

Opening Statement of Chair Richard Blumenthal
“Coast Guard Oversight: Sexual Assault and Harassment”
U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
June 11, 2024

We welcome our two witnesses, Admiral Linda Fagan and Master Chief Jones.

Nearly six months ago when we began this investigation, we were assured that the problem of sexual assault in the Coast Guard was a thing of the past—that mishandling of problems of sexual assault and harassment were over, and that cooperation would be full and complete. Unfortunately, we have found the opposite to be true. In fact, problems of sexual assault and harassment in the Coast Guard are by no means a problem of the past. They are very much a present, ongoing, persistent, and unacceptably prevalent problem.

And the mishandling of abuse complaints seems intolerably common. We have received reports from almost forty whistleblowers just in the last few months that attest to this ongoing problem. And unfortunately, the evidence points to a culture of cover-up continuing as exemplified by the resistance to producing documents that very specifically and importantly should be part of this investigation.

We are not hypothesizing about the Coast Guard claiming that the problem is one of the past. In fact, it's in a document that we have. It is a handwritten document that accompanied a memorandum arguing that Operation Fouled Anchor should not be revealed.

We began this inquiry in the wake of the news that Operation Fouled Anchor, the Coast Guard internal investigation into decades of unaddressed sexual assault and sexual harassment, had been kept hidden from Congress. In fact, it was hidden from the public as well as Congress for three years.

In deciding to keep Operation Fouled Anchor out of the public view, the Coast Guard leaders believed, as handwritten notes on documents obtained by this Subcommittee show that, in fact, the problem was one of the present. The question is, what will the Coast Guard do about it now in the present? What specific action? We are beyond good intentions and statements of doing the right thing. We are now expecting action.

And what we know from Operation Fouled Anchor and the way that it was concealed is that our investigation has shown a deep moral rot within the Coast Guard now, one that prioritizes cronyism over accountability, silence over survivors. The whistleblowers who came to us just six months ago and testified before us described the culture of cover-up that led to their cases being dismissed or degraded or disregarded or treated as trivial administrative matters.

The most recent of the whistleblowers who has come forward is Shannon Norenberg. She was the official at the Academy responsible for response to sexual assault complaints. In a letter to us stating that she would resign, she said the following, “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 cases.” I don't think in my thirteen years in the United States Senate and twenty-five years in law enforcement I have seen a statement as concisely damning as the one that Ms. Norenberg has sent to us. But she is only one of a great number.

Another one of the whistleblowers wrote to us recently, saying, “I can say with absolutely certainty that at every single duty station I was assigned to that I either personally experienced bullying, hazing, and harassment, or either bore witness to or learned of others being treated inappropriately or unfairly. These forms of harassment include but are not limited to sexual assault.”

These statements reflect a broken culture—not at some point in the past, but again, right now in the present.

Last month, an incendiary email was widely circulated to current Coast Guard personnel in leadership with allegations about the Coast Guard's recent mishandling of a sexual assault and harassment case. Instead of addressing these claims directly, the Coast Guard removed it from the inboxes of personnel, though not before the allegations could go viral on the internet.

A month earlier, the Coast Guard attempted to suppress survivor's storyteller videos. These are videos with accounts of whistleblower experiences, survivors' victimization. And the reason they were suppressed was, “It could continue to exacerbate the narrative that the Coast Guard is in a sexual assault crisis now.” That was just a couple of months ago.

Equally concerning is the way the Coast Guard has responded to our requests. Just one example: The Coast Guard is refusing to provide us with documents deemed “sensitive.” Which is another word for embarrassing.

This situation demands unsparing truth telling. Following the evidence where it leads and being willing to face that truth, even though it may be embarrassing to friends, colleagues, predecessors, and current leadership.

I am grateful to Admiral Fagan for being here today, along with Master Chief Heath Jones. And I have said before to her, I have said publicly, that I hope that we can begin a different era in the Coast Guard, but it will take facing the truth and disclosing it.

There is an obligation to survivors, to the public, as well as to this Subcommittee, to be fully forthcoming.

We would like more cooperation from the Coast Guard. I have enormous respect and admiration for the Coast Guard, for all it has done for the country, for its great contributions to our national security, and its storied history. I have been a strong supporter of the Academy and of the museum that we hope will commemorate and celebrate that history, in New London, Connecticut.

But for right now, we need a commitment—again, not just in words, but in actions—that this problem will be addressed effectively. We will be asking questions, I am sure, about that commitment to action and to ending the broken culture, which is a culture of concealment that, in many respects, is as deeply troubling as the instances of abuse and assault themselves.

With that, I will turn to the Ranking Member.