

# GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-539](#), a report to congressional addressees

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard is a multi-mission maritime military service responsible for maritime safety, security, and environmental protection, among other things. During the pandemic, the Coast Guard has faced challenges in balancing the need to safeguard its personnel with its responsibility to continue missions and operations.

In response to a CARES Act mandate and congressional requests, GAO reviewed the Coast Guard's efforts to respond to the pandemic. This report examines (1) the Coast Guard's actions to reduce the risk of COVID-19 exposure for its personnel; (2) challenges the Coast Guard faced in operating in a pandemic environment and how it addressed them; and (3) the extent to which the Coast Guard has collected and maintained valid and current telework documentation, as well as accurate and complete COVID-19 data on its personnel.

GAO reviewed Coast Guard COVID-19 policies and guidance, interviewed officials from headquarters and a non-probability sample of nine Coast Guard sectors, and analyzed data on the status of Coast Guard personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends the Coast Guard ensure that (1) personnel have valid telework agreements in place, (2) these agreements are reviewed at least annually, and (3) weekly audits are conducted to verify the status of personnel. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-21-539](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or [macleodh@gao.gov](mailto:macleodh@gao.gov).

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## COVID-19

### The Coast Guard Has Addressed Challenges, but Could Improve Telework Documentation and Personnel Data

## What GAO Found

The U.S. Coast Guard took steps to safeguard its personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic by updating its policies and guidance, expanding telework, and administering COVID-19 vaccines, among other efforts. For example, the Coast Guard formed a COVID-19 Crisis Action Team comprising targeted working groups to address COVID-19-related issues and develop new policies and guidance. Further, from December 2020 through April 2021, the Coast Guard administered vaccines to 35,439 (about 64 percent) of its personnel.

#### Selected U.S. Coast Guard COVID-19 Crisis Action Team Working Groups



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard documentation. | [GAO-21-539](#)

The Coast Guard also took actions to address a variety of challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, officials from all nine sectors (i.e., operational field units) we interviewed identified challenges with information technology system functionality when the Coast Guard expanded telework in March 2020. This included insufficient network bandwidth and a lack of laptop computers. To address these challenges, the Coast Guard increased network bandwidth to allow more simultaneous users and provided additional laptops to field offices. In addition, the Coast Guard faced other challenges during the pandemic, including ensuring personnel continued to receive necessary training and on-the-job experience.

GAO found that the Coast Guard lacks controls over telework documentation and its personnel data are not reliable. First, the Coast Guard expanded its telework program during the pandemic, but lacks controls to ensure that teleworking personnel have valid and current telework agreements in place. Officials told us that high levels of participation in its telework program may continue following the pandemic. Thus, ensuring that all personnel who telework have valid and current telework agreements in place will provide the Coast Guard with the information needed to make decisions that require telework data, such as for space planning or technology investments. Second, the Coast Guard modified its personnel system to allow personnel to self-report and update their COVID-19 and telework statuses. GAO analyzed these data from April 2020 through April 2021 and found they were not reliable due to missing data and concerns about accuracy. In particular, Coast Guard officials could not provide assurance or evidence that weekly audits purposefully designed to verify the accuracy and completeness of these data were being conducted. Without such assurance, the Coast Guard may be relying on inaccurate and incomplete information when making decisions that rely on these data, such as for assessing its operational readiness.