

Senators Blast Coast Guard Chief for Sexual Assault Response



Adm. Linda L. Fagan, commandant of the Coast Guard, speaks to guests during the 2024 State of the Coast Guard Address in Washington, D.C., March 20. *U.S. Coast Guard | Petty Officer 1st Class Brandon Giles*

Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Linda L. Fagan endured withering criticism of the service's treatment of sexual harassment issues at the Coast Guard Academy on June 11, as Senators from both sides of the aisle said the Coast Guard has not been forthcoming with its investigations or in helping the Senate panel conduct its own.

The Homeland Security & Government Affairs Committee's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations looked into the Coast Guard's Operation Fouled Anchor investigation into sexual

assault at the Coast Guard Academy. During a hearing, members said the Coast Guard buried its own critical report, retaliated against whistleblowers and has been dragging its feet in providing information about the report to the committee.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut), the panel's chair, said Operation Fouled Anchor "was hidden from the public as well as Congress" and decried what he called "a culture of coverup continuance."

Blumenthal said the Coast Guard attempted to say much of the assault and harassment had occurred in the past, but more than 40 whistleblowers told the committee it is ongoing.

"The question is, what will the Coast Guard do about it now, in the present?" Blumenthal asked. "We are now expecting action." He also said, "our investigation has shown a deep moral rot inside the Coast Guard."

Fagan appeared at the hearing as the primary witness, along with Master Chief Heath Jones, the highest-ranking enlisted officer in the Coast Guard

Fagan said the Coast Guard is trying to provide all relevant documents to the committee, is cooperating with an Inspector General review of the Fouled Anchor effort, and is about to contract with an outside, independent investigator with \$1.5 million provided by Congress.

The Inspector General (IG) is "looking into Operationa Fouled Anchor, the totality of it, including action or inaction of senior leadership," Fagan said.

"Sexual assault is "unacceptable. Not in my Coast Guard," said Fagan, the service's first female commandant. "It is not who we are."

She said she has met with victims of assault, and "to the

victims, the survivors, I am truly sorry for what you have had to go through.”

She said the failure to provide the Fouled Anchor report to Congress was a mistake that eroded trust but said now the service is being fully responsive to the subcommittee.

“I cannot change the past. But as the commandant today, I reaffirm to our workforce, past and present, that I remain steadfast to making lasting cultural change,” Fagan said.

Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wisconsin), the ranking member of the panel, complained that the Coast Guard had issued a “data dump” of 1,000 pages of heavily redacted material on Operation Fouled Anchor, which he said was purposefully confusing and hard to follow.

Operation Fouled Anchor

The issue of Operation Fouled Anchor, first uncovered by CNN, burst into the news just days before the hearing, when Shannon Norenberg, the sexual assault response coordinator at the Coast Guard Academy, resigned and posted an open letter on Maritime Legal Aid.com in which she wrote, “The Coast Guard lied to me. Worse than that, they used me to lie to victims, used me to silence victims, and used me in a coordinated effort to discourage victims of sexual assault at the Academy from speaking to Congress about their assaults and about the Coast Guard’s investigation of their cases.”

Fagan said Norenberg, who was in the room, “has been an incredible employee for us” and “the allegations she has made will be part of the IG investigation.” She said she had not read Norenberg’s posted statement but would do so.

Norenberg had started working with Operation Fouled Anchor in 2018, her letter says, but it had been ongoing for four years before that and had investigated dozens of sexual assaults reported at the academy.

Part of her work with the operation was to call victims and offer what she called "official expressions of regret," along with in-person meetings in 2019 with 25 to 30 victims. Norenberg discovered she would not be offering CG-6095s to victims, which is proof offered to the Department of Veterans Affairs that the victim reported an assault while in the military, making it easier for them to obtain VA services to deal with their trauma.

Blumenthal said he was especially outraged by this, calling it "one of the most damning parts of her letter." He asked Fagan what she would do to provide access to VA services for sexual assault victims.

Fagan replied "I am committed to working with the IG," and later said, "my priority is supporting victims ... I don't want any victim to not get the support they are entitled to."

Blumenthal said "the IG report cannot be used as a shield for inaction" or as a reason for not disclosing documents, drawing a small smattering of applause.

Fagan said she did not become aware of the full extent of potential victims uncovered by Operation Fouled Anchor "until we had some of the FOIA requests from CNN."

She said her predecessor, Admiral Karl Schultz, was commandant of the Coast Guard at the time the decision was made to not reveal the findings of Operation Fouled Anchor but said she did not know if he was involved.

Blumenthal said maybe she didn't want to know, but Fagan replied, "I am committed to full transparency with regard to the allegations." She said the service will continue to cooperate with the IG and the third-party investigator "so we can understand what was known, when, and bring clarity to the allegations."