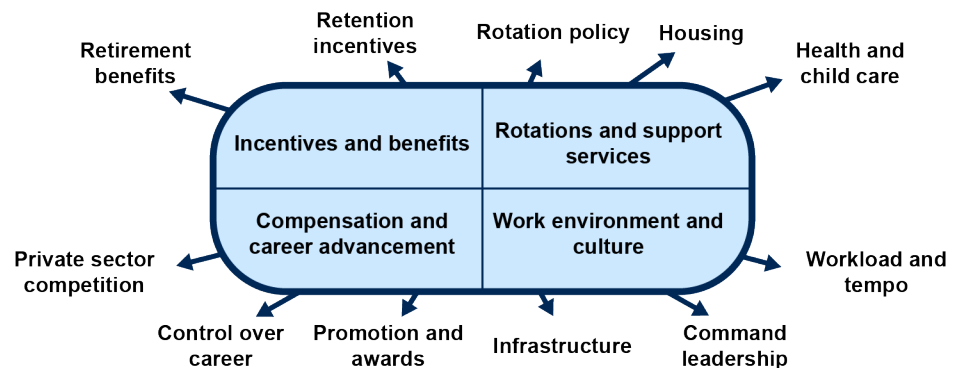
Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues

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.

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April 23, 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, is the principal federal entity responsible for maritime safety, security, and environmental stewardship. In 2024, the Coast Guard employed approximately 55,500 personnel across the entire service. Approximately 55 percent (about 30,600) of these personnel were active-duty enlisted service members, while the remainder of the workforce included active-duty officers, civilians, and reservists. These service members are responsible for multiple operational missions, including search and rescue, aids to navigation, and marine environmental protection.

According to Coast Guard data, the service was short approximately 2,600 active-duty enlisted service members at the end of fiscal year 2024. As a result, the Coast Guard was operating below the workforce level it deemed necessary to meet its operational demands. In 2024, the service reported that it temporarily closed some small stations and decommissioned some ships and patrol boats earlier than planned due to workforce gaps. We have previously reported on challenges that the service faced retaining its workforce due to competition with higher paying jobs in the private sector, limited opportunities for promotion, and quality-of-life issues such as health care and housing.¹

You asked us to examine how the Coast Guard addresses service member retention issues. This report discusses (1) trends in retention data for Coast Guard enlisted service members from fiscal years 2017

¹GAO, *Coast Guard: Recruitment and Retention Challenges Persist*, [GAO-23-106750](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2023). Reports referenced in this statement discuss the Coast Guard's retention challenges. For example, see GAO, *Coast Guard: Workforce Planning Actions Needed to Address Growing Cyberspace Mission Demands*, [GAO-22-105208](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2022) and *Coast Guard Health Care: Additional Actions Could Help Ensure Beneficiaries' Access*, [GAO-23-105574](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 4, 2023). For more information on our prior work and related recommendations, see appendix I.

through 2024; (2) issues that may influence service member retention in the Coast Guard; and (3) how the Coast Guard addresses retention challenges.²

To analyze trends in retention data for Coast Guard enlisted service members, we reviewed the Coast Guard's data for fiscal years 2017 through 2024 related to retention. This included data on service member losses by type of loss and changes in this data over time. We selected this time frame to include retention data from before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. To assess the reliability of the data, we interviewed officials about how the data were generated and reviewed related documentation. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this objective.

To determine issues that may influence the retention of Coast Guard service members (enlisted and officers), we reviewed the Coast Guard's analysis of its retention-related surveys, including questions and results, for calendar years 2021 through 2023. We also conducted in-person site visits to a nongeneralizable sample of three districts within the Coast Guard (District 5 – Portsmouth, VA; District 8 – New Orleans, LA; and District 13 – Seattle, WA). We selected sites to obtain a range of perspectives on retention-related issues and challenges. This included locations with multiple sectors across broad geographic areas representing a range of unit sizes and types. These units vary from small to large and are situated in both isolated and populated locations, and included boat stations, air stations, and bases. While the information obtained during the site visits is not generalizable to all service members, it provided valuable context into issues that may influence service member retention.

On these site visits, we conducted 12 discussion groups across 12 different field units that included 63 service members (a range of 3 to 10 service members per discussion) on retention-related issues. We conducted these discussion groups with a combination of enlisted members and officers (of various ratings and pay grades) with a range of experiences serving in units both ashore and afloat to ensure our analysis included diverse experiences within the Coast Guard. During these discussion groups, we asked open-ended questions regarding issues

²This report is a companion to our May 2025 report that examined Coast Guard's recruitment efforts and related challenges. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Progress Made to Address Recruiting Challenges, but Additional Actions Needed*, GAO-25-107224 (Washington, D.C.: May 14, 2025).

affecting retention, as well as selected questions about specific retention issues identified in prior discussions and in Coast Guard survey responses.³ As a result, service members may have agreed that additional items were issues affecting retention because we asked directly about them.

We performed a content analysis of the 12 discussions. Multiple analysts reviewed each discussion summary and identified an initial list of categories and themes, which allowed us to group and assess similar statements across interviews. The information from our discussion groups is not representative of all service members; however, it provides valuable information on service members' perspectives. As such, this analysis formed the primary basis for our findings on service members' perspectives.

We also reviewed the Department of Defense's Basic Allowance for Housing program, including changes in provided allowances for certain enlisted pay grades within the districts we conducted our discussion groups. In addition, we reviewed Department of Defense and Coast Guard policy documentation related to the Blended Retirement System to determine the implications of retirement system changes on the retention of service members.

To assess how the Coast Guard addresses retention challenges, we reviewed Coast Guard documents related to retention efforts, such as strategic plans, policies, and implementation guidance. We reviewed the Coast Guard's process for prioritizing and implementing retention incentives, including incentives offered in fiscal years 2024 and 2025. We also reviewed the Coast Guard's retention-related surveys, including distribution methods, response rates, and limitations, for calendar years 2018 through 2023.⁴ In addition, we interviewed headquarters officials to understand the Coast Guard's policies and efforts to retain service members, including its data collection and analysis, and any recent or planned changes to address retention-related challenges. We compared these efforts against leading workforce planning practices related to retention that we identified in our previous work and Office of

³Specifically, we began each discussion group with the question, "What key issues do you think contribute to service members leaving the Coast Guard?"

⁴The results of the 2023 Career Intention Survey were the most recent available survey results at the time of our review.

Management and Budget (OMB) criteria on statistical analyses and surveys.

We conducted this performance audit from December 2023 through April 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 the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Coast Guard Military Workforce

The Coast Guard employs about 55,500 personnel across the entire service. Its military workforce consists of active-duty service members (enlisted and officer) and reservists. Table 1 describes the Coast Guard's military workforce.

Table 1: Descriptions of Coast Guard Military Workforce

Military workforce	Description of military workforce	Number and percent of total Coast Guard military workforce (2024)
Active Duty Enlisted	Once enlisted service members complete recruit training, they leave 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-school to learn one of the Coast Guard's job specialties, commonly known as a rating. ^a According to the Coast Guard, enlisted service members have 22 ratings, including Maritime Enforcement Specialists, Electrician's Mates, and Machinery Technicians, among others. A Talent Acquisition Specialist rating will be added in fiscal year 2025.	30,602 (67 percent)
Active Duty Officer	The officer corps is comprised of graduates from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and Officer Candidate School, service members 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 provides all members with leadership and professional development. The Coast Guard officer corps is largely involved in duties that provide direct or indirect leadership to day-to-day activities of the deployable, mobile or shore-based forces that execute service missions.	8,880 (19 percent)
Reservists	These are part-time enlisted and officer service members. They are trained and qualified to serve in times of war or national emergency, to augment the Coast Guard's forces, and to provide surge capacity to respond to natural or human-made disasters, accidents, and all other hazards.	6,323 (14 percent)

Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-25-107869

Note: The Coast Guard also employed 9,650 civilian staff in 2024.

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

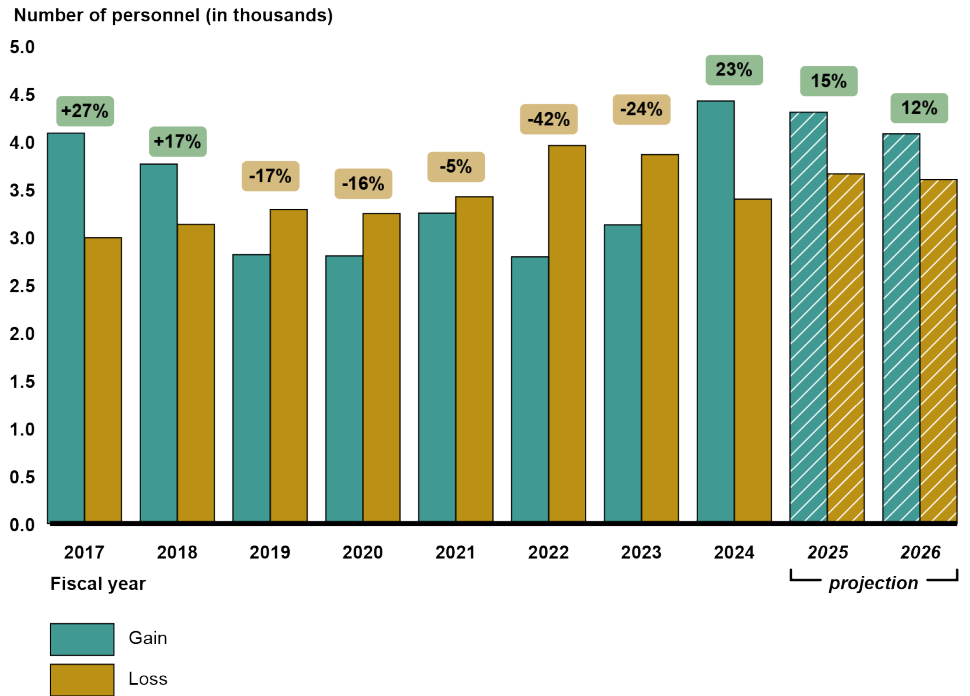
Coast Guard Lost More Enlisted Service Members Than It Recruited from Fiscal Years 2019 through 2023

While Coast Guard enlisted service member gains exceeded losses in fiscal years 2017 and 2018, the Coast Guard consistently lost more enlisted service members than it recruited from fiscal years 2019 through 2023. For example, in 2023, the Coast Guard lost more than 3,800 enlisted service members and recruited 3,126. This trend changed in fiscal year 2024, when enlisted gains exceeded losses by over 1,000 service members.⁵ The Coast Guard projects continued net gains in fiscal years 2025 and 2026 (see fig. 1).

Even with these net gains, the service remained approximately 2,600 enlisted service members short of its enlisted workforce target, or 8.5 percent of its total enlisted workforce, at the end of fiscal year 2024. Additionally, if the Coast Guard were to meet its projected net gains, the service would remain approximately 1,600 enlisted service members short of its enlisted workforce target at the end of fiscal year 2026. However, in March 2025 the Coast Guard stated that updated projections indicated that workforce targets will be likely be achieved sometime in calendar year 2026.

⁵Losses for officers and reservists also increased between fiscal years 2020 and 2022 and then began decreasing in fiscal year 2023.

Figure 1: Coast Guard Enlisted Service Member Gains, Losses, and Projections, Fiscal Years 2017–2026



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107869

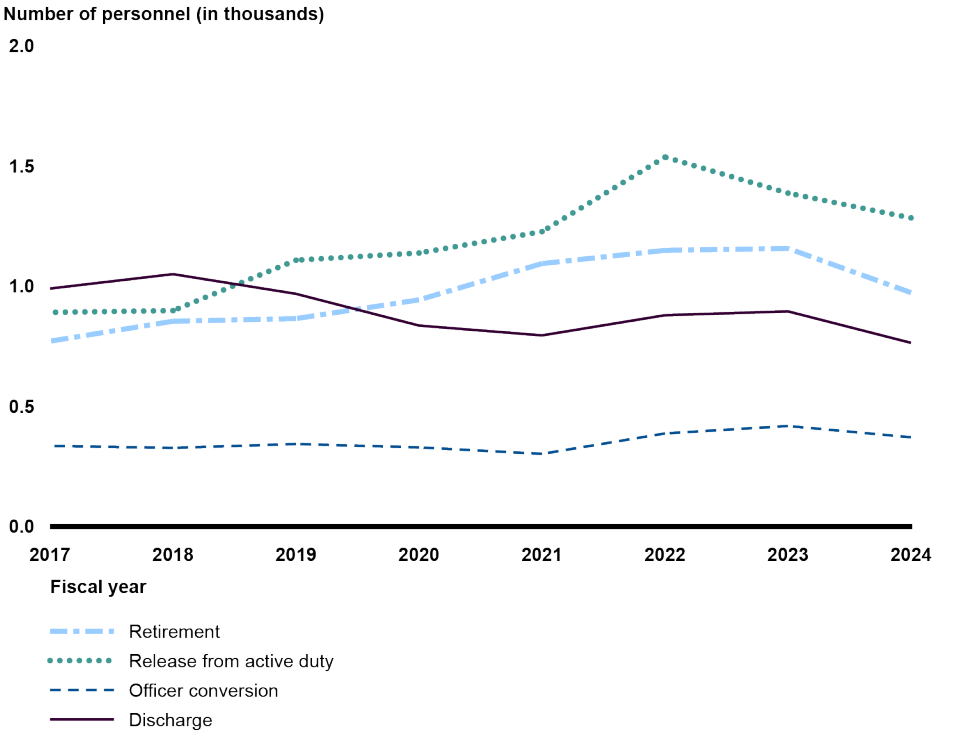
Note: Percentages represent the net service member gain or loss for each fiscal year.

The Coast Guard’s data categorized enlisted service member losses into four categories, including retirement, release from active duty, officer conversion, and discharge.⁶ As shown in figure 2, in fiscal year 2024, 67 percent of service member losses were due to retirement or release from active duty. Coast Guard officials stated that enlisted service member

⁶Retirement includes enlisted service members that separate from the service, either (1) voluntarily after reaching 20 years in service or (2) mandatorily after reaching the maximum age allowed by statute (62 years). 14 U.S.C. § 2304. Release from active duty refers to enlisted service members that move from active duty into the reserve force. Officer conversions include enlisted service members who move into the commissioned officer or warrant officer rank. Discharge refers to enlisted service members that separate from the workforce (either voluntarily or non-voluntarily) and are not released into the reserve force.

losses increased in recent years due to a surge of enlisted service members, hired in the early 2000's, becoming eligible for retirement.⁷

Figure 2: Coast Guard Enlisted Service Member Losses by Type, Fiscal Years 2017—2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-25-107869

Notes: Retirement includes enlisted service members that separate from the service, either (1) voluntarily after reaching 20 years in service or (2) mandatorily after reaching the maximum age allowed by statute (62 years). 14 U.S.C. § 2304. Release from active duty refers to enlisted service members that move from active duty into the reserve force. Officer conversions include enlisted service members who move into the commissioned officer or warrant officer rank. Discharge refers to enlisted service members that separate from the workforce (either voluntarily or non-voluntarily) and are not released into the reserve force.

In fiscal year 2024, about 11 percent of enlisted service member losses were due to officer conversion, while 23 percent were due to discharges. The majority of discharges were due to unsuitability (61 percent) or conduct (33 percent). Unsuitability discharges include causes such as

⁷We reported in 2004 that the Coast Guard experienced a 9 percent increase in personnel following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Relationship between Resources Used and Results Achieved Needs to Be Clearer*. [GAO-04-432](#) (Washington, D.C., Mar. 22, 2004).

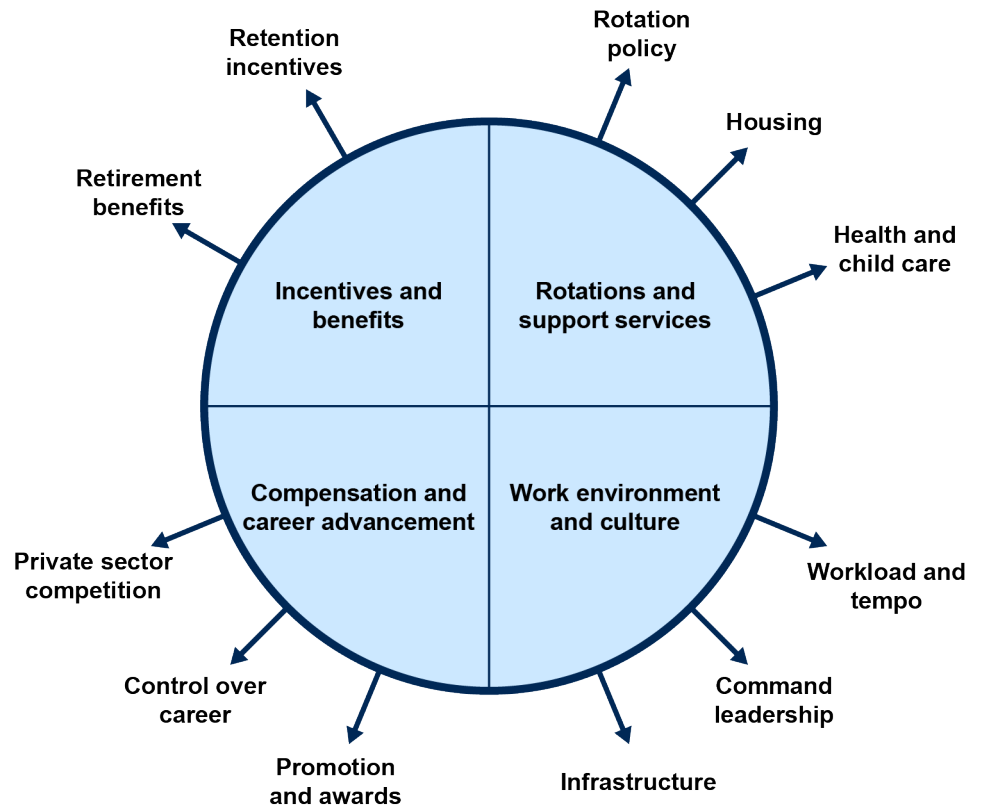
inaptitude or personality disorders while misconduct discharges include causes such as unauthorized absences and serious offenses. The remaining 6 percent of discharges were due to permanent injury, hardship, and other factors.

Coast Guard Service Members Identified Multiple Issues That Affected Retention

In our discussion groups with Coast Guard enlisted and officer service members and Coast Guard survey results, service members identified key issues affecting retention that we grouped into four categories: (1) rotations and support services, (2) work environment and culture, (3) compensation and career advancement, and (4) incentives and benefits. We identified these categories based on our analysis of twelve discussion groups we conducted with 63 Coast Guard service members and the results of the Coast Guard's 2021—2023 Career Intention Surveys (see fig. 3).⁸

⁸The Coast Guard's Career Intention Survey has been administered for over 15 years and identifies variation in work satisfaction and engagement between members who remain with the Coast Guard and those who leave. The service emails this survey to active-duty enlisted members and officers at key points in their career progression. More information on the Coast Guard's Career Intention Survey is discussed later in the report.

Figure 3: 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

As described throughout the following paragraphs, we have previously reported on and made recommendations regarding the Coast Guard's retention challenges, including some related to specific issues identified in figure 3. Specifically, in 10 reports issued since 2016, we have made 39 recommendations to the Coast Guard on issues that may impact retention. As of February 2025, the Coast Guard had taken steps to fully implement 11 recommendations and partially addressed three. For more information on our prior work and related recommendations, see appendix I.

Frequent Rotations and Access to Support Services

According to our discussions with service members in 2024, frequent moves resulting from the Coast Guard's rotation policy made it difficult to find housing, health care, and childcare.⁹

Rotation policy. Service members in all 12 discussion groups stated that the Coast Guard's rotation policy caused stress for service members and/or their families. For example, one service member stated that certain aspects of the rotation process, such as finding housing, schooling, daycare, and spousal employment, distracted service members from their work and negatively impacted performance. In addition, service members in seven of 12 discussion groups stated that they would prefer geographic stability due to the difficulties of moving to a new location every few years.¹⁰ The Coast Guard's 2021 Career Intention Survey results also indicated that geographic instability contributed to service member separation. In addition, according to the Coast Guard, the 2023 Career Intention Survey results indicated that 50 percent of service members surveyed said that relocating every 2 to 4 years had a significant influence on service members leaving the service.¹¹

Housing. Service members in 11 of 12 discussion groups stated that they found it difficult to obtain safe and affordable housing near their assigned units.¹² For example, service members reported living several hours away from their assigned duty stations because they could not afford housing nearby.¹³ The Department of Defense's Basic Allowance for Housing

⁹To conduct its missions, the Coast Guard assigns service members to duty stations at a wide range of operating locations, including aboard ships. Coast Guard service members, and often their families, must reside near its operating locations. The Coast Guard annually rotates over 40 percent of its active-duty workforce to new duty stations, according to officials. For more information on the Coast Guard's rotation process and requirements, see GAO, *Coast Guard: Better Feedback Collection and Monitoring Could Improve Support for Duty Station Rotations*, [GAO-25-107238](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 18, 2024).

¹⁰Tour lengths for assignments typically vary from one to four years depending on the type of assignment (e.g., continental United States, overseas, afloat, etc.).

¹¹We previously reported on the Coast Guard's rotation challenges. See [GAO-25-107238](#) and appendix I for more information.

¹²According to officials, the Career Intention Survey does not ask questions that directly address housing benefits, but there is a subset of adjacent questions on the requirement to relocate geographically.

¹³We previously reported on challenges related to private sector housing for Coast Guard service members. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Better Feedback Collection and Information Could Enhance Housing Program*, [GAO-24-106388](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 5, 2024) and appendix I for more information.

program provides an allowance to assist military service members, including the Coast Guard, with rental and utility costs.¹⁴ However, Coast Guard service members we interviewed stated that this allowance decreased for certain enlisted pay grades in 2024.¹⁵

Health and childcare. Service members in 11 of 12 discussion groups stated that they had difficulty finding available and affordable health care or childcare.¹⁶ For example, several service members reported complications accessing providers who accept military health insurance.¹⁷ In addition, service members reported challenges finding childcare on short notice when the Coast Guard assigned them to a new unit.¹⁸

Demanding Work Environments and Challenges with Culture

According to our discussions with service members in 2024, challenges within their assigned units such as high workloads, command leadership, and physical and technical infrastructure issues decreased morale and affected retention.

¹⁴The Department of Defense's Basic Allowance for Housing is a tax-free allowance provided to uniformed service members under 37 U.S.C. § 403 to assist them with rental and utility costs, if they are stationed in the United States, and government-provided quarters are not available. We previously reported that the Department of Defense did not collect enough data on some locations and housing types to accurately represent housing costs in 44 percent of military housing areas. See GAO, *Military Housing: Actions Needed to Improve the Process for Setting Allowances for Service Members and Calculating Payments for Privatized Housing Projects*, [GAO-21-137](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 25, 2021).

¹⁵Our review of allowances provided under the Basic Allowance for Housing program for certain enlisted pay grades within the districts where we conducted our interviews showed that allowances either increased at a lower rate or decreased in comparison to certain officer pay grades from 2023 to 2024. For example, the allowance for service members with dependents in New Orleans, LA, decreased 3.8 percent for the E-4 pay grade and 4.6 percent for the E-6 pay grade, whereas the allowance for the O-3 pay grade increased 12.7 percent in 2024.

¹⁶The Coast Guard's analysis of its 2021-2023 Career Intention Survey results did not specifically identify health or childcare as key contributors to service member separation.

¹⁷We previously reported on challenges related to access to medical and dental care for Coast Guard service members. See GAO, *Coast Guard Health Care: Additional Actions Could Help Ensure Beneficiaries' Access*, [GAO-23-105574](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 4, 2023) and appendix I for more information.

¹⁸We previously reported on challenges related to the Coast Guard's child development centers. See GAO, *Military Child Care: Coast Guard is Taking Steps to Increase Access for Families*, [GAO-22-105262](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2022) and appendix I for more information.

Workload and operational tempo. Service members in 11 of 12 discussion groups cited challenges with high workloads and operational tempos. For example, several service members reported that staffing shortages had resulted in more collateral duties, which increased the burden and demand on members who remained with the service. The Coast Guard's 2021 and 2023 Career Intention Surveys also identified that unfair distribution of workloads contributed to service member separation.¹⁹

Command leadership. Service members in 10 of 12 discussion groups stated that command leadership inconsistently applied policy, resulting in a poor command climate. For example, one service member stated that leadership strictly enforced small infractions for some members but overlooked consistent performance issues for other members, which service members perceived as unfair. In addition, service members in six of 12 discussion groups stated that leadership mishandled instances of sexual assault and harassment. For example, service members stated that investigations of sexual assault and harassment were not conducted fairly or thoroughly, which led to a sense of injustice and dissatisfaction. Service members suggested that assigning investigators outside of the unit, or even a third-party organization, could improve the perceived fairness and effectiveness of investigations. The Coast Guard's 2021 and 2023 Career Intention Surveys identified that racial discrimination, poor unit morale, and unfair resolutions of complaints also contributed to service member separation.²⁰

Infrastructure. Service members in nine of 12 discussion groups cited various physical and technical infrastructure issues within their assigned units. For example, service members reported limited reliable internet, water supply, and fire suppression systems within their assigned units, which affected both morale and operational efficiency. The Coast Guard's 2022 and 2023 Career Intention Surveys also identified insufficient

¹⁹We previously reported on workforce challenges related to marine inspectors. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Enhancements Needed to Strengthen Marine Inspection Workforce Planning Efforts*, [GAO-22-104465](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2022) and appendix I for more information.

²⁰We have ongoing work related to the Coast Guard's response to sexual misconduct. In addition, we previously testified on challenges related to service member sexual assault and harassment. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Action Needed to Evaluate Efforts to Address Sexual Assault and Harassment*, [GAO-24-107388](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 6, 2024) and appendix I for more information.

materials and equipment to complete work as contributors to service member separation.²¹

Limited Compensation and Opportunities for Career Advancement

According to our discussions with service members in 2024, the Coast Guard's compensation packages were less appealing than those in the private sector, and service members faced issues related to opportunities for advancement, such as enabling them to maintain control over their own career trajectory and linking promotions and awards to performance.²²

Private sector competition. Service members in eight of 12 discussion groups stated that the private sector was more appealing than military service due to higher pay and other quality of life factors.²³ For example, service members reported that military compensation and benefits did not keep up with the private sector, specifically in terms of pay, housing, and health care.²⁴

Control over career. Service members in eight of 12 discussion groups stated that they lacked control over their career, resulting in trade-offs between career advancement and family stability. For example, service members described seeing some members decline a promotion because salary increases were not worth uprooting their family and moving to a new unit. The Coast Guard's 2022 and 2023 Career Intention Surveys

²¹We previously reported on the Coast Guard's infrastructure challenges. See GAO, *Coast Guard Shore Infrastructure: Applying Leading Practices Could Help Better Manage Project Backlogs of at Least \$2.6 Billion*, [GAO-19-82](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 21, 2019) and appendix I for more information.

²²In addition to the issues we describe within the compensation and career advancement category, the Coast Guard also found in its Career Intention Surveys that the following issues contributed to service member separation: better work-life balance elsewhere (2021), refusal to get the COVID-19 vaccination (2022), and not receiving enough training (2023). Pursuant to Executive Order 14,184, in March 2025, the Coast Guard announced that all service members who were separated solely for refusal to get the COVID-19 vaccination were invited to return to the Coast Guard. In addition, service members who involuntarily separated may be entitled to backpay and other compensation. See Exec. Order No. 14,184 (Jan. 27, 2025).

²³The Coast Guard's analysis of its 2021-2023 Career Intention Survey results did not identify private sector competition as a key contributor to service member separation.

²⁴We previously reported on challenges related to private sector competition for Coast Guard cyberspace positions. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Workforce Planning Actions Needed to Address Growing Cyberspace Mission Demands*, [GAO-22-105208](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2022) and appendix I for more information.

also cited members not having control over their own career and future as contributors to service member separation.²⁵

Promotions and awards. Service members in seven of 12 discussion groups stated that promotion opportunities were not linked to their job performance. For example, service members stated that the Coast Guard did not have a career path for service members who wanted to remain in their current position as a subject matter expert, since promotions were often dependent on diversification of experience. According to the results of the Coast Guard's 2021, 2022, and 2023 Career Intention Surveys, failure to receive promotions and a lack of linkage between performance and awards/recognition contributed to service member separation.

Minimal Retention Incentives and Changes to Retirement Benefits

According to our discussions with service members in 2024, minimal retention incentives for more senior service members, coupled with a new retirement system, provided a catalyst for senior members to retire earlier.

Retention incentives. Service members in seven of 12 discussion groups stated that retention bonuses and incentives often were not applicable to service members who were more senior in their careers. For example, service members reported that retention incentives were geared towards members with 4 or 5 years of service, but there were minimal incentives after a member had reached 10 or more years of service.²⁶ According to the Coast Guard, the 2023 Career Intention Survey also found that over 95 percent of respondents planning to leave the Coast Guard within 12 months stated that they were not offered retention incentives.

Retirement benefits. Service members in six of 12 discussion groups stated that the new Blended Retirement System made it easier for

²⁵We previously reported on challenges related to the Coast Guard's career progression requirements. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' Workforce Needs Could Improve Efficiency and Reduce Potential Overlap or Gaps in Capabilities*, [GAO-20-33](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 21, 2019) and appendix I for more information.

²⁶Some retention incentives have statutory limitations on eligibility based on length of service. For example, certain retention incentive authorities are generally limited to service members who have completed less than 20 or 25 years of active-duty service, respectively. 37 U.S.C. §§ 308(a)(1)(A), 355(e).

members to leave the service earlier.²⁷ For example, service members reported that members who depart the service prior to reaching full retirement could retain contributions made towards their retirement accounts, which made earlier separation more appealing. Specifically, according to the Department of Defense, under the Blended Retirement System about 85 percent of service members receive a government retirement benefit if they serve at least 2 years, even if they do not qualify for a full retirement pension that typically requires 20 years.

According to Coast Guard headquarters officials, one element of the Blended Retirement System provides for continuation pay to service members who agree to obligate a set number of additional years of service, which can serve as a retention incentive for senior members.²⁸ In January 2025, the Coast Guard increased continuation pay for enlisted members, officers, and reservists. For example, enlisted member continuation pay increased to a one-time direct payment of nine times the monthly basic pay for a member who had reached eight years of service.²⁹

²⁷Established in 2018, the Blended Retirement System combines the traditional legacy retirement pension with a defined contribution benefit into a Thrift Savings Plan that service members retain upon separation. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016, Pub. L. No. 114-92, subtit. D, pt. I, §§ 631-635, 129 Stat. 726, 842-52 (2015) (amending scattered sections of titles 5, 10, and 37 of the United States Code). The Coast Guard's analysis of its 2021-2023 Career Intention Survey results did not identify the new blended retirement system as a key contributor to service member separation.

²⁸According to the Coast Guard, it is difficult to offer cost-effective monetary retention incentives once members are fully vested in the retirement pension (20+ years) because those incentives compete directly with the value and flexibility of the pension.

²⁹We held our discussion groups in 2024. The Coast Guard's separate decision to change continuation pay occurred in January 2025.

Coast Guard Offers Retention Incentives but Conducts Limited Survey Analysis and Lacks a Clear Plan to Target Initiatives

Coast Guard Offers Incentives to Improve Retention of Some Service Members

The Coast Guard offers monetary and nonmonetary incentives to improve retention rates.³⁰ Monetary incentives to enlisted service members include bonuses for (1) retaining critical skills for certain occupations (known as ratings), (2) reenlistment for certain ratings, and (3) completing technical training school.³¹ Nonmonetary incentives to enlisted service members include guaranteed training for certain ratings and service-wide exam points to increase the opportunity for advancement.³²

³⁰Unless otherwise noted in the associated Coast Guard announcement, the service pays all monetary incentives as a lump sum once the member has met all eligibility requirements. According to Coast Guard policy, all implemented incentives are temporary and continue only through the fiscal year for which they were awarded. Providing incentives to retain personnel is consistent with our previously reported leading practices for workforce planning. [GAO-22-105208](#).

³¹The Coast Guard's A-school provides specialized training for service members to learn job-specific skills. In this report, we refer to A-school as technical training school.

³²The Coast Guard's annual service wide exam, along with command input, qualifications, and other factors, is a necessary step for advancement for certain enlisted pay grades and ratings. To attract enlisted service members to challenging assignments, such as to ships undergoing maintenance, the Coast Guard may offer service-wide exam points as a retention incentive. According to the Coast Guard, these exam points help to address concerns regarding advancement equity for enlisted members, as compared to their peers who don't take on these assignments.

Coast Guard Monetary Incentive Programs

The Coast Guard's monetary incentive programs include the following:

- The Critical Skills Retention Bonus program, authorized under 37 U.S.C. § 355, is used as an incentive to encourage the retention of members qualified in critical military skills or assigned to high priority units.
- The Critical Skills Training Bonus program, authorized under 14 U.S.C. § 2319, is used by the Coast Guard as an incentive to attract qualified service members to critical skills or ratings. These bonuses are linked to a member achieving a critical rating by graduating from technical training school. The Coast Guard renamed the program to Designated Career Field Bonus in fiscal year 2025 and increased the limit on available funding.
- The Selective Reenlistment Bonus Program, authorized under 37 U.S.C. § 308, is used by the Coast Guard as a reenlistment incentive for members who possess highly desired skills or are in eligible ratings and meet specific time in service requirements from 17 months to 14 years of qualified active duty.

Source: GAO summary of Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107869

To determine which incentives 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 incentives annually and determine future needs.³³ To complete this work, the team analyzes data on service member losses and technical training school enrollments to identify, prioritize and propose retention incentives. For example, the Coast Guard may offer retention incentives to help retain service members for designated critical ratings, such as Culinary Specialists.

Specifically, the Coast Guard may increase or decrease retention incentives for particular ratings each fiscal year depending on the results of the Workforce Planning Team's analysis of service member losses and technical training school enrollments. For example:

- The Coast Guard increased a Critical Skills Retention Bonus to the Boatswain's Mate, Damage Controlman, Electrician's Mate, Machinery Technician, and Operations Specialist ratings from \$20,000 to \$40,000 from fiscal year 2024 to 2025.
- The Coast Guard decreased a Designated Career Field Bonus to the Electronics Technician rating from \$65,000 to \$35,000 from fiscal year 2024 to 2025.

The Coast Guard may also add new incentives, or remove existing incentives, for particular ratings each fiscal year.³⁴ For example:

- The Coast Guard added a Selective Reenlistment Bonus of \$30,000 for the Machinery Technician rating in fiscal year 2025.
- The Coast Guard removed a Selective Reenlistment Bonus of \$30,000 for service members with 6 through 10 years of service for the Culinary Specialist rating in fiscal year 2025.

³³The Coast Guard's Workforce Planning and Analytics Division, which includes the Workforce Planning Team, is responsible for determining service member movements across the service, including whether they are incoming through accessions or outgoing through losses. This division is within the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics (a staff office for the Deputy of Personnel Readiness).

³⁴Officials stated that the Coast Guard may decide to exclude certain lower priority retention incentives in subsequent fiscal years due to budget constraints.

Coast Guard Conducts Retention Surveys but Has Not Taken Steps to Improve or Analyze Low Response Rates

Career Intention Survey

The Coast Guard conducts surveys as its primary mechanism to obtain information on why a member may choose to leave the service but has not taken steps to improve or analyze low survey response rates. Specifically, the Coast Guard's Workforce Systems and Capability Division has administered the Career Intention Survey for over 15 years, and a one-time Employee Retention Survey in 2023.³⁵

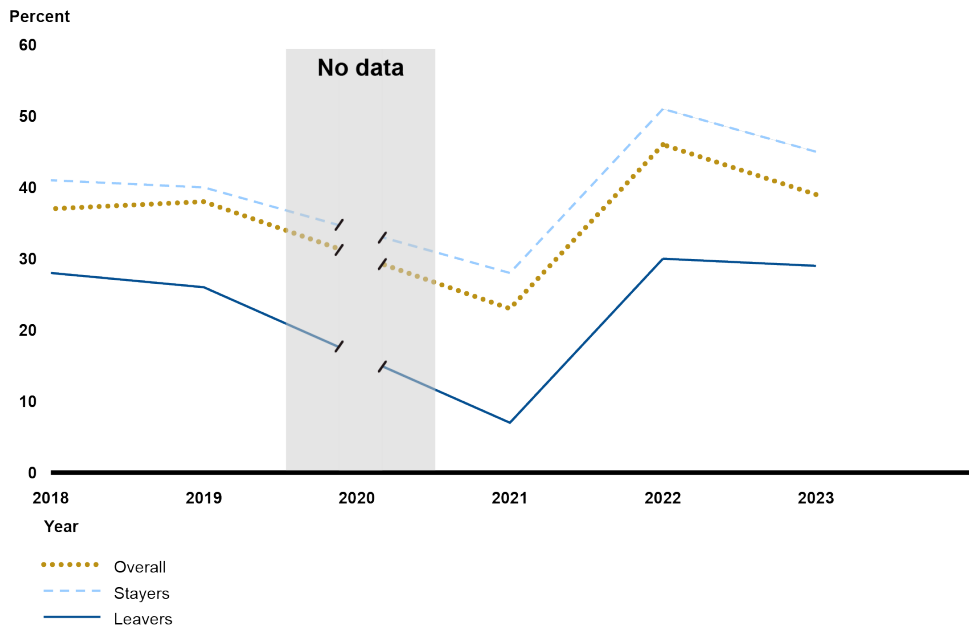
The Coast Guard's Career Intention Survey identifies variation in work satisfaction and engagement between members who remain with the Coast Guard and those who leave. The service emails this survey to active-duty enlisted members and officers at key points in their career progression, including the following:

- All active-duty service members reaching retirement or receiving orders releasing them from active duty in the next 120 days (classified as leavers);
- Enlisted service members who re-enlist or extend their service (classified as stayers);
- Officers at 5, 10, and 15 years of service (classified as a leaver or a stayer, depending on their answers to survey questions).

However, as shown in figure 4, the Career Intention Survey has had a consistently low response rate since 2018. Specifically, the 2023 Career Intention Survey had an overall response rate of 39 percent, and the response rate for leavers was below 7 percent in 2021. According to officials who manage the Career Intention Survey, the response rate may be low, in part, because completing it may not be a priority for members preparing to depart the Coast Guard.

³⁵The Workforce Systems and Capability Division is a division within the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics (a staff office for the Deputy of Personnel Readiness).

Figure 4: Coast Guard Career Intention Survey Response Rates for Leavers and Stayers, 2018—2023



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-25-107869

Note: According to the Coast Guard, it did not administer a Career Intention Survey in 2020 due to personnel shortages within the program office at that time. Coast Guard officials stated that when analyzing survey results for 2021 through 2023, they counted respondents as staying if they did not indicate on the survey that they were leaving. Coast Guard officials were unable to confirm if they used this same approach for the 2018 and 2019 survey results.

The Coast Guard has administered its Career Intention Survey for over 15 years, but did not require completion of the survey until September 2022. Specifically, in July 2022, the Coast Guard issued an announcement stating that the intention of this requirement was to ensure maximum participation so that the Coast Guard could act on items necessary to improve service member experiences. However, in 2024, Coast Guard officials stated that there is no strict enforcement mechanism for survey completion. Our analysis showed that overall response rates went down approximately 7 percentage points between 2022 and 2023. Although officials stated that they send multiple reminder emails to each service member about the Career Intention Survey, overall response rates have been at or below 46 percent since 2018.

According to federal statistical standards set by OMB, agencies should encourage respondents' participation to maximize response rates and

improve data quality.³⁶ OMB cites strategies that can be used to achieve high response rates, including:

- Ensure that the data collection period is of adequate and reasonable length;
- Plan an adequate number of contact attempts;
- Train staff (such as command leadership) who may have contact with respondents in techniques for obtaining respondent cooperation; and
- Consider use of respondent incentives to achieve data of sufficient quality for intended use.

To increase response rates, officials stated that the service is considering adding the survey to a separate form that members are required to complete for their unit leadership. However, as of December 2024, the Coast Guard had not implemented this effort. Without effective mechanisms to increase response rates, the Coast Guard faces challenges with accurately determining the most likely causes for service member separations. This also can affect how well it is able to identify problems and target solutions.

Our prior work has shown that low survey response rates are a concern because they raise the risk that responses received do not represent the views of all service members who were surveyed.³⁷ OMB guidance states that response rates are an important indicator of the potential for a bias called nonresponse bias, which could affect the accuracy of a survey's results, because survey results can differ among people who respond versus people who do not.³⁸ In general, as a survey's response rate increases, the likelihood of a bias problem decreases, and, therefore, the views and characteristics of the target population are more accurately reflected in the survey's results. Our prior work has also shown that a service member's likelihood of response could be correlated with factors such as a member's rank, tenure, demographics, and geographic location. Consequently, low response rates may not accurately reflect service-wide perspectives.

³⁶Office Of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys* (Sept. 2006).

³⁷[GAO-25-107238](#).

³⁸Office Of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys* (Sept. 2006).

Despite low response rates, Coast Guard officials told us they have not conducted any additional work—such as a nonresponse bias analysis of the survey results—to assess generalizability or variation among survey respondents due to time and resource constraints. Officials stated that they review the general summary of results. However, given the time needed to conduct these analyses, their office has requested additional personnel to assist with survey efforts for fiscal year 2027.

OMB guidance stipulates that agencies must design surveys to achieve the highest practical rates of response to ensure that results are representative of the target population so they can be used with confidence as input for informed decision-making.³⁹ In addition, nonresponse bias analyses must be conducted when response rates or other factors suggest the potential for nonresponse bias to occur. These standards also recommend that agencies analyze nonresponse bias for any survey with a response rate of less than 80 percent.⁴⁰

Until the Coast Guard increases response rates in its Career Intention Survey, it will be difficult to ensure results are representative of the entire service since low response rates are not generalizable to all Coast Guard service members. By implementing additional mechanisms to increase survey response rates and completing a nonresponse bias analysis until the response rates increase, the Coast Guard could better assess issues most affecting service member retention. This could enhance its ability to develop relevant initiatives aimed at retaining service members.

Employee Retention Survey

In April 2023, the Coast Guard administered a voluntary, one-time, five-question Employee Retention Survey electronically to all Coast Guard employees, including enlisted service members, officers, civilians, executives, and cadets. Its purpose was to collect data to determine which issues were influencing employees' desire to stay or leave the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard sent the survey to 57,234 employees,

³⁹Office Of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys* (Sept. 2006).

⁴⁰The OMB guidance governs federal agency surveys of the public at large or outside individuals, groups, or organizations, such as local government entities. Although internal surveys, such as those that the Coast Guard conducts of enlisted and officer service members, do not require OMB approval, we believe the OMB standards and guidance provide relevant direction on planning, designing, and implementing high quality surveys—including the need to obtain a high response rate.

and a total of 8,883 employees (including 4,616 enlisted service members) completed it, for an overall response rate of 16 percent.

The Coast Guard's analysis of its 2023 Employee Retention Survey results identified the following top five issues as contributing to employee separation:

- Desire for greater geographic stability
- Desire for more time with family
- Better compensation elsewhere (pay, incentives, bonuses)
- Issues with organizational leadership
- Better work-life balance elsewhere

Based on the responses, administrators of the Employee Retention Survey recommended that the Coast Guard take several actions to improve retention:

- Pursue a talent management system that provides members with more control over their careers and assignments.
- Pursue programs and policies that provide flexible options which allow members to have a better work-life balance and spend more time with their families.
- Pursue programs to improve support for service members' families (such as improved options for childcare, support for a spouse's career, and to meet other unique family needs).

Coast Guard Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office Lacks Clear Plan to Support Retention Initiatives

In January 2024, the Coast Guard established the Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office (Talent Management Transformation Office). According to the Coast Guard, the purpose of this office is to enable, accelerate, and track human capital initiatives identified in the 2022 Coast Guard Strategy, including those focused on retention.⁴¹ However, this office has not developed a clear plan to support

⁴¹In 2022, the Coast Guard identified several new priorities and initiatives to address retention-related issues in three strategic planning documents—the *Coast Guard Strategy*, *Coast Guard Mission Support Action Plan 2022-2026*, and *Ready Workforce 2030*. Initiatives in these plans discuss career growth and flexibility, childcare, health care, housing and relocation, human resources, incentives, training, trauma assistance and prevention, and work-life issues.

these retention initiatives, including how they align with strategic objectives and time frames and key milestones for implementation.

According to its charter, the Coast Guard established the Talent Management Transformation Office to provide additional technical support and surge capacity for the implementing program offices and analyze how to further advance the initiatives identified in 2022.⁴² In February 2024, Talent Management Transformation Office officials reported that they were still setting up and staffing the office but planned to begin addressing initiatives in June 2024. As part of these efforts, the office identified the following retention topics among those they assessed for further action:

- Increase career flexibility
- Enhance efforts to better align personnel interests and abilities with specific positions
- Explore opportunities for service members to earn civilian education credits for related training

In October 2024, Coast Guard officials told us the office would also help support additional initiatives arising from recommendations in the 2023 Employee Retention Survey. Officials stated the office was working on 38 different initiatives, including eight retention-related initiatives, across 18 different Coast Guard programs as of March 2025. Some of the specific retention-related initiatives they identified addressed issues such as (1) training; (2) talent management; and (3) promotion opportunities for enlisted service members.

Officials from the Talent Management Transformation Office stated that addressing retention-related initiatives is part of a broader, long-term effort to transform the human capital system. Specifically, these initiatives remain at various stages of development, and the office is working to identify and sequence initiatives to address the most critical gaps first. Officials also provided a 1-page overview of the initiatives but noted that future implementation and timing are budget dependent, and they are working to identify and develop activities to implement as resources

⁴²According to the Coast Guard, as of October 2024 the office's staff includes 16 military service members with additional contractor support in a variety of roles and skillsets. Active-duty positions within the office are dedicated full-time, 3-year orders.

become available. For example, officials stated they have identified over 300 specific activities in support of these initiatives.

The Coast Guard's Framework for Strategic Mission Management, Enterprise Risk Stewardship, and Internal Control states that initiatives should be presented in annual plans.⁴³ These plans are to include how the initiatives align with strategic objectives, along with time frames and key milestones to track progress and gauge program performance. Our past work has also highlighted that milestones enable agencies to demonstrate that they have properly planned for the actions needed to accomplish their goals and are tracking progress.⁴⁴

Although officials provided an overview of retention-related initiatives, they were unable to provide a clear plan that identified how these initiatives aligned with strategic objectives, such as those within the Coast Guard Strategy. In addition, the initiative information was limited and lacked key details.

Specifically, the information provided identified the current status of retention initiatives, but only two initiatives identified a time frame or key milestone for completion. For example, one initiative aims to enhance the ability of qualified officers to continue serving in their current position regardless of promotion selection decisions. This initiative could be responsive to concerns raised in our discussions with Coast Guard service members and key issues identified in the Coast Guard's Career Intention Survey regarding promotions and control over service members own career paths. The office documented that they intend to conduct analyses to identify optimal times for offering stabilized career paths for continued service, but did not identify any milestones for completion of analyses or implementation of new career paths. In March 2025, officials stated they also intend to incorporate strategic objectives, time frames, and key milestones into a future plan as resources become available but no additional details or documentation were provided.⁴⁵

⁴³U.S. Coast Guard, Deputy Commandant for Operations, *Framework for Strategic Mission Management, Enterprise Risk Stewardship, and Internal Control*. (July 2020).

⁴⁴GAO, *Managing For Results: Agencies Should More Fully Develop Priority Goals under the GPRA Modernization Act*, [GAO-13-174](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2013).

⁴⁵Officials also stated that Talent Management Transformation Office absorbed responsibilities to facilitate organizational changes due to presidential directives since January 2025 and anticipate this work will continue through May 2025. Officials expect to resume traditional talent management efforts in June 2025.

By developing a clear plan that aligns initiatives with strategic objectives, the Talent Management Transformation Office can more effectively support its retention initiatives. Additionally, incorporating time frames and key milestones into its plan can improve the office's ability to track initiative progress and gauge program performance. Due to the Talent Management Transformation Office's recent establishment, it is too soon to determine the efficacy of this office's efforts to support these initiatives. However, developing a clear plan is critical to guiding the office's efforts to achieve long-term success, including improving the retention of service members and enhancing the Coast Guard's ability to carry out its missions.

Conclusions

Coast Guard service members are responsible for conducting numerous missions that enhance marine safety, security and environmental protection in U.S. waters. However, retaining service members has been persistently challenging due to a variety of issues, including frequent rotations and access to support services, work environment and culture challenges, career development and advancement requirements, and limited retention incentives to balance out the challenges.

The Coast Guard has taken some actions to address retention challenges, such as offering incentives to service members and identifying issues affecting retention in its Career Intention Survey. Despite these efforts, it is difficult for the Coast Guard to accurately assess issues most affecting service member retention because Career Intention Survey response rates remain low. Implementing additional mechanisms to increase survey response rates and completing a nonresponse bias analysis until the rates increase would help ensure results are representative of the entire service and improve the service's ability to better assess issues most affecting service member retention. Moreover, these actions could enhance the Coast Guard's ability to develop relevant initiatives aimed at retaining service members.

Although the Talent Management Transformation Office is to assess, implement, and integrate initiatives identified in the 2022 Coast Guard Strategy, including those focused on retention, it has not yet developed a clear plan that aligns initiatives with strategic objectives and that includes time frames and key milestones for implementation. With a clear plan, the office could more effectively support its initiatives and gauge program performance, which could help improve retention. Additionally, fully implementing GAO's prior related recommendations can help maximize opportunities to improve retention; and, thus, enhance Coast Guard's ability to carry out its missions.

Recommendations for Executive Action

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

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics implements additional mechanisms to increase response rates for its Career Intention Survey. (Recommendation 1)

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics analyzes the potential for nonresponse bias in its Career Intention Survey results. (Recommendation 2)

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office develops a clear plan, including how retention initiatives align with strategic objectives and time frames and milestones for implementation, to track progress and gauge program performance. (Recommendation 3)

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 three of our recommendations and described the Coast Guard's planned actions to address them. The Department of Homeland Security also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 21 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Commandant of the Coast Guard. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8777 or 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: Prior GAO Reports on Issues that May Affect Coast Guard Retention

We have previously reported and testified on Coast Guard retention challenges, including those related to competition with higher paying jobs in the private sector, limited opportunities for promotion, and long work hours.¹ As shown in table 2, in 10 reports issued since 2016, we made a total of 39 recommendations to the Coast Guard on issues that may affect retention. As of February 2025, the Coast Guard had taken steps to fully implement 11 recommendations and partially addressed three. For example, the Coast Guard issued guidance on reporting hazing incidents, improved guidance and procedures for infrastructure maintenance and repair investments, and the tracking of health care insurance referrals.

However, the service had not yet implemented the 25 remaining recommendations, including 22 from GAO reports issued between 2022 and 2024. Some of these recommendations include establishing a process to collect and analyze feedback on duty station rotations and housing issues, and assessing workforce levels needed to meet mission needs (such as for aviation, marine inspectors, and Deployable Specialized Forces). However, GAO reports issued prior to 2020 made three recommendations that the service has not yet implemented, including a recommendation from 2016 to evaluate the prevalence of hazing in the Coast Guard.

Table 2: Prior GAO Reports and Recommendations on Issues that May Impact Coast Guard Retention	
Key issue	Prior GAO Report Description and Recommendation Status as of February 2025
Command leadership	<p>In 2016, we reported on challenges related to hazing incidents in the Coast Guard. We recommended that the Coast Guard regularly monitor hazing policy implementation. In 2017, the Coast Guard issued policy which identified hazing data reporting requirements, including a requirement to incorporate hazing awareness training into recruit, officer, and leadership training curriculums.</p> <p>We made five recommendations to the Coast Guard in this report. We closed four as implemented; one remains open. GAO-16-226.</p>
Infrastructure	<p>In 2019, we reported that an extensive maintenance backlog affects the habitability of Coast Guard shore infrastructure. We recommended that the Coast Guard establish performance goals, measures, and baselines to track the effectiveness of its maintenance and repair investments. As of 2023, the Coast Guard reported that it was in the process of entering data into its system for evaluating and tracking investment decisions.</p> <p>We made six recommendations to the Coast Guard in this report. We closed two as implemented, two remain open but partially addressed, and two remain open. GAO-19-82.</p>

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

**Appendix I: Prior GAO Reports on Issues that
May Affect Coast Guard Retention**

Key issue	Prior GAO Report Description and Recommendation Status as of February 2025
Control over career and promotion	<p>In 2019, we reported that personnel within Specialized Forces units could not remain in those units and be competitive for promotions, due to certain requirements for career progression. We recommended that the Coast Guard conduct a comprehensive analysis of its Deployable Specialized Force's workforce needs. In 2024, the Coast Guard provided GAO with a limited mission analysis of its Deployable Specialized Forces. We made two recommendations to the Coast Guard in this report and closed both as implemented. GAO-20-33.</p>
Workload and operational tempo	<p>In 2022, we reported on workforce challenges related to marine inspectors. We then testified in 2023 that the Coast Guard's marine inspectors identified several factors that could negatively affect retention, including long work hours. Our 2022 report recommended that the Coast Guard develop performance measures with targets for the marine inspection workforce improvement plan. In 2024, the Coast Guard reported that it plans to develop these performance measures and assess outcomes. We made five recommendations to the Coast Guard. We closed one as implemented, and four remain open. GAO-22-104465. GAO-23-106750.</p>
Childcare	<p>In 2022, we reported that the Coast Guard reportedly had 315 children on waitlists across the service's nine Child Development Centers, which had a total capacity of 704 children, in 2019. We reported that the Coast Guard was working to increase access to quality childcare by planning facility improvements and centralizing information for families. We did not make any recommendations to the Coast Guard. GAO-22-105262.</p>
Private sector competition	<p>In 2022, we reported that the Coast Guard has had difficulty filling and retaining personnel for cyberspace positions because many were leaving for higher paying positions in the private sector. We recommended that the Coast Guard establish and track metrics of success for improving cyberspace personnel morale and report its progress to leadership. In 2023, the Coast Guard reported that it added questions to its biennial Organizational Assessment Survey to better track these metrics, and in 2024, the Coast Guard reported that it would document how it plans to use these questions to track progress on improving cyberspace personnel morale and inform leadership by June 2025. We made six recommendations to the Coast Guard. One is open but partially addressed, while five remain open. GAO-22-105208.</p>
Health care	<p>In 2023, we reported that Coast Guard beneficiaries may experience challenges receiving timely medical and dental care through TRICARE, which is the primary health care program for uniformed service members and their families. We recommended that the Coast Guard establish a process to routinely monitor data on Coast Guard beneficiaries' access to medical care provided at Defense Health Agency medical facilities. We made five recommendations to the Coast Guard. We closed two recommendations as implemented, and three remain open. GAO-23-105574.</p>
Housing	<p>In 2024, we reported that certain regions present challenges with the affordability and availability of private sector housing, which the Coast Guard relies upon for most members. We recommended that the Coast Guard establish a process to collect and use service-wide housing feedback from service members and spouses on a routine basis. In 2024, the Coast Guard reported that it planned to issue a solicitation for a contract to implement an annual recurring housing survey. We made three recommendations to the Coast Guard, which remain open. GAO-24-106388.</p>
Command leadership	<p>In 2024, we testified that the Coast Guard had taken action to address sexual assault and harassment, but the service had not developed a plan to assess its efforts. We recommended that the Coast Guard develop an evaluation plan to assess the effectiveness of actions taken to help ensure service members have an experience free from sexual assault and harassment. In 2024, the Coast Guard reported that it is developing metrics to leverage surveys, reports, and workplace information to create a baseline of current practices to understand, measure, and track culture change within the service. We made one recommendation to the Coast Guard, which remains open. GAO-24-107388.</p>

Appendix I: Prior GAO Reports on Issues that
May Affect Coast Guard Retention

Key issue	Prior GAO Report Description and Recommendation Status as of February 2025
Retention incentives	<p>In 2024, we reported that Coast Guard pilots preferred alternative retention incentives, such as geographic stability or more control over where they are assigned, rather than monetary incentives. We recommended that the Coast Guard assess and determine the aviation workforce levels it requires to meet its mission needs. The Department of Homeland Security reported that the Coast Guard will begin this process in 2024.</p> <p>We made five recommendations to the Coast Guard, which remain open. GAO-24-106374.</p>
Rotation policy	<p>In 2024, we reported that Coast Guard field unit personnel identified rotation challenges as negatively affecting Coast Guard operations, personnel readiness, and service member retention. We recommended that the Coast Guard establish a process to routinely collect and analyze service-wide feedback on duty station rotations.</p> <p>We made one recommendation to the Coast Guard, which remains open. GAO-25-107238</p>

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-107869

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

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



**Homeland
Security**

BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

April 2, 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-25-107869, "COAST GUARD: Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues"

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 U.S. Coast Guard took steps to address retention challenges by offering monetary and nonmonetary incentives and—as of 2022—the Coast Guard began to require service members complete a Career Intention Survey (CIS) to help identify key issues affecting retention. The Coast Guard remains committed to implementing intervention strategies, policies, and procedures to improve retention and enhance its ability to execute missions to protect and defend the nation.

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

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: 2025.04.02 13:55:50 -04'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations
Contained in GAO-25-107869**

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

Recommendation 1: Ensure that the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics implements additional mechanisms to increase response rates for its Career Intention Survey.

Response: Concur. The Coast Guard's Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics (DPR-2) is actively strengthening accountability mechanisms to improve response rates for the CIS by embedding it within the existing Career Intentions Worksheet (CIW)¹ process on March 13, 2025. Currently, the Coast Guard employs the CIW as a long-standing tool completed by members at key career milestones such as reenlistments, permanent change of station, advancements, and separations. The first large-scale deployment using the CIS as a new accountability mechanism will occur during Assignment Year (AY) 2025's transfer season, primarily spanning May through August 2025.

Following this deployment, DPR-2 will lead a focused evaluation of the CIS to determine its value in supporting the Service's retention strategy. This includes tracking participation rates across career stages, analyzing member responses to identify early indicators of potential attrition, and comparing results to known retention trends and historical workforce data. DPR-2 will also assess the effectiveness of the survey timing and delivery, ensuring it reaches members at the most relevant decision points. By aligning survey collection with natural decision points in a member's career, the Coast Guard can gather meaningful and timely insights that reflect the lived experiences, motivations, and intentions of its workforce. This data analysis will shape future enhancements to the CIS and directly inform retention practices and planning efforts designed to strengthen workforce stability and mission readiness. Additionally, this effort supports the Service's broader goal of becoming an employer of choice by enhancing leadership's ability to understand member sentiment and proactively retain critical talent in support of both current and future mission demands.

Estimated Completion Date (ECD): November 28, 2025.

Recommendation 2: Ensure that the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics analyzes the potential for nonresponse bias in its Career Intention Survey results.

Response: Concur. The Coast Guard recognizes the importance of analyzing potential nonresponse bias in the CIS to ensure data accuracy. Accordingly, DPR-2 conducted an initial analysis in January 2025 comparing CIS responses with data from the 2023 Organizational Assessment Survey (CG-OAS).² Preliminary findings showed strong alignment across

¹ CG-2045, "Career Intentions Worksheet," https://media.defense.gov/2021/Feb/11/2002580889/-1/-1/0/CG_2045.PDF. This document is used for Coast Guard members to convey career intentions to Coast Guard officials for processing separation from or retention in the service.

² The CG-OAS is a biennial, anonymous service-wide survey conducted since 2002 to capture workforce perspectives on leadership, policies, communication, and workplace experience. Results provide commands and

comparable questions, indicating minimal nonresponse bias. To ensure data collection reliability, DPR-2 will actively monitor employee engagement, satisfaction, and feedback results from the CIS on an ongoing basis, to include observing participation trends across assignment types, operational communities, paygrades, and career fields. For example, DPR-2 will compare results from AY 2025 to those from AY 2026 (approximately spanning from May-August each year, respectively) and future cycles as appropriate to assess trends and monitor for potential bias or shifts in member sentiment over time. DPR-2 will remain attuned to these trends to ensure a balanced input across the service and to account for adjustments during data interpretation to ensure conclusions are reflective of the overall workforce perspective. ECD: December 31, 2026.

Recommendation 3: Ensure that the Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office develops a clear plan, including how retention initiatives align with strategic objectives and time frames and milestones for implementation, to track progress and gauge program performance.

Response: Concur. Since establishment in January 2024, the Coast Guard's Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office (TMX-PIO) worked with personnel readiness stakeholders from across the Coast Guard enterprise to develop over 300 distinct tasks in support of 38 strategic initiatives. With limited exceptions, many of the initiatives are contingent on future resourcing and remain pre-decisional.

In addition to enabling, accelerating, and tracking these pre-decisional initiatives, the TMX-PIO absorbed responsibility for facilitating actions related to presidential directives issued since January, 2025. The office is a coordinating mechanism for emergent matters concerning: (1) Return to Office mandates; (2) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion updates; (3) Civil Rights updates; (4) Recruitment; and (5) Other Readiness Factors (e.g., COVID-19 return to service policy, transgender service policy, Hyde Amendment activities). This effort is anticipated to run through June 2025.

TMX-PIO anticipates resuming traditional integration efforts by June 30, 2025, and developing a plan to address how recruitment and retention initiatives align with strategic objectives by the end of December 2025. Once complete, this plan will include time frames, milestones, and tracking metrics to track progress and gauge program performance.

ECD: December 31, 2025.

senior leaders actionable insight to evaluate and improve programs, policies, and organizational effectiveness. See: <https://www.mycg.uscg.mil/News/Article/3495035/let-your-voice-be-heard-2023-uscg-organizational-assessment-survey-now-open/>.

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), Daniel Bolton, Lauri Barnes, Ben Crossley, Bethany Gracer, Amanda Miller, and Mary Offutt-Reagin made key contributions to this report.

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