

Opportunities Exist to Strengthen Reform Efforts to Address Sexual Misconduct

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A report to congressional requesters.

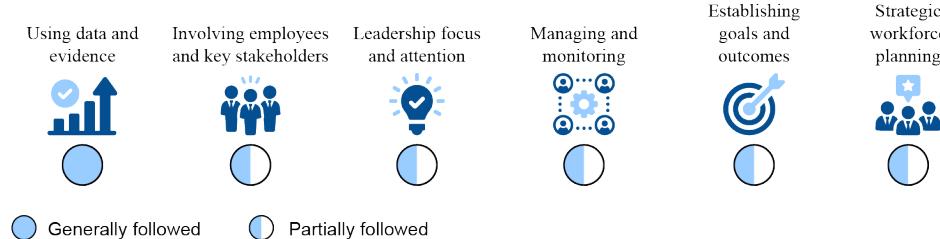
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What GAO Found

The Coast Guard identified 49 actions to implement as part of its reform effort to address sexual misconduct since July 2023. As of September 2025, the service reported implementing 32 of them. These actions include revising policy to improve accountability for sexual misconduct and developing new training. Coast Guard officials cited several reasons why the 17 remaining actions are incomplete, including their complexity and transitions in the service's leaders.

The Coast Guard has taken steps to incorporate aspects of leading practices to support its reform efforts, but gaps in key areas may affect its ability to maintain progress and achieve lasting results to address sexual misconduct.

Extent to Which the Coast Guard's Reform Effort to Address Sexual Misconduct Followed Selected Leading Practices for Agency Reforms



Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard documents and interviews against GAO leading practice for agency reform. | GAO-26-107685

Specifically, GAO identified gaps in these areas:

- Involving employees and key stakeholders.** The Coast Guard engaged employees and stakeholders (e.g., the Department of Defense) when developing its reforms but does not have a dedicated method for collecting feedback from its personnel. Establishing a two-way communication strategy would better ensure the Coast Guard has opportunities to collect and respond to employee feedback regarding the effects of the reforms.
- Leadership focus and attention.** The service established a steering committee, but it has not met since November 2024. An active reform implementation team would help the Coast Guard maintain momentum.
- Managing and monitoring.** The Coast Guard has not updated timelines or outlined clear next steps for incomplete reform actions. Developing a clear implementation plan with key milestones and updated time frames could help the Coast Guard pinpoint performance shortfalls and address challenges.
- Establishing goals and outcomes.** The Coast Guard has not developed an evaluation plan to assess the effectiveness of its efforts, as GAO recommended in March 2024. Officials have begun to develop a service culture index to measure progress; however, it is incomplete.
- Strategic workforce planning.** The service has added staff to support its reform efforts (e.g., 16 personnel at the Academy) but has not fully assessed workforce needs. Addressing GAO's 2020 recommendation on workforce assessment planning would better ensure the Coast Guard has the right people in the units responsible for implementing the reform efforts.

Why GAO Did This Study

Sexual assault and sexual harassment (i.e., sexual misconduct) are serious offenses that can have lasting, harmful effects on victims. Incidents of sexual misconduct in the Coast Guard—a maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—have generated congressional and media attention for nearly 2 decades. In July 2023, after media reporting on the mishandling of sexual assault cases, the Coast Guard directed a review to identify areas for organizational improvement and to counter sexual misconduct.

GAO was asked to review the Coast Guard's effort to address sexual misconduct. This report examines (1) the reform actions the Coast Guard has taken since July 2023 to address sexual assault and harassment and (2) the extent to which the Coast Guard has followed selected leading agency reform practices to implement and sustain its reform efforts.

GAO reviewed Coast Guard documentation on its reform actions and assessed them against selected leading practices for agency reform. GAO also interviewed Coast Guard officials from headquarters and from five of nine districts (selected based on size and geography) and visited one of these districts (New England) as well as the Coast Guard Academy.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Coast Guard (1) establish a two-way communications strategy with employees regarding the status and effects of its reform efforts; (2) ensure there is an active reform implementation team in place to manage and sustain its reform efforts; and (3) develop an implementation plan for its reform effort. DHS agreed with the recommendations.