

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-106750](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard, a branch of the armed forces located within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is responsible for protecting and defending more than 100,000 miles of U.S. coastline and inland waterways. It safeguards an economic region covering 4.5 million square miles. The service also assists people in distress or those affected by natural and human-made disasters. To accomplish its missions, the Coast Guard must balance recruiting new members and retaining already trained service members.

This statement discusses, among other things, (1) Coast Guard's assessments of its workforce needs, (2) recruitment and retention issues for certain segments of the Coast Guard workforce, and (3) challenges identified related to Coast Guard workforce retention.

This statement is based primarily on reports published from November 2019 to April 2023. For that work, GAO analyzed Coast Guard and DOD documents and data and interviewed agency officials. For a full list of the reports, see [Related GAO Products](#) at the conclusion of this statement.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO made 29 recommendations in the reports covered by this statement, including to improve workforce planning processes and data monitoring and collection. The Coast Guard and DOD generally concurred with the recommendations. As of April 2023, the agencies had implemented five of these 29 recommendations. GAO continues to monitor agencies' progress in implementing them.

View [GAO-23-106750](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or [MacLeodH@gao.gov](mailto:MacLeodH@gao.gov).

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## COAST GUARD

### Recruitment and Retention Challenges Persist

## What GAO Found

The Coast Guard—a multi-mission military service employing more than 55,000 personnel—has reported that it is about 4,800 members short and has missed its recruiting targets for the past four fiscal years. The Coast Guard has conducted limited assessments of its workforce needs. Such assessments could help inform its recruiting goals. Specifically, as of March 2023, the service reported completing workforce requirements determinations for 15 percent of its units.

The Coast Guard has also faced recruitment and retention issues within its cyberspace workforce, specialized forces, and marine inspectors. Competition with higher paying jobs in the private sector, limited opportunities for promotion, and long work hours have made it challenging to recruit and retain these personnel. The Coast Guard has taken steps to address these challenges by, for example, creating career paths for certain workforces. GAO has recommended that the service take steps to fully address its workforce needs. Until it does so, the service will likely continue to miss recruiting and retention opportunities.

#### U.S. Coast Guard Recruiting Center



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-106750

Challenges related to quality of life factors in health care and housing, among others, may also affect the Coast Guard's ability to retain personnel. In April 2023, GAO found that Coast Guard personnel stationed in remote areas may experience challenges accessing medical care. Specifically, 17 of 43 Coast Guard clinics were located in medically underserved areas and 11 of 43 were located in at least one type of health provider shortage area. GAO recommended the Coast Guard obtain and monitor health care access data. Doing so would better position the Coast Guard to identify and address potential access concerns, which could affect retention.

Additionally, military personnel may receive housing allowances to help cover the cost of housing, but in January 2021 GAO found that the Department of Defense (DOD)—which determines allowances for all the services—had not consistently relied on quality data to set accurate allowance rates. For example, DOD had not consistently monitored housing cost trends over time and compared them against the allowance. GAO recommended DOD establish and implement a process for using quality information to set housing allowance rates, which would help DOD ensure that rates reflect current housing costs.