

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107224](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard is a multi-mission maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security. In fiscal year 2024, it employed over 39,000 active-duty service members; about 30,600 were enlisted personnel. The service's ability to recruit qualified enlisted personnel is critical to maintaining its readiness and morale. However, the Coast Guard missed its military recruiting targets from fiscal years 2019 through 2023.

GAO was asked to examine the Coast Guard's recruitment efforts. This report examines Coast Guard actions taken to (1) meet recruitment goals for enlisted personnel, and (2) enhance recruiter effectiveness.

GAO identified Coast Guard recruiting office locations and reviewed recent outreach efforts and initiatives. GAO also reviewed recruitment-related documentation. This included policies and guidance on enlistment eligibility, medical standards, and eligibility waivers. In addition, GAO interviewed officials at headquarters and at five selected recruiting offices about recruitment processes and challenges.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to the Coast Guard: (1) further assess how recruiting and outreach activities contribute to annual results, (2) implement recruiter training in an in-person or hybrid format, (3) implement mechanisms to monitor and resolve IT issues with recruiter tools and systems, and (4) develop a process to routinely monitor and analyze recruiting website availability. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with these recommendations.

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COAST GUARD

Progress Made to Address Recruiting Challenges, but Additional Actions Needed

What GAO Found

In 2024, the Coast Guard took additional actions to reach potential recruits by expanding the number of recruiting office locations, initiating new outreach efforts, offering bonuses to eligible recruits, and increasing marketing efforts. In recent years, it also revised enlistment eligibility standards and began to address challenges with the medical waiver review process, such as hiring additional medical staff to review waiver requests. Collectively, these efforts contributed to the Coast Guard exceeding its recruiting target of 4200 enlisted personnel by more than 200 in fiscal year 2024, but additional opportunities and challenges remain. For example, the Coast Guard has not fully assessed how its initiatives contribute to recruiting results. Additional data collection or analyses, such as determining the cost effectiveness of certain efforts, could help the Coast Guard make evidence-based decisions regarding any further changes needed.

Example of Coast Guard Recruiting Outreach



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo by 2nd class Gabriel Wisdom. | GAO-25-107224

The Coast Guard also took steps in fiscal year 2024 to enhance recruiter effectiveness. This entailed initiating a recruiter incentive pay program, offering a new career track for recruiting specialists, and increasing recruiter support resources. However, recruiter training has been conducted virtually since the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruiters stated that the virtual format was not as effective as in-person training, especially for practicing key skills such as public speaking. Returning to an in-person or hybrid format would help recruiters model real-world interactions and would better align with other military services.

In addition, recruiters stated that their offices faced a variety of IT challenges, including issues with computers, equipment, and system outages, but the Coast Guard does not have a mechanism to monitor or fully address them. Further, the recruiting website had persistent technical challenges, and the service does not routinely monitor the site to ensure it is properly functioning. As a primary access point for potential recruits, maintaining a fully operational website and addressing any technical issues in a timely manner is critical. By monitoring data on technology issues and downtime, the Coast Guard would be better positioned to identify and resolve IT-related challenges and help prevent extended service delays that may impact recruiter effectiveness.