

Senate Committee Report Calls for Coast Guard Action on Sexual Harassment Claims



Admiral Linda Fagan and Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard Heath Jones converse Oct. 19, 2023 with Senator Tammy Duckworth in observance of National Disability Employment Awareness Month. *U.S. Coast Guard | Petty Officer 2nd Class Erik Villa Rodriguez*

In a new report entitled “A Pervasive Problem,” the majority staff of the Homeland Security Committee’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations concluded the U.S. Coast Guard must do more to eliminate sexual harassment in its ranks and at the service’s academy and should use evidence uncovered by the panel to prosecute perpetrators.

“The Subcommittee has heard from more than 80 whistleblowers, who together have made clear the need for immediate change

both at the Academy and in the Coast Guard,” the report’s conclusion says. “Their stories detail systemic sexual assault and harassment, including a culture of silencing, retaliation, and failed accountability. Although Operation Fouled Anchor initially brought these problems to light, they span both the Academy and the Fleet – the Coast Guard as a whole must work to build a culture in which everyone is safe, respected, and valued.”

The panel has been looking into the issue for more than a year, and recently [held a hearing](#) featuring Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Linda L. Fagan as the main witness, focusing on Operation Fouled Anchor, the Coast Guard’s investigation into sexual harassment allegations. Members of the panel charged the service had buried the results of its own investigation until CNN brought them to light. Fagan pledged to be transparent in dealing with the issue, which is also being investigated by the service’s inspector general.

However, in a “note from the chair” that begins the new report, panel chairman Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut writes, “I am deeply disappointed by the Coast Guard’s responses to this Subcommittee’s requests for critically necessary information. Despite repeatedly and publicly claiming a commitment to transparency, the organization has often resisted constructive responses. Such repeated opposition to disclosure has made us wonder whether the Coast Guard is, once again, attempting to escape Congressional scrutiny.”

Victim Reports

The report includes statements from numerous reports of sexual assault going back decades, as well as what survivors describe as attempts to silence them.

“These stories, spanning from the 1970s through the 2020s, depict systemic failures at the Coast Guard Academy and in the

Coast Guard that continue to this day,” the report says.

In one account, “after learning that she had experienced months of sexual misconduct, a superior allegedly told an enlisted whistleblower: ‘Okay, I want you to think about these men and their careers. They could lose their jobs over this, and you could ruin their lives. And then CGIS [Coast Guard Investigative Services] is going to show up and make you out to be a liar. No one will believe you. Do you want that? I want you to think about all of this before you decide to tell anyone else.’”

In some cases, “fear of punishment for collateral misconduct deterred victims of abuse from reporting. One whistleblower shared that, as a cadet in the 2010s, the threat of discipline for unrelated misconduct was used to keep her from reporting repeated sexual assaults by the same perpetrator for a year. She said: ‘He blackmailed me, using his position over me and the fact that I drank underage to get me to have sex with him. He knew that I would get into more trouble for underage drinking than he would for blackmailing me for sex. He was right. ...’”

Blumenthal’s opening note says the subcommittee will continue its work, and “our continuing investigation is likely to provide evidence that will assist and motivate the Coast Guard to impose discipline. It is imperative that the Coast Guard uses all means available to hold accountable both individual perpetrators and the leadership that covered up their wrongdoing ... the culture will not change until the Coast Guard makes clear that sexual assault and harassment will not be tolerated.”

Coast Guard Response

The Coast Guard provided a statement to *Seapower* in response to the report.

“Sexual assault, sexual harassment, and all forms of abuse

have no place in the Coast Guard. We are committed to fostering [lasting institutional and cultural change](#) that ensures a safe and respectful environment free of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other harmful behaviors. Should such incidents occur, the Coast Guard is committed to supporting victims, upholding the law, and reinforcing the service's core values," the statement says.

"We are actively implementing the commandant's 33 directed actions announced in November 2023 to strengthen our service culture, improve support and care of victims, and hold perpetrators accountable. Our progress completing 18 of these directed actions so far represents the early stages of enduring change that will ensure every person in the Coast Guard experiences a safe work environment where they are respected and valued. More information regarding the Coast Guard's actions to address sexual assault, and ensure accountability, care, and support, is [available here](#)."