

**Testimony of Melissa K. McCafferty
Before the U.S. Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
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For twelve years, I was a proud member of the United States Coast Guard. On July 2, 2007, I entered the Academy gates and began my journey. Four years later, on May 18, 2011, I graduated with high honors, received my Commission, and began my active-duty Coast Guard Career.

While a freshman at the Academy, I experienced my first sexual assault. A male cadet in his second year befriended me and invited me to visit New York City with him. I had already established strict friends-only boundaries, and he assured me that he would book us separate hotel rooms. I grew up in a small village in Michigan and had never been to the Big Apple, so I agreed. When I arrived at the hotel, I learned he had reserved only one room. I also quickly realized this person was *not* my friend. For three days, he repeatedly raped me. When I returned to the Academy, I told no one. I feared that if I reported this incident, I would face discipline. My fears were not unfounded; I later witnessed the restriction of a classmate who was brave enough to report a rape. To add insult to injury, Senior Leaders permitted her rapist to graduate and receive his Commission. To my knowledge, he is still serving today.

My second sexual assault occurred during my third year at the Academy. I was asleep in my barracks room when an intoxicated classmate broke in, climbed into my bed, and began undoing his shorts. Thankfully, I was able to stop him from going any further. I escorted my inebriated classmate to his room, put him to bed, and never spoke of the incident again.

The impact of these assaults on my life cannot be understated. My sense of trust in others, safety, self-worth, confidence, and emotional security were devastated.

As a result of this, I became increasingly fearful around men in the Coast Guard. I could not be alone with them in a room without being overly alert, having 911 on speed-dial, and becoming close to—or having—a PTSD-related flashback. I followed strict rules to protect myself from the men with whom I served, including refusing to go anywhere alone with them, dining alone with them, or even going to less-crowded public spaces with them. Even though I intuitively knew that not all Coast Guard men were predators, I felt I had to take every step possible to keep myself safe. I saw risk everywhere. It was just easier to keep my male colleagues at arm's length in order to protect myself. In fact, the impacts of these assaults and my struggle to cope with them transcended the Coast Guard: I became afraid to be alone in a room with any man, including, devastatingly enough, my own brother.

Over the course of my Coast Guard career, I unfortunately witnessed a culture that shields Senior Leaders at the expense of women—and men—who experience sexual harassment, assault, bullying, retaliation, and more. This culture is not limited to the Coast Guard Academy. Rather, it is ever-present in the fleet as well. While serving, I functioned as a Victim Advocate to a newly reported enlisted woman at a small boat station who was coerced by her second in command into

having sex with him. I've consoled a colleague who was transferred from his unit due to "excessive drinking" after reporting a rape. I've sent flowers to the funerals of members who have died by suicide, knowing that one of the reasons they refused to seek help is because they were afraid that nothing would be done and, even worse: that it would ultimately end up hurting them or ending their careers.

The emotional toll of Coast Guard missions is hard enough to bear without incurring the additional damage inflicted by Senior Leaders who know what is wrong but fail to take any action. Not only has the Coast Guard failed to remedy this toxic culture, but at times, I have witnessed leadership going so far as to protect the offenders. I fear that the cost of their failure has endangered the mental and physical health of too many women and men in the Coast Guard. Some regrettably do not survive. For others, it is a lifetime of scars and mistrust.

Myself, I opted for suicide. Between what I had witnessed in the fleet and what was done to me by those I was supposed to trust, I figured suicide was the best way to find any semblance of relief. So, on December 3, 2017, for the first time in my life, I gave up. Chasing hundreds of pills with a bottle of champagne, I flat lined in the ambulance and at the hospital.

My recovery journey was extremely difficult and frankly, I am lucky to be alive. For most of 2017 and 2018, I wanted to die more days than not. In the period of a year, I was institutionalized for eleven of the twelve months. Had I not been, I would have succeeded in killing myself.

I isolated myself from friends and family. Decade-long relationships were strained or ruined and I was unable to work, let alone leave my house. I was unable to make rational decisions and had my mother take charge of my finances. I was always one drink away from insanity, one flashback away from further institutionalization, and one step away from losing what little basis of reality I had left.

Four separate medical providers stated that my PTSD was so severe and so complex that I would require extensive long-term care and ongoing treatment. My prognosis from all four was poor.

Despite the grim prognosis and unfavorable odds, with the unwavering and relentless support from my family, my friends, a 12-step community, and my medical providers, I was able to recover, and achieve stability and sobriety. I regained my sanity, graduated law school, and am now successfully employed. Most importantly, I am not only healthy, but I am happy as well.

I am here today because, despite everything that happened, I love the Coast Guard and am passionate about its missions and its people. I am here today because it is beyond time for Senior Leaders to do better and to be better.

This begins with accountability. Too often, Coast Guard Senior Leaders have punished junior officers, mid-grade officers, and enlisted members for their "misdeeds" but have failed to police themselves. Too many times, Senior Leaders have interceded, overturning recommendations—and at times, convictions—made by independent parties. Senior Leaders have also permitted members to quietly resign or retire in lieu of receiving punishment or adverse documentation. For

members who are able to quietly retire, they are subsequently afforded military honors and a fully funded government pension. This double standard is simply unacceptable. If this institution is to change, Senior Leaders must first be loyal to the Coast Guard rather than to themselves.

This means applying the Coast Guard Code of Conduct fairly and equally to all members of the service. Senior Leaders who break the rules should not be protected from the consequences of their actions.

To illustrate the necessity of holding Senior Leaders accountable, I need only to direct your attention to the recent reports concerning several failed attempts by Senior Leaders to conceal and bury damaging reports: (1) Operation Fouled Anchor, (2) the highly visible case of Glenn Sulmasy, and (3) the 2015 Culture of Respect Report.

Despite these reports, which document widespread abuse, hazing, sexual misconduct, retaliation, harassment, and racism alongside selective enforcement, concealment, and evasion of accountability, Senior Leaders continue to remain defiant in the face of well-documented truths. This disturbing pattern is further documented in the personal accounts of numerous Coast Guard service members with whom I've been in touch. Several of these individuals have asked me to share their anonymous personal accounts with the Subcommittee, which I will submit as an addendum to this testimony.

Lamenting a decades-long “disconnect” between the Coast Guard’s desired culture and actual experiences, Coast Guard Senior Leaders continue to deflect responsibility and misplace blame, placing it instead on the shoulders of enlisted members along with junior and mid-grade officers. In vowing to enact change through action-items such as increased oversight of the Cadet Corps at the Academy and by expanding bystander intervention training, Senior Leaders continue to miss the very obvious, and critical, point: none of these efforts will matter until Senior Leaders are finally willing to adhere to the rules, enforce the law, and exercise integrity themselves.

From the beginning of my time at the Academy until the day I retired, I was repeatedly told that as a Commissioned Officer, how we behave and what we do matters. Actions matter. Consequences—both intended and unintended—matter. All of this matters and not just to those below, but to those above and outside of our organization as well. To that end, perception is reality. Whether today’s Senior Leaders created this problem or contributed to it, they ultimately bear the responsibility and obligation to fix it.

It should come as no surprise that trust in the organization is eroding. Given the repeated failures by Coast Guard Senior Leaders to promote transparency, to enforce the law, and to hold members accountable who are involved in any misconduct, they have not just further eroded organizational trust but have destroyed it altogether.

The integrity of the Coast Guard and the lives of those it is charged to protect depends on the ability of Senior Leaders to unequivocally act with courage, conviction, and character. To do the right thing, no matter the consequence. To embody the Coast Guard Core Values, no matter the

cost. To even-handedly apply and enforce the law, regardless of who that member is or what rank they hold.

Only once Senior Leaders are willing to lead with integrity and to indiscriminately fulfill their Oath, can they ensure the success of the Coast Guard, its people, and its culture. Until this occurs, however, the Coast Guard will continue to remain lost and adrift.