

Opening Statement of Chair Richard Blumenthal
“Coast Guard Academy Whistleblowers: Stories of Sexual Assault and Harassment”
U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
December 12, 2023

This hearing on the Permanent Subcommittee of Investigations will come to order. Welcome everyone, thank you all for being here; my colleagues who are here, and most especially the witnesses who have joined us. This hearing is about a culture of cover-up. It is a culture of cover-up that the Coast Guard has spawned and sustained for decades. It has discouraged and deterred victims and survivors of sexual abuse at the Coast Guard Academy from coming forward. It has denied them justice, and it has failed to protect them from retaliation and reprisal when they have stood up and spoken out.

For years this culture enabled sexual misconduct to occur, despite evidence of widespread, unaddressed, and egregious violations of basic norms. And, we want to make sure that there is not only transparency but also accountability going forward. This culture has continued to refuse accountability, a type of accountability when it comes to naming names and holding wrongdoers accountable. It's the type of accountability that requires full cooperation with the Subcommittee's inquiry, which so far, the Coast Guard has failed to fully do.

As we will hear today it is a culture that has all too often victimized survivors twice, first when they are assaulted or harassed, and then later when the leaders in command have failed to hold the perpetrators fully accountable. And, it is a culture that has fostered fear, fear of coming forward, fear that lives would be destroyed. The fear that, all too often, has been proven right. This is not just about Fouled Anchor, it is about lost Anchor, it is about a Coast Guard that has lost its way in doing justice for women who are victims and survivors of sexual assault. It is about a Coast Guard that has abandoned its moral compass and lost its ethical sonar.

We are here because the Coast Guard has continued this problem, and we know that the culture can and must be fixed. This past summer, we learned that the Coast Guard failed to disclose to Congress a multi-year internal investigation into dozens of instances of sexual assault at the Academy that had been reported but not adequately investigated or otherwise addressed. That investigation, known as Fouled Anchor, looked at 102 instances of rape or sexual assault at the Coast Guard Academy from the early 1990's through 2006, ultimately identifying 43 alleged perpetrators with a total of 63 victims. And yet, that investigation, or so-called investigation, failed to even scratch the surface. The majority of our witnesses here today will talk about violations of their rights, sexual assault that occurred outside that timeframe. So, it was not covered by Operation Fouled Anchor. The investigation found that the Academy had previously been aware of allegations against 30 of those 43 alleged perpetrators, but that only five -- only five -- had been reported to law enforcement at the time.

The report from this investigation concluded that the Academy leadership who oversaw these cases did not "instill a culture intolerant of any form of sexual misconduct; they did not promote and maintain a climate conducive to reporting incidents of sexual assault; and they did not adequately investigate alleged offenses as serious criminal matters and hold perpetrators appropriately accountable."

This Subcommittee opened a bipartisan inquiry soon after Operation Fouled Anchor was disclosed. Our inquiry, which is ongoing, has already found that Operation Fouled Anchor failed to address sexual misconduct in a vast number of cases at the Coast Guard Academy. We have heard accounts from numerous individuals with disturbing personal stories; gripping, painful, stories of sexual assault and harassment at the Coast Guard Academy, and in the Coast Guard. Those survivors include both men and women, and they span nearly five decades of Coast Guard alumni and retirees. Four of these brave

individuals are here with us today. And on behalf of myself, and all of my colleagues, I want to thank each of you for being here. I want to thank each of you for your courage and tenacity in coming forward.

The stories that we are going to hear today show how the Coast Guard Academy fostered an environment where assaults and harassment not only persisted, but fueled the culture of cover-up where survivors who did come forward were not treated with the seriousness and respect that they deserve. I want to share part of one, just one, individual story from a former cadet who is not here today. Just one of numerous accounts that the Subcommittee received in recent weeks. And we are going to make some of them part of this record. This woman, who was a constituent, was assaulted twice in her first year at the Academy, but did not disclose these assaults to anyone for decades, including members of her family. And I am quoting, "The rumors that existed about other girls who reported assaults were awful, and they eventually left the service because they were not taken seriously, and in some cases blamed for their assault. I hid the assaults from everyone that I knew, including my family and closest friends." This is a woman who chose the Academy. A woman who was committed to public service and chose to serve her country. But, because of what she experienced she decided to forgo a lifelong career in the Coast Guard. And our nation is worse off for it.

The stories that we have heard from survivors, that we are going to hear in fact from our witnesses today, are echoed by the Coast Guard's own data, a 2022 survey. A survey of cadets revealed that nearly 30% of female cadets experienced unwanted sexual conduct and contact since arriving at the Academy. That means that for every four female cadets, one or more has experienced unwanted sexual contact. That same survey found that only 15% of female survivors reported their assaults, and half of those who did, they experienced retaliation. More than half of female cadets surveyed reported experiencing sexual harassment in the last year.

I am encouraged that the Coast Guard is signaling, that they are beginning to take this problem seriously. The Coast Guard recently released the results of a 90-day Accountability and Transparency Review ordered by the Commandant after Operation Fouled Anchor was disclosed. This review includes programmatic recommendations aimed at addressing the deeply rooted cultural issues within the Coast Guard, and we support these efforts. I believe them to be a positive first step. But let me be clear, there is no accountability in that report. There is no naming of names. There is no reason given for the three-and-a-half-year delay between completion of Operation Fouled Anchor and its disclosure to the Congress. That report was concealed, hidden, and withheld from the United States Congress. This 90-day review in no way provides accountability. The Coast Guard's "Accountability Task Force" did not in fact recommend any steps to hold accountable past perpetrators or generations of Coast Guard leaders who oversaw and enabled that culture of misconduct, to build up, that enabled the cover-up.

Accountability is essential to ensure justice for victims and survivors, and prevent it from occurring in the future. There is no deterrence without accountability. Perpetrators must know that their actions will be punished, and that the survivors and victims will be protected.

The Coast Guard also has to do more to fully cooperate with this Subcommittee's investigation and produce documents that we requested in order to reveal the full scope of the culture of cover-up that has existed on their watch. While we are encouraged that the Coast Guard has produced some records, we have yet to receive a single internal email related to the decision of whether or not to disclose the report on Operation Fouled Anchor. Not one internal email disclosed so far. These critical documents must be provided without further delay.

And let me just say, finally, while this hearing is primarily focused on the Coast Guard and specifically the Academy, we know that these issues are not limited to the Coast Guard or to the Coast Guard Academy. The culture of cover-up has inevitably bled from the ranks of the Academy to the Coast Guard

itself. These problems persist in other military services, and we need to be determined to rid all of our military of sexual assault and harassment.

The Coast Guard has a long and storied history of service to our nation. It is vital to domestic safety and national defense. I have been a strong supporter of the Coast Guard, a strong supporter of the Academy, a strong supporter of a museum that will tell the story of the Coast Guard. But, the strongest supporters of the Coast Guard ought to be the most determined to rid it of this scorching scourge. And I hope that this hearing and the others that will follow it in our investigation will help in that effort.

And with that I will turn to the Ranking Member for his opening remarks.