

Coast Guard Health Care: Information on Telehealth Usage

GAO-24-106784

Q&A Report to Congressional Committees

April 10, 2024

Accessible Version

Why This Matters

The U.S. Coast Guard, a military service of the Department of Homeland Security, is responsible for maritime safety, security, and environmental stewardship in U.S. ports and waterways. In support of its mission, the Coast Guard provides health care to approximately 47,000 active duty and reserve personnel. The Coast Guard offers outpatient medical services for its personnel at shore-based outpatient clinics and sickbays, as well as limited services at sickbays that are on Coast Guard vessels. Coast Guard personnel may also obtain medical care through the Department of Defense's (DOD) regional health plan, TRICARE, which is administered by the Defense Health Agency (DHA). Through TRICARE, Coast Guard personnel can obtain medical care from military hospitals and clinics or through civilian health care providers.

Challenges such as clinic staffing shortages, or more recently the COVID-19 pandemic, have previously limited the Coast Guard's ability to provide health care to its personnel. Furthermore, some Coast Guard personnel serve and live in remote areas that may have few community medical providers.

To help address some of these challenges, the Coast Guard started using telehealth to improve access to care and maximize the use of available clinic staff to provide care to personnel in remote areas. The Coast Guard defines telehealth as communication between patients and health care providers via electronic, video, or audio means that allows for the remote delivery of clinical services, such as primary and behavioral health care.

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for us to report on aspects of the Coast Guard's telehealth program. This report describes how the Coast Guard uses telehealth to provide medical care to its active duty personnel, as well as the benefits and challenges of telehealth identified by the Coast Guard.

Key Takeaways

- The Coast Guard began using telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, according to officials. It started piloting its current video telehealth platform in 2022, with full deployment occurring in September 2023. As of December 2023, the Coast Guard is in the process of formalizing its telehealth program, which includes establishing standardized scheduling practices for telehealth appointments and monitoring related metrics by the end of fiscal year 2024.
- According to the Coast Guard, benefits of telehealth include increasing access to medical care for personnel located in remote locations; maximizing staff resources at Coast Guard clinics; and minimizing exposure to illness for personnel and providers.
- At the time of our review, there were various challenges that limited the Coast Guard's use of telehealth, including issues with its IT infrastructure, according

to officials. For example, the Coast Guard had inconsistent internet connectivity aboard its vessels, limiting the use of telehealth while at sea. Additionally, the Coast Guard did not have Wi-Fi at all its ashore bases, which can limit the ability of personnel to access telehealth appointments via their personal devices in the absence of strong cellular signals.

- The Coast Guard has plans to address many of these broader challenges that may affect its use of telehealth, including improving its internet capabilities aboard its vessels and requesting funds for the installation of Wi-Fi on bases.

When did the Coast Guard start providing telehealth?

Coast Guard officials told us they began offering video and telephone telehealth appointments to personnel in 2021, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, the Coast Guard implemented its video telehealth appointments through a platform called Coast Guard Care Anywhere. However, as we previously reported, the Coast Guard experienced some challenges using this platform and stopped using it in March 2022.¹

In March 2022, the Coast Guard adopted a new telehealth video platform called MHS Video Connect. This platform is a component of its new electronic health record system called MHS GENESIS, which it procured from DHA.² DHA manages MHS Video Connect, which is integrated within MHS GENESIS. The Coast Guard initially piloted the platform with its behavioral health providers and fully deployed it in September 2023 to include primary care providers. The Coast Guard formalized a new telehealth policy in December 2023 and is in the process of developing related procedures for scheduling appointments and documenting care.

How can Coast Guard active duty personnel access telehealth, and for what services?

Coast Guard personnel can access telehealth from several sources, although these options may be limited by technological capabilities when at sea.

- Coast Guard clinics can offer telehealth (video or telephone) via clinic-assigned medical providers for services such as behavioral health care, primary care, pharmacy consultations, and to complete components of the Coast Guard-required Periodic Health Assessment.³
- The Coast Guard's confidential counseling hotline, CG SUPRT, offers free, confidential, short-term telehealth and in-person counseling via contracted mental health providers for a limited number of sessions.⁴
- DOD's TRICARE health plan includes coverage for telephone and video services from military providers assigned to military medical treatment facilities and from civilian providers in the TRICARE network who offer these services.⁵

When aboard a Coast Guard vessel at sea, personnel can use a satellite phone to access telehealth from these sources, if needed, according to officials. However, these officials stated that the technological capabilities of individual vessels may limit telehealth while at sea.⁶ Typically, an independent duty corpsman assigned to the afloat sick bay provides medical care, such as the diagnosis and treatment of certain medical conditions, first aid, or emergency treatment.⁷ If they need to connect with a health care provider while afloat, the following options are available to facilitate telehealth with some limitations:

- **Satellite phone:** Satellite phones are the primary mode of communication between personnel and ashore providers. However, Coast Guard officials told us that the connectivity and dependability of these calls relies upon a vessel's longitudinal and latitudinal location at sea.⁸

- **Video:** Video telehealth appointments are generally limited while at sea due to difficulties in maintaining a sufficient internet connection. The Coast Guard upgraded internet capabilities on many of its vessels in 2023. Coast Guard officials told us that all vessels should have the upgraded internet capabilities by the end of calendar year 2024. We heard from two providers that they successfully conducted video appointments with personnel when either the provider or personnel were aboard vessels with this newer capability.

Additionally, Coast Guard officials told us that DHA is in the process of implementing a new telehealth platform that can be used while at sea, which the Coast Guard plans to also implement once available.⁹

How does the Coast Guard monitor the use of telehealth?

The Coast Guard has been monitoring its use of video telehealth appointments through monthly reports, but as of October 2023, it was not routinely monitoring its telephone telehealth appointments. Specifically, for its video telehealth appointments, the Coast Guard receives monthly reports from DHA on the number of MHS Video Connect encounters between its personnel and the health care providers at specific Coast Guard clinics.

Coast Guard clinics have not been routinely tracking telephone telehealth appointments because there is no standard practice for how to document this appointment type, according to Coast Guard officials. However, officials told us they do make efforts to track telephone appointments in MHS GENESIS, such as by adding notes to the appointment to indicate that it was conducted via telephone.

Additionally, with the implementation of a new telehealth policy in December 2023, Coast Guard officials told us that the service plans to implement standardized telehealth scheduling practices. Officials told us these practices will enable them to track and analyze telehealth data, including telephone versus video appointments, to determine how to best optimize the use of telehealth.

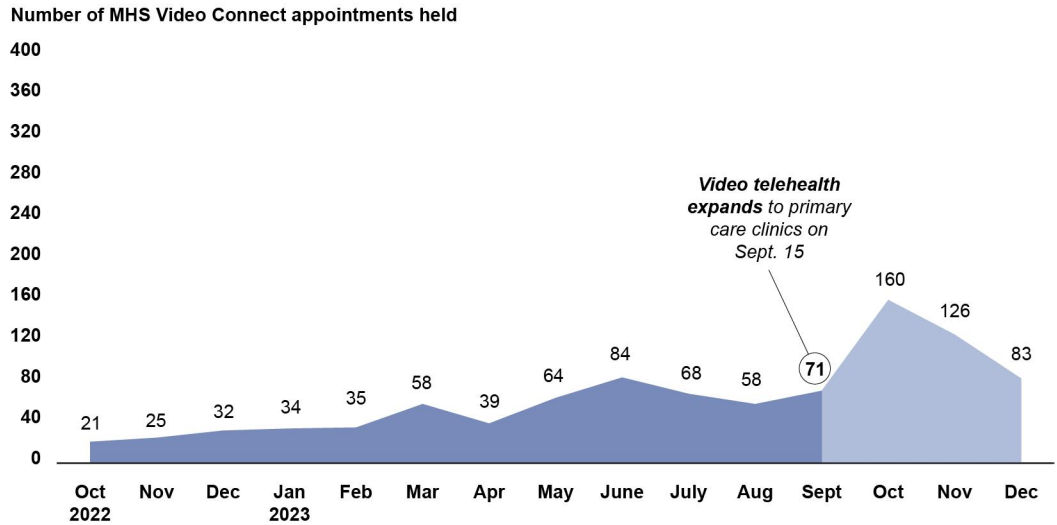
The Coast Guard also identified additional planned initiatives that will further enhance its ability to monitor its use of telehealth. For example, DHA uses another platform called HealthIntent that Coast Guard officials said is expected to be deployed to the Coast Guard by the end of fiscal year 2024. Coast Guard officials explained that this platform is expected to include telehealth data and metrics for additional monitoring purposes.

Further, Coast Guard officials told us they have plans to solicit telehealth user feedback in fiscal year 2024. Specifically, officials said that the Coast Guard is in the process of procuring and launching the Joint Outpatient Experience Survey, which they intend to disseminate to personnel seen at Coast Guard clinics.¹⁰ In the survey, personnel will be asked to indicate whether they received care in-person or via telehealth and about the quality of their care.

To what extent is the Coast Guard using video telehealth?

DHA data on the Coast Guard's use of video telehealth (via MHS Video Connect) shows that telehealth appointments almost quadrupled from October 2022 through December 2023. While the service used the platform solely for behavioral health care when first piloted, there was a notable increase in its use starting in September 2023, when the Coast Guard also began using it for primary care. However, the Coast Guard is still in early stages of its implementation of MHS Video Connect. See fig. 1.

Figure 1: Number of MHS Video Connect Telehealth Appointments for Coast Guard Active Duty Personnel, Oct. 2022 – Dec. 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Defense Health Agency data. | GAO-24-106784

Accessible data table for Figure 1: Number of MHS Video Connect Telehealth Appointments for Coast Guard Active Duty Personnel, Oct. 2022 – Dec. 2023

Date	Number of MHS VC appointments
Oct 2022	21
Nov 2022	25
Dec 2022	32
Jan 2023	34
Feb 2023	35
Mar 2023	58
Apr 2023	39
May 2023	64
Jun 2023	84
Jul 2023	68
Aug 2023	58
Sept 2023 (Video telehealth expands to primary care clinics on Sept. 15)	71
Oct 2023	160
Nov 2023	126
Dec 2023	83

Source: GAO analysis of Defense Health Agency data. | GAO-24-106784








Note: The Coast Guard uses a platform called MHS Video Connect, which is managed by the Defense Health Agency, to facilitate its video telehealth appointments. The Coast Guard began piloting the platform with behavioral health providers in March 2022 and expanded its use to primary care providers in September 2023. We could not obtain data prior to October 2022 because Defense Health Agency officials said that they only retain telehealth data for up to 13 months and thus data before then was not available at the time of our request.

What benefits has the Coast Guard identified with using telehealth?

The Coast Guard’s use of telehealth has benefits for its personnel as well as for its health services program, which oversees health care delivery, according to Coast Guard officials and telehealth documents. Specifically, telehealth improves access to care for Coast Guard personnel, such as those stationed in remote locations. It also benefits the Coast Guard’s health services program by improving efficiencies for its staffing. For example, clinics can use telehealth to

provide coverage during provider staffing shortages. For a description of the benefits the Coast Guard identified, see fig. 2.

Figure 2: Telehealth Benefits for Coast Guard Active Duty Personnel and the Health Services Program Identified by the Coast Guard

	Benefit	Example of benefits
Coast Guard active duty personnel		
	Improves access to care	Enhances health care access for personnel, especially those located in isolated or remote areas. Expands available appointments as providers may potentially see more personnel than they would otherwise be able to, since telehealth visits may be shorter than in-person visits.
	Accommodates personal preferences	Allows personnel to receive care from the privacy of their homes, from which they may be more comfortable discussing certain health care topics.
	Reduces travel	Eliminates drive-times to and from clinics and reduces time away from duties.
	Other	Minimizes exposure to illness for patients.
Coast Guard health services program		
	Efficient use of resources	Enables clinics to support each other in the event of provider shortages. Allows providers to conduct appointments even if they are not physically in the clinic. Reduces clerical support required of clinic staff (e.g., less time taking vitals) and allows them to direct their time toward other tasks.
	Potential cost savings^a	May facilitate reduced costs per capita for medical supplies in clinics, such as table paper or thermometer probe covers.
	Other	Minimizes exposure to illness for medical providers and personnel at the clinic.

Source: GAO review of Coast Guard documents and interviews; RaulAlmu/stock.adobe.com (illustrations). | GAO-24-106784

Accessible data table for Figure 2: Telehealth Benefits for Coast Guard Active Duty Personnel and the Health Services Program Identified by the Coast Guard

	Benefit	Examples of benefits
Coast Guard active duty personnel	Improves access to care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhances health care access for personnel, especially those located in isolated or remote areas. Expands available appointments as providers may potentially see more personnel than they would otherwise be able to, since telehealth visits may be shorter than in-person visits. Allows opportunities for providers aboard a Coast Guard vessel to share images of a patient's ailment with ashore providers to help determine appropriate care.
	Accommodates personal preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows personnel to receive care from the privacy of their homes, from which they may be more comfortable discussing certain health care topics.
	Reduces travel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eliminates drive-times to and from clinics and reduces time away from duties.

	Benefit	Examples of benefits
Coast Guard health services program	Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimizes exposure to illness for patients.
	Efficient use of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enables clinics to support each other in the event of provider shortages. Allows providers to conduct appointments even if they are not physically in the clinic. Reduces clerical support required of clinic staff (e.g., less time checking in patients and taking vitals) and allows them to direct their time toward other tasks.
	Potential cost savings ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May facilitate reduced costs per capita for medical supplies in clinics, such as table paper or thermometer probe covers.
	Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimizes exposure to illness for medical providers and personnel at the clinic.

Note: The Coast Guard health services program offers a limited range of outpatient medical and dental services to personnel at its clinics.

^aThe Coast Guard has not completed a formal cost savings analysis of its telehealth program as of September 2023.

What limits the Coast Guard's use of telehealth?





The Coast Guard's use of telehealth may be limited by a variety of factors, such as individual preference and military readiness requirements, according to Coast Guard officials and telehealth guidance documents. Such factors include:

- medical care for which telehealth would be inappropriate, such as when personnel require urgent treatment or a physical exam;
- instances in which the patient or provider is not comfortable communicating virtually or prefers in-person care;
- occasions where personnel may reside in remote locations with limited broadband access or cellular service;
- military readiness health requirements that require in-person appointments, such as flight physicals;
- situations in which medical results need to be shared in person; and
- while at sea, instances in which a Coast Guard vessel is required to turn off IT capabilities during a particular mission.

What challenges has the Coast Guard encountered in providing telehealth?

The Coast Guard identified several challenges affecting its ability to provide telehealth to its personnel. In our discussions with Coast Guard officials and our reviews of related documents, we found that some of these challenges, such as the need for IT infrastructure improvements, are broader than telehealth but affect its use. Other challenges are specific to telehealth, such as a lack of standardized telehealth guidance for health care provider staff. For examples of other challenges, see fig. 3.

Figure 3: Challenges Identified by the Coast Guard Affecting the Provision of Telehealth to Its Personnel

Challenge	Example of challenge	Location of challenge	
		Ashore	Afloat
 Coast Guard IT infrastructure	Lack of reliable phone and video connectivity at sea.		●
	Absence of Wi-Fi on all Coast Guard bases, which may limit personnel's use of personal phones and computers for their telehealth appointments.	●	
	Physical infrastructure of buildings on bases may prevent adequate cellular service for connecting with a telehealth appointment from within certain buildings.	●	
 Privacy and security of appointments^a	Limited private physical space to conduct telehealth appointments (some personnel are assigned to shared barracks, for example)	●	●
	Concern about protocols to confirm a patient's identity over the phone	●	●
 Standardized guidance for staff	No formal training on the appropriate use of telehealth	●	●
	No standardized telehealth scheduling practices and tracking protocols	●	
 Personnel awareness	Lack of outreach to personnel on the benefits of telehealth appointments	●	●

Source: GAO review of Coast Guard documents and interviews; RaulAlmu/stock.adobe.com (illustrations). | GAO-24-106784

Accessible data table for Figure 3: Challenges Identified by the Coast Guard Affecting the Provision of Telehealth to Its Personnel

Challenge	Example of Challenge
Coast Guard IT infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of reliable phone and video connectivity at sea.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absence of Wifi on Coast Guard bases, which may limit personnel's use of personal phones and computers for their telehealth appointments.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical infrastructure of buildings on bases may prevent adequate cellular service for connecting with a telehealth appointment from within certain buildings.
Privacy and security of appointments ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited private physical space to conduct telehealth appointments (<i>some personnel are assigned to shared barracks, for example</i>).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concern about protocols to confirm a patient's identity over the phone.
Standardized guidance for staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No formal training on the appropriate use of telehealth.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No standardized telehealth scheduling practices and tracking protocols.
Personnel awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of outreach to personnel on the benefits of telehealth appointments.

Source: GAO review of Coast Guard documents and interviews; Raul/almu/stock.adobel.com (Illustratiojns. | GAO-24-106784

Note: This table includes challenges that are specific to the provision of telehealth, such as the lack of standardized scheduling practices for telehealth appointments, as well as challenges that are

more general to the Coast Guard but may also affect telehealth, such as the absence of Wi-Fi on all Coast Guard bases.





Additionally, there is not an approved telehealth platform for use aboard Coast Guard vessels at sea, as of March 2024. However, Coast Guard officials told GAO that DHA is in the process of implementing a new telehealth platform for such use, which the Coast Guard plans to also implement once available. The challenges identified as applying to afloat locations are challenges the Coast Guard will have to address once this platform is available.

^aThe challenge of ensuring the privacy and security of telehealth appointments describes a potential logistical challenge that providers may face in providing these appointments. GAO's identification of this challenge does not indicate a concern about a privacy or security vulnerability, which was outside the scope of its work.

What plans does the Coast Guard have to address its telehealth challenges?

According to Coast Guard officials and documents we reviewed, the service has plans to address many of the challenges that affect its use of telehealth, such as by providing telehealth training sessions to clinic staff and upgrading satellite capabilities aboard its vessels. The service is also pursuing efforts that should enhance its future use of telehealth, such as developing standardized telehealth scheduling practices and requesting funds for the installation of Wi-Fi on bases. For examples of completed or planned efforts, see fig. 4.

Figure 4: Example of Coast Guard Efforts to Help Address Telehealth Challenges and Their Status, as of January 2024

Challenge	Coast Guard improvement effort	Status of effort	Location of effort	
			Ashore	Afloat
 Coast Guard IT infrastructure	Installing Starshield (internet) capabilities on vessels. ^a	Estimated completion in 2024 ^b		●
	Planning to install Wi-Fi on bases, including clinics.	Ongoing ^c	●	
	Assigned unique telephone numbers to all personnel, allowing members to conduct calls on computers across the Coast Guard's network, which may include for telehealth appointments.	Completed in 2023	●	●
 Privacy and security of appointments	Making space available for patients to conduct appointments in clinics and on vessels to the extent possible.	As needed ^d	●	●
	Published procedures for clinical staff to comply with to assure confidentiality (for example, processes to verify patient identity).	Completed in 2023	●	●
 Standardized guidance for staff	Provided 12 agency-wide trainings to providers and clinic staff on how to use MHS Video Connect, and made on-demand trainings available.	Completed in 2023	●	●
	Developing procedures regarding telehealth suitability and practices for using it.	Estimated completion in 2024 ^e	●	●
	Developing standardized scheduling practices.	Estimated completion in 2024 ^f	●	
 Personnel awareness	Published information about MHS Video Connect for active duty personnel, including frequently asked questions, a tip sheet, and links to additional Defense Health Agency guidance about the platform.	Completed in 2023	●	●

Source: GAO review of Coast Guard documents and interviews; RaulAlmu/stock.adobe.com (illustrations). | GAO-24-106784

Accessible data table for Figure 4: Example of Coast Guard Efforts to Help Address Telehealth Challenges and Their Status, as of January 2024

Challenge	Coast Guard improvement effort	Affects ashore	Affects at sea	Status of effort
Coast Guard IT infrastructure	• Installing Starshield (internet) capabilities on vessels. ^a		X	Estimated completion in 2024 ^b
	• Planning to install Wi-Fi on bases, including clinics.	X		Ongoing ^c
	• Assigned unique telephone numbers to all personnel, allowing members to conduct calls on computers across the Coast Guard's network, which may include for telehealth appointments.	X	X	Completed in 2023

Challenge	Coast Guard improvement effort	Affects ashore	Affects at sea	Status of effort
Privacy and security of appointments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making space available for patients to conduct appointments in clinics and on vessels to the extent possible. 	X	X	As needed ^d
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Published procedures for clinical staff to comply with to assure confidentiality (<i>for example, processes to verify patient identity</i>). 	X	X	Completed in 2023
Standardized guidance for staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided 12 agency-wide trainings to providers and clinic staff on how to use MHS Video Connect, and made on-demand trainings available 	X	X	Completed in 2023
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing procedures regarding telehealth suitability and practices for using it. 	X	X	Estimated completion in 2024 ^e
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing standardized scheduling practices. 	X		Estimated completion in 2024 ^f
Personnel awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Published information about MHS Video Connect for active duty personnel, including frequently asked questions, a tip sheet, and links to additional Defense Health Agency guidance about the platform. 	X	X	Completed in 2023

Note: There is not an approved telehealth platform for use aboard Coast Guard vessels at sea, as of March 2024. However, Coast Guard officials told GAO that DHA is in the process of implementing a new telehealth platform for such use, which the Coast Guard plans to also implement once available. The efforts identified as applying to afloat locations are efforts already underway or completed that are happening or happened regardless of not having an approved platform.

^aStarshield is the government-approved version of Starlink. Starlink utilizes a network of non-stationary satellites that operate at lower altitudes, which allows for seamless internet connections around the world. This provides vessels with connectivity, even when operating in high latitudes.

^bAs of January 2024, the Coast Guard had implemented Starshield on 75 percent of its fleet that include afloat sickbays, according to Coast Guard officials.

^cAs of October 2023, the Coast Guard has plans to install Wi-Fi on Coast Guard bases, pending additional funding, which would expand members' ability to conduct telehealth appointments while ashore.

^dThe Coast Guard does not plan to designate clinic or afloat sickbay spaces for telehealth-specific purposes. However, Coast Guard officials said that they would make space available to the extent possible for personnel—both ashore and afloat—who may not otherwise have access to a private space for a telehealth appointment.

^eCoast Guard officials told GAO they are working on a policy for providers on the appropriateness of telehealth, such as when it is most suitable.

^fThe Coast Guard finalized its telehealth policy in December 2023, which Coast Guard officials said first needed to occur before they can develop standardized scheduling practices.

The Coast Guard has also taken steps to bolster its IT infrastructure by installing Starshield capabilities aboard its vessels. Starshield uses non-stationary satellites that operate at low altitudes, which expands internet coverage while at sea. The installation of Starshield is intended to improve network connectivity for Coast Guard vessels. Coast Guard officials said that Starshield capabilities will also support telehealth appointments while personnel are at sea, as necessary. As of January 2024, Starshield has been installed on 43 of 57 vessels. See table 1.

Table 1: Information on Coast Guard Vessels and the Status of Starshield Implementation, as of January 2024

Type of Coast Guard vessel	Total number of vessels in Coast Guard fleet with afloat sickbays	Number of vessels with Starshield ^a installed	Number of vessels without Starshield installed
Icebreakers ^b	3	2	1
National Security Cutters ^c	10	10	0
Medium Endurance Cutters ^d	27	26	1
Seagoing Buoy Tenders ^e	16	4	12
Barque Eagle ^f	1	1	0
TOTAL	57	43	14

Source: GAO review of Coast Guard information | GAO-24-106784.

^aStarshield is the government-approved version of Starlink. Starlink utilizes a network of non-stationary satellites that operate at lower altitudes, which allows for seamless internet connections. This provides vessels with connectivity, even when operating in high latitudes.

^bIcebreakers are used to support missions in polar regions. These missions include open-water ice breaking, providing resupply to remote stations, and supporting science and research activities, among others.

^cNational Security Cutters are the largest and most technologically advanced of the service's cutters. Cutters are defined as vessels 65 feet in length or greater with accommodations for a crew to live aboard. The Coast Guard has plans to add two more National Security Cutters to its fleet.

^dMedium Endurance Cutters are the Coast Guard's primary tools for law enforcement, domestic fisheries enforcement, counterdrug, and search and rescue missions. These vessels include a modern weapons and sensor suite.

^eSeagoing Buoy Tenders are responsible for maintaining shore- and long-range aids to navigation, such as fixed structures and buoys. These vessels also provide light ice breaking in ice-laden domestic waters and conduct maritime law enforcement, homeland security, and defense operations, as well as provide search and rescue assistance should the need arise.

^fThe Barque Eagle is a three-masted sailing barque homeported at the Coast Guard Academy. It is the only active commissioned sailing vessel in the U.S. maritime services. The vessel serves as a seagoing classroom for the academy; aboard the vessel, cadets apply the navigation, engineering, and other skills they develop at the academy.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Coast Guard and DOD for review and comment. The Coast Guard provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. DOD had no comments.

How GAO Did This Study

We reviewed Coast Guard policy and guidance documents for its telehealth program and an internal report on telehealth. We also interviewed Coast Guard officials from the Health, Safety, and Work-Life Directorate and the Acquisition Directorate about the service's use of telehealth. We discussed limitations, benefits, and challenges of telehealth as well as how the service planned to address its identified challenges.¹¹ The scope of our review was limited to Coast Guard active duty personnel because they are the primary recipients of health care and telehealth from Coast Guard clinics.

To obtain perspectives on telehealth provided by Coast Guard clinics to active duty personnel either ashore or aboard a Coast Guard vessel, we conducted site visits at three Coast Guard clinics and three afloat sickbays.¹² We selected these facilities for variation by type of facility, geographic location, use of telehealth services, relative population density, and availability of the afloat sickbay

(meaning the vessel was docked). We excluded ashore sickbays from our review because telehealth is generally not provided to personnel in these settings, which are typically used to provide routine care such as vaccinations or medications for seasonal colds.¹³ At the selected sites, we interviewed health care providers, clinic staff, and leadership officials, including commanding and executive officers, about their use of telehealth, including its benefits and challenges. Information obtained from these sites cannot be generalized to other Coast Guard clinics or afloat sickbays.

To describe the extent to which the Coast Guard is using video telehealth via MHS Video Connect, we obtained and reviewed data from DHA, which manages the platform. We analyzed data from October 2022, the earliest data available at the time of our request, through December 2023 (the most recent available at the time of our review).¹⁴ To assess the reliability of these data, we interviewed DHA officials and reviewed the data dictionary. We found these data to be sufficiently reliable for our reporting purposes.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2023 to April 2024 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.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Chair
The Honorable Ted Cruz
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate

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

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

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Endnotes

¹For example, Coast Guard clinic officials reported lacking a wireless connection in their clinic to use the tablets provided by the Coast Guard for Coast Guard Care Anywhere appointments. See GAO, *Coast Guard Health Care: Additional Actions Could Help Ensure Beneficiaries' Access*, GAO-23-105574 (Washington, D.C: Apr. 4, 2023).

²MHS GENESIS is DHA's electronic health record system. In 2018, DOD modified its contract with its contractor for the electronic health record system to incorporate the Coast Guard and create a standardized baseline electronic health record between the Coast Guard, DOD, and the Department of Veterans Affairs. DHA administers the MHS GENESIS contract, and the Coast Guard is reliant on DHA for configuring the system.

³Coast Guard active duty and reserve personnel are required to complete a Periodic Health Assessment every 12 months. The purpose of the assessment is to ensure medical readiness for personnel, including their physical and mental health.

⁴Contracted counselors provide members with counseling for several issues, such as financial challenges, weight loss, work-related concerns, and anxiety. CG SUPRT is intended to assist personnel through a limited number of telehealth or in-person sessions per year; specifically, personnel are limited to 12 appointments, per year, per issue, according to officials. Services are available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. The Coast Guard noted that this program is not considered a health care benefit.

⁵Coast Guard personnel referred to DOD military medical treatment facilities may receive care from DOD providers via telehealth. Coast Guard personnel can also access additional programs offered by the regional TRICARE managed care support contractors, such as Telemynd and Doctor on Demand. The scope of our report is limited to telehealth provided by the Coast Guard.

⁶When docked at their home piers, Coast Guard vessels have access to hardwire internet, according to Coast Guard officials and medical providers. Personnel aboard can then use this internet connection to attend telehealth appointments. Personnel may also use their cell phones to conduct appointments if cellular service is available, according to officials and personnel.

⁷An independent duty corpsman is a health service technician who has completed one of three recognized Independent Duty Training courses and may be assigned to a Coast Guard unit that has no attached medical officer, such as an afloat sickbay. A health service technician provides supportive services to medical officers and provides primary health care in the absence of such providers. For example, health service technicians maintain all administrative aspects of health care, render first aid, perform tentative diagnosis and emergency treatment, and provide nursing care where trained.

⁸Vessels at sea have traditionally relied on stationary satellites that orbit at higher altitudes and lower speeds. Internet connectivity under this system depends on the latitude of the vessel relative to these satellites; vessels are more likely to lose connectivity when they move into high latitudes.

⁹Specifically, Coast Guard officials said that the Joint Operational Medicine Information System (JOMIS) is taking the lead on the deployment of products that will include a virtual component and that are to be used in the operational environment for all military services. The JOMIS Program Management Office falls under DOD's Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment and is administratively attached to DHA. Its mission is to provide interoperable medical information technology capabilities across the full spectrum of military operations.

¹⁰DHA currently disseminates the Joint Outpatient Experience Survey to military members who receive care at DHA's military medical treatment facilities to assess their beneficiary experience. As of January 2024, Coast Guard officials told us they are working with DHA to launch the survey at Coast Guard clinics, as well as to finalize an interagency agreement for its use.

¹¹The Health, Safety, and Work-Life Directorate (CG-11) is comprised of several divisions, including the Health Safety-Work Life Service Center (HSWL SC) and the Office of Health Services (CG-112), who we also interviewed as part of this report.

Additionally, we interviewed two organizations representing Coast Guard active duty personnel to obtain personnel perspectives on telehealth and corroborate what we heard from Coast Guard officials. Specifically, we interviewed representatives from the Coast Guard Chief Petty Officers Association and the Chief Warrant and Warrant Officers Association, United States Coast Guard.

¹²We visited Coast Guard clinics located at (1) Base Seattle, (2) Base Astoria, and (3) Base Charleston. The three afloat sickbays we visited were docked at two of these three locations; specifically, we visited the afloat sickbay (1) *CGC Steadfast* (Astoria), (2) *CGC Stone* (Charleston), and (3) *CGC Hamilton* (Charleston). *CGC Stone* and *CGC Hamilton* are the same type of vessel; thus, we met with staff from both afloat sickbays, but only visited the afloat sickbay aboard *CGC Stone*.

¹³Active duty personnel assigned to ashore sickbays are concurrently empaneled, or assigned, to a primary care manager in a clinic affiliated with either the Coast Guard, DOD, or a TRICARE civilian provider, from whom they would receive telehealth if needed.

¹⁴We could not obtain data prior to October 2022 because Defense Health Agency officials said that they only retain telehealth data for up to 13 months and thus data before then was not available at the time of our request.