

# Coast Guard: Additional Actions Needed to Address Reports of Community Discrimination Against Service Members

GAO-26-107875

Q&amp;A Report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

February 11, 2026

## Why This Matters

As a multi-mission maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Coast Guard has over 40,000 active-duty military personnel stationed at numerous operating locations. These locations are often situated along major waterways and coastlines. As of 2023, about 41 percent of Coast Guard units were located in remote areas or high vacation rental areas, or both. Coast Guard service members and their families often reside near these remote locations and generally rotate to new duty stations every 3 to 4 years.

The Coast Guard mandates that all personnel be treated fairly and with respect to successfully carry out its missions, including within the communities in which they live. However, Coast Guard members and their families may experience hostility, harassment, and discrimination from members of their community, which the Coast Guard calls a social climate incident. For example, members have reported being called racial slurs, and in one incident in 2023, a service member reported that their child was the target of antisemitic hate speech in school. According to the Coast Guard, social climate incidents can have a negative impact on the emotional, physical, and social wellbeing of members and their families, which may then have a negative impact on morale and job performance.

We were asked to examine the policies and procedures that the Coast Guard has in place to track, monitor, and address social climate incidents. This report provides information on the Coast Guard's available data on reported social climate incidents, the extent to which the Coast Guard has followed its social climate incident policies, and how the Coast Guard responds to social climate incidents.

## Key Takeaways

- Coast Guard members reported 112 social climate incidents from fiscal years 1998 through 2024. Most of these incidents were perceived to target the race or ethnicity of the service member or that of a family member. More than half of these incidents were reported from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2024.
- Coast Guard commands generally followed the social climate incident policies outlined in the Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual, but they used different interpretations for what constitutes a social climate incident. As a result, the Coast Guard may not be implementing its definition of a social climate incident consistently. We recommend that the Coast Guard review and clarify its social climate incident definition and ensure that the definition is the same in its Civil Rights Manual and Assignments Manual.

- The Civil Rights Directorate (CRD) was unable to locate any documentation for six of 30 reported social climate incidents we selected to review. We recommend that the Coast Guard develop a standardized process for collecting and retaining these documents.
- The CRD provides Coast Guard members access to an internal website that tracks all reported social climate incidents and displays incident trends, including the location and type of incident. However, many Coast Guard commands we interviewed were not aware of these monitoring tools. We recommend that the Coast Guard take steps to improve command awareness of these tools.

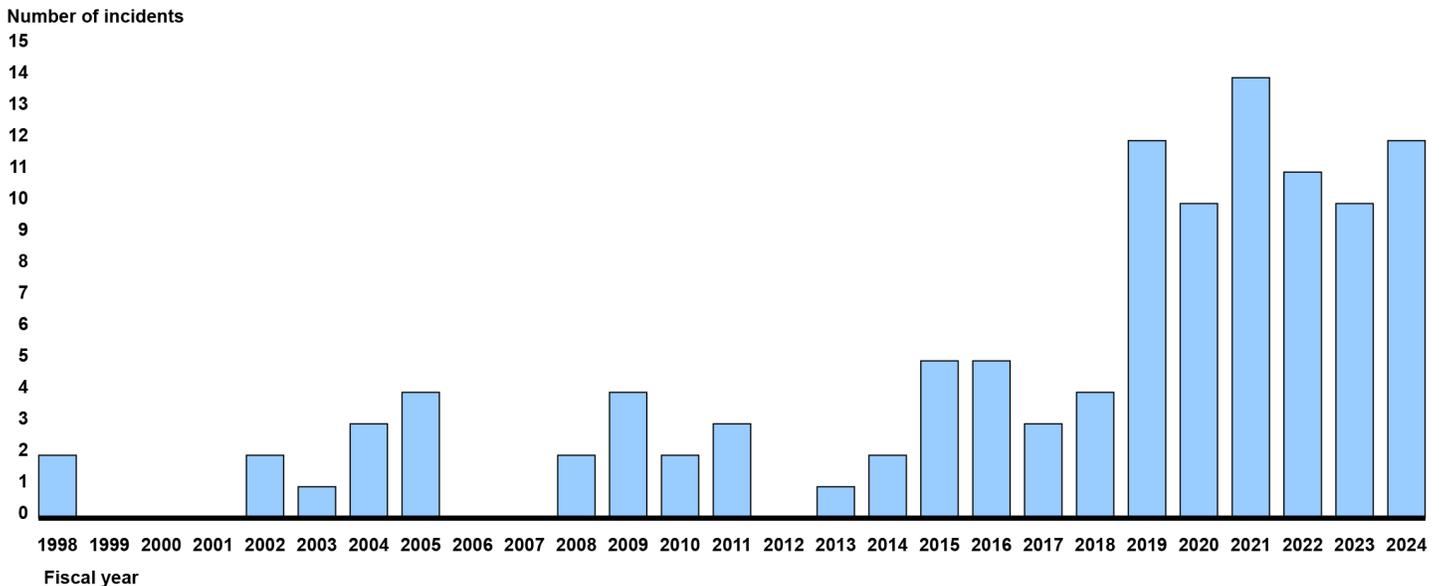
### What is a social climate incident?

According to the Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual, a social climate incident is an action committed by a member or members of a community against Coast Guard military personnel, or their family members, that is perceived as hostile, harassing, or discriminatory in nature, and that is based on unlawful discrimination.<sup>1</sup> For example, a restaurant refusing service to a Coast Guard member because of their race, sex, or disability is a social climate incident. A service member subjected to racial slurs by a community member in a public place, like a grocery store, also qualifies as a social climate incident.

### What do available data show about the number of reported incidents?

From fiscal years 1998 through 2024, Coast Guard members reported 112 social climate incidents.<sup>2</sup> As shown in figure 1, Coast Guard members reported more than half of these incidents in the last six years, from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2024. The number of reported incidents peaked in fiscal year 2021 at 14 reported incidents. Coast Guard officials said that they could not attribute the increase in reported incidents to a single cause. However, officials said that a possible explanation could be related to a general societal shift around 2019 and 2020 that led to heightened sensitivities around discrimination. They noted that this may have led to Coast Guard members feeling more comfortable reporting incidents.

**Figure 1: Social Climate Incidents Reported by Coast Guard Service Members from Fiscal Years 1998 through 2024**



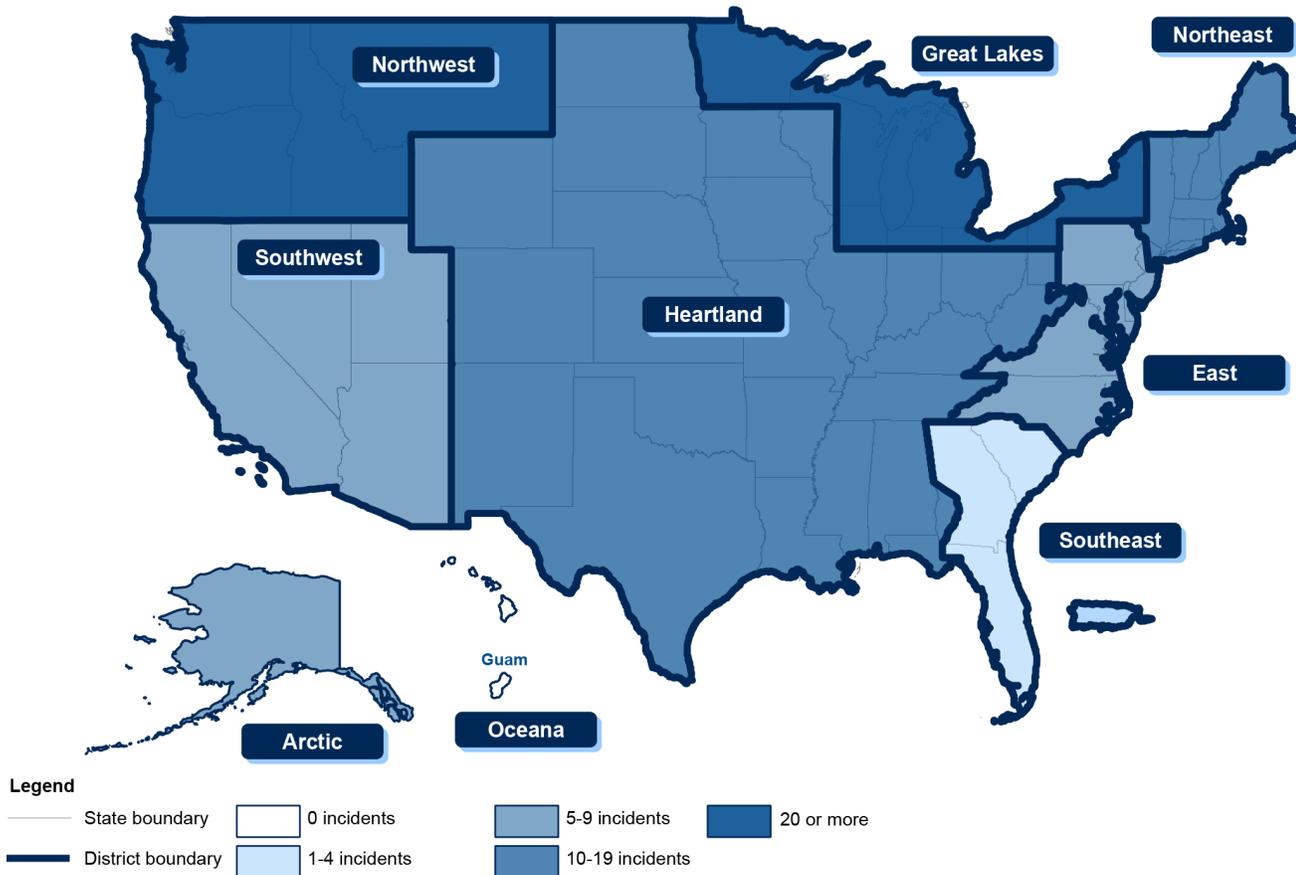
Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-26-107875

Note: The Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual defines a social climate incident as an action committed by a member or members of a community against Coast Guard military personnel, or their family members, that is perceived as hostile, harassing, or discriminatory in nature, and that is based on unlawful discrimination. This figure reflects the number of social climate incidents as reported by Coast Guard members, and may not include all actual social climate incidents.

**What do available data show about the locations of reported incidents?**

Coast Guard data show that most reported incidents occurred in four of the nine Coast Guard districts, and about half of all incidents were reported in two of these districts. Districts, sectors, and units are led by individuals referred to as commands. Coast Guard commands from nine districts oversee 36 regional Coast Guard sectors and numerous individual Coast Guard units. Of the 112 social climate incidents that Coast Guard members reported to their commands from fiscal years 1998 through 2024, members reported 89 incidents in four districts: Great Lakes (38 incidents), Northwest (25 incidents), Northeast (14 incidents), and Heartland (12 incidents). Figure 2 shows the number of social climate incidents that Coast Guard members reported in each district from fiscal years 1998 through 2024.

**Figure 2: Social Climate Incidents Reported by Coast Guard District, Fiscal Years 1998 through 2024**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-26-107875

Note: The Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual defines a social climate incident as an action committed by a member or members of a community against Coast Guard military personnel, or their family members, that is perceived as hostile, harassing, or discriminatory in nature, and that is based on unlawful discrimination. This figure reflects social climate incidents reported by Coast Guard service members. Coast Guard districts oversee Coast Guard sectors and individual Coast Guard units.

Coast Guard members reported the highest number of incidents in two cities, Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan and Port Angeles, Washington. Specifically, Coast Guard members reported 15 incidents in Sault Ste. Marie and seven incidents in Port Angeles from fiscal years 1998 through 2024. Of the 15 social climate incidents reported in Sault Ste. Marie, nine were reported from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2024. Of the seven incidents reported in Port Angeles, five were reported from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2024.

Coast Guard commands in these areas told us that these communities are isolated and remote, and lack racial diversity. In Sault Ste. Marie, 13 of the 15 social climate incidents from fiscal years 1998 through 2024 were perceived to

be motivated by race or ethnicity. In Port Angeles, all seven incidents reported by Coast Guard members from fiscal years 1998 through 2024 were perceived to be motivated by race or ethnicity.

Commands from both locations told us they were aware of the incidents in their communities and that they were proactive in taking steps to prevent or address additional social climate incidents. For example, the commands in Sault Ste. Marie said that they worked with community leaders to encourage a property owner to remove an item that could be perceived as a racist symbol, which was near the entrance to Coast Guard housing. The command took this step out of concern for members before any formal complaints were filed. Port Angeles commands told us that they make sure to discuss social climate incident procedures with members who are new to the area.

Figure 3: Coast Guard Members in Sault Ste. Marie, MI (left) and Port Angeles, WA (right).



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photos by MCPO Alan Haraf (left) and CPO David Mosley (right). | GAO-26-107875

Coast Guard members reported social climate incidents in 67 locations from fiscal years 1998 through 2024. Further, as shown in figure 4, members reported two or more incidents in 19 of these locations. Of the 64 incidents that Coast Guard members reported in these 19 locations from fiscal years 1998 through 2024, 59 (over 90 percent) of the incidents were perceived to be motivated by race or ethnicity.

**Figure 4: Locations with Two or More Reported Coast Guard Social Climate Incidents from Fiscal Years 1998 through 2024**



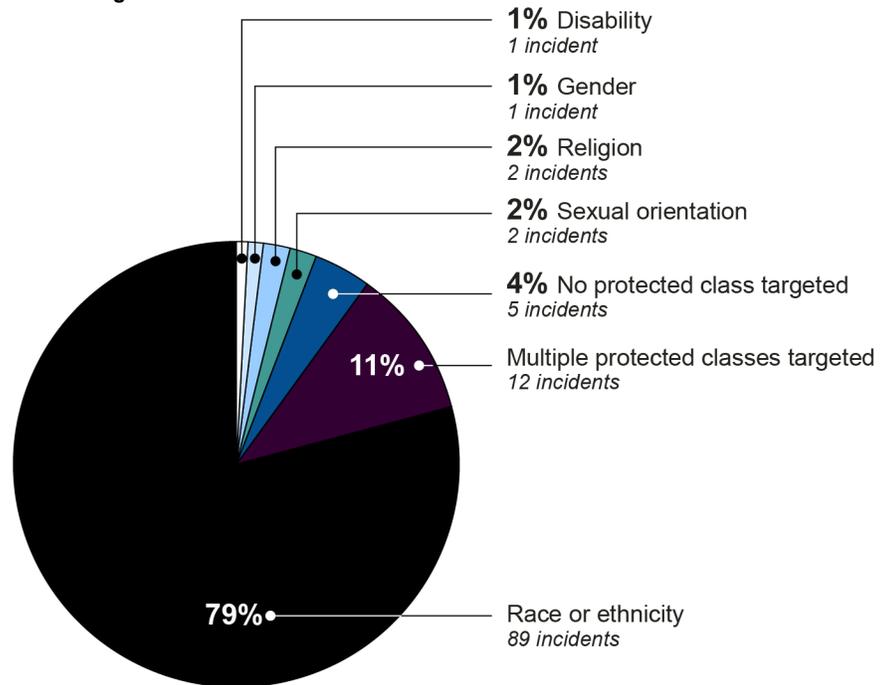
Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-26-107875

Note: The Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual defines a social climate incident as an action committed by a member or members of a community against Coast Guard military personnel, or their family members, that is perceived as hostile, harassing, or discriminatory in nature, and that is based on unlawful discrimination. This figure reflects data from 64 of the 112 social climate incidents that Coast Guard service members reported in which more than one incident was reported in a city. This figure reflects incidents reported by Coast Guard service members.

### What do available data show about the type of discrimination involved?

According to Coast Guard data, of the 112 reported social climate incidents, 89 were reported by members who perceived that the incidents targeted solely their race or ethnicity, or that of a family member. Members reported 12 incidents with multiple motivations and 11 of these were perceived as targeting race or ethnicity as well as another motivation. Other reported incidents were perceived as targeting the sexual orientation (2 of 112), the religion (2 of 112), the disability (1 of 112), or the gender (1 of 112) of the member or their immediate family. There were also five incidents where members reported no perceived targeted motivation. See figure 5 for a breakdown of the reported motivations.

**Figure 5: Reported Perceived Motivation in Coast Guard Social Climate Incidents From Fiscal Years 1998 through 2024**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-26-107875

Note: Service members reported that 11 of the 12 incidents where multiple protected classes were perceived as targeted included race or ethnicity as at least one perceived motivation. Reported motivations in these 12 incidents included race and gender (4); race and sexual orientation (4); ethnicity and gender (1); race, gender, and sexual orientation (1); race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and disability (1); and sexual orientation and gender (1). The Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual defines a social climate incident as an action committed by a member or members of a community against Coast Guard military personnel, or their family members, that is perceived as hostile, harassing, or discriminatory in nature, and that is based on unlawful discrimination. This figure reflects social climate incidents reported by Coast Guard service members.

**What are Coast Guard roles and responsibilities regarding social climate incidents?**

The CRD is the headquarters office responsible for developing policies and procedures on overseeing the management of reported social climate incidents. Commands are primarily responsible for responding to reported incidents and reporting them up the chain of command to the CRD. The Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual outlines the Coast Guard’s roles and responsibilities regarding reported social climate incidents.<sup>3</sup> See table 1 below for the full list of roles and responsibilities within the Coast Guard regarding social climate incidents.

**Table 1: Coast Guard Offices and Officials with Responsibilities Related to Reporting, Preventing, and Responding to Social Climate Incidents**

Program office or official	Coast Guard location	Description of role
Civil Rights Directorate (CRD)	Headquarters	Responsible for developing social climate incident policies and procedures, maintaining a database of social climate information, and program oversight.
Commands	Field (can be at various levels, such as district or unit) <sup>a</sup>	Serve as the primary and direct first responders to reported social climate incidents, and report social climate incidents to the CRD.
Civil Rights Service Providers	Field, fall under the CRD	Provide civil rights training and guidance to commands and members.
Personnel Service Center	Headquarters	Responsible for duty station assignments and social climate transfers.
Assignment officers	Headquarters / Personnel Service Center	Assign members to duty stations based on service need and member preference, among other things.

Source: GAO summary of U.S. Coast Guard policies. | GAO-26-107875

<sup>a</sup>Coast Guard districts oversee Coast Guard sectors and individual Coast Guard units.

## How has the Coast Guard implemented its definition of a social climate incident?

Our interviews with Coast Guard officials, including all 9 district commands, found that commands used different interpretations of what constitutes a social climate incident. As a result, they may not be implementing the Coast Guard’s definition of a social climate incident consistently in terms of (1) whether a social climate incident is limited to protected classes only—i.e., race, color, national origin, sex, religion, and disability—and (2) the standard of proof to substantiate an incident as a social climate incident.

For example, officials from the Northwest District command told us that a community incident not related to a legally protected class, but one that involved fear for the member’s safety, resulted in a transfer of the Coast Guard member out of Astoria, Oregon. One area Civil Rights Service Provider also said that they were using social climate incident policies to address incidents not related to a legally protected class. We further identified 5 out of 112 reported incidents that did not cite a legally protected class.

Furthermore, two district commands told us that they substantiate any report that the member perceives as a social climate incident. For example, one district command said that after an investigation, it is sometimes difficult to assess whether a reported incident involved protected class discrimination (such as in reported road rage incidents). Therefore, they substantiate the case as a social climate incident if the member perceives it to be due to a protected class.

Two other district commands told us that they only substantiate reports where the investigation determines that the motivation was a member’s protected class. For example, one district command told us that if the investigation cannot determine whether the reported incident was motivated by a legally protected class, they do not consider it to be a social climate incident and use other avenues to support the member.

Personnel Service Center officials said that they only consider a social climate transfer if commands investigate and confirm that a social climate incident occurred. This could mean service members receive different response options depending on how their local command interprets and applies the policy.

Commands are taking these inconsistent approaches because the Coast Guard's definition of a social climate incident is not clear as to whether it is limited to protected classes only—i.e., race, color, national origin, sex, religion, and disability. The Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual also does not make clear what standard of proof is required to substantiate an incident as a social climate incident.

For example, it is not clear whether command staff should conclude that a social climate incident occurred based solely on a person's perception that they were subjected to hostile, harassing, or discriminatory actions, or based on a different standard, such as whether the person was subjected to unlawful discrimination. Additionally, the Civil Rights Manual and Assignments Manual have slightly different definitions for what constitutes a social climate incident, with the Assignments Manual not specifying whether incidents must be based on unlawful discrimination.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the Civil Rights Manual states that the treatment is based on unlawful discrimination.

CRD officials initially stated that social climate incidents are not limited to protected classes, and could, for instance, involve a service member being mistreated for being in uniform. These officials later clarified that while the policy does not specify the protected classes, in practice the Coast Guard uses the protections outlined in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Americans with Disabilities Act to determine whether an incident would be considered a social climate incident. Title VII prohibits discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, or religion. The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination based on disability. Neither statute prohibits discrimination based on military service status.

One of the CRD's strategic goals is to conduct activities which uphold commands' accountability for civil rights. Coast Guard policy requires management to follow *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.<sup>5</sup> Under Principle 12, management implements control activities through policies and periodically reviews those policies for continued relevance and effectiveness in achieving the entity's objectives or mitigating related risks. Under the Civil Rights Manual, if command staff decides to conduct an investigation of a reported social climate incident, they must determine whether a social climate incident occurred.

By clarifying its definition of a social climate incident in its policies, the Coast Guard could better ensure that the CRD receives and disseminates information about incidents that are within the scope of its responsibilities and the Civil Rights Manual. This is important because members may rely on this information in identifying preferred service locations and commands may use the data when addressing reported incidents in their area. The Coast Guard could also better ensure that commands and the Personnel Service Center consistently apply the policies and treat members consistently, such as in providing a social climate transfer option.

## What are the Coast Guard's policies for addressing and overseeing these incidents?

Coast Guard policies require members to report social climate incidents, commands to respond to reported incidents, and the CRD to oversee the process.

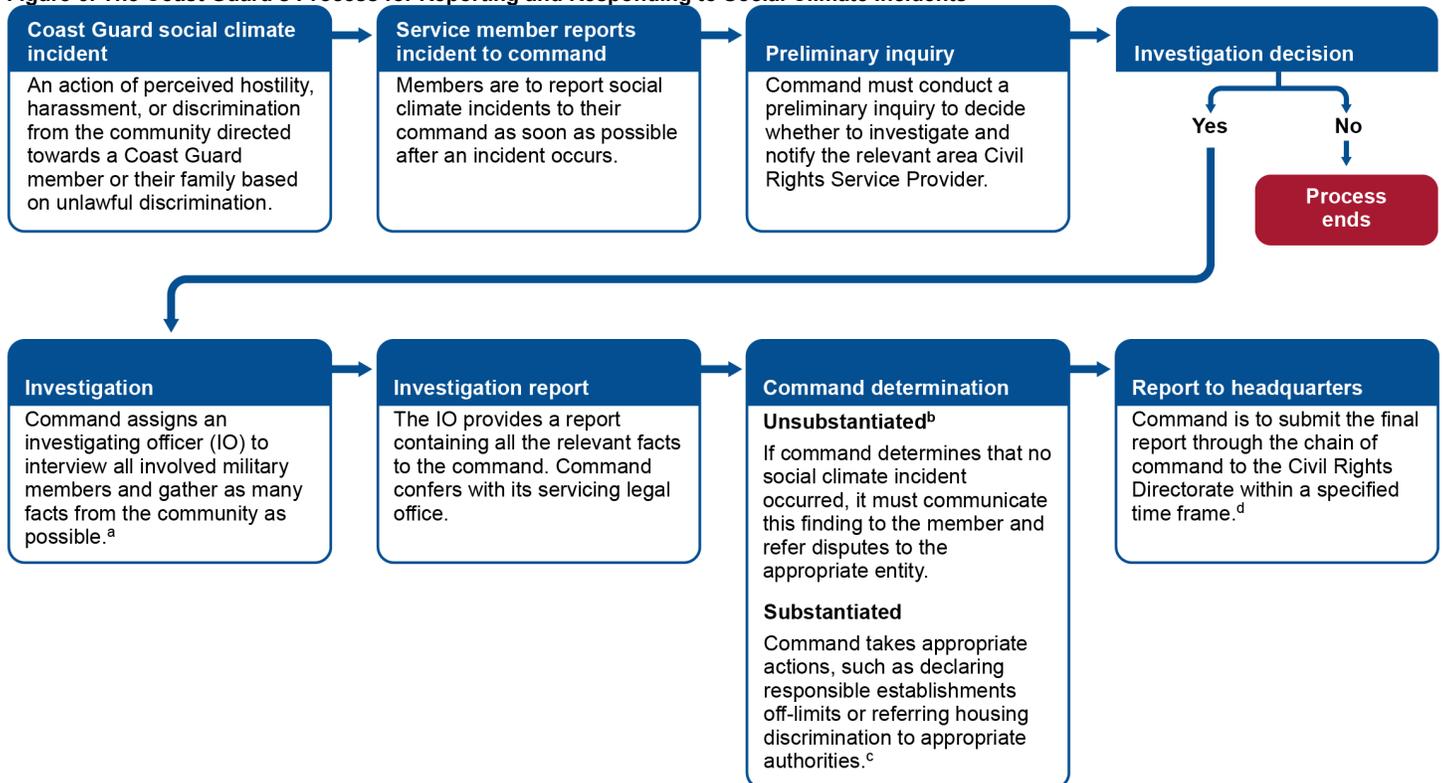
**Member reporting requirements.** If a service member or their family experiences a perceived social climate incident, members are to report it to their command.

**Command response requirements.** Once a member reports a social climate incident, commands must conduct a preliminary inquiry to determine whether to investigate and notify their area Civil Rights Service Provider. If the command initiates an investigation, it assigns an investigating officer to interview all involved service members and gather facts from the community, as they are able. The command then makes a determination as to whether the incident is a substantiated social climate incident and provides a final report to the CRD.

**CRD oversight requirements.** Within headquarters, the CRD is responsible for overseeing the process, including developing social climate incident policies and procedures and ensuring incident follow-up at the unit and community level. The CRD also helps facilitate resolution of incidents. At the request of commands, the CRD may provide guidance and direction, such as recommendations on appropriate responses. The CRD also maintains a database of reported social climate incident information that is internally available to members and commands.

Figure 6 shows the process within the Coast Guard for reporting and responding to social climate incidents.

**Figure 6: The Coast Guard's Process for Reporting and Responding to Social Climate Incidents**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard policies. | GAO-26-107875

<sup>a</sup>According to the Coast Guard's Administrative Investigations Manual, investigating officers do not have the authority to subpoena civilian witnesses. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard Administrative Investigations Manual, COMDTINST M5830.1A (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 7, 2007).

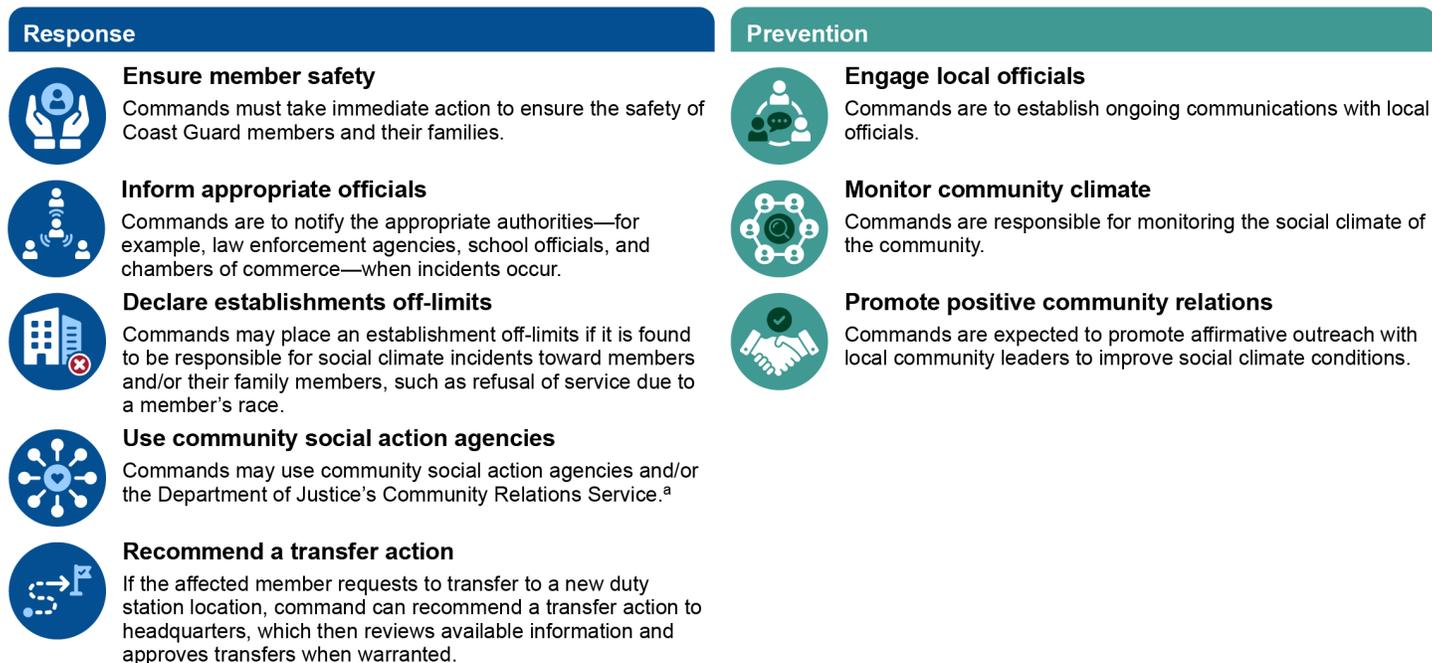
<sup>b</sup>A command determination of unsubstantiated does not mean that an incident did not occur, but rather that the incident was determined not to be a social climate incident. Coast Guard may address these incidents through other policies.

<sup>c</sup>Commands are to refer housing discrimination to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

<sup>d</sup>Commands are to submit the final report to the Civil Rights Directorate within 45 days, absent exigent circumstances.

Coast Guard commands are responsible for taking action to respond to and prevent social climate incidents. Specifically, figure 7 below shows command responsibilities and possible actions that commands can take to respond to and prevent social climate incidents.

Figure 7: Coast Guard Command Actions to Respond to and Prevent Social Climate Incidents



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard policies; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com (icons). | GAO-26-107875

Note: The Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual defines a social climate incident as an action committed by a member or members of a community against Coast Guard military personnel, or their family members, that is perceived as hostile, harassing, or discriminatory in nature, and that is based on unlawful discrimination.

<sup>a</sup>The Community Relations Service provides services such as mediation and training that are intended to assist communities in addressing discriminatory practices based on race, color, or national origin.

## How has the Coast Guard implemented its social climate incident policies?

The Coast Guard generally implemented its policies to address and oversee social climate incidents, but the CRD was unable to locate any documentation for some of the reported incidents we reviewed. We selected a nongeneralizable subset of incidents to determine whether Coast Guard implemented its policies. This subset included all nine incidents that resulted in transfer requests, as well as five other randomly selected incidents from fiscal years 2020 through 2024 (14 total incidents).

We assessed the extent to which the Coast Guard implemented the requirements in the Civil Rights Manual in response to these incidents. We found that commands generally followed CRD social climate incident policies, such as reporting incidents to the headquarters office, and coordinating with internal stakeholders, including their servicing legal office. Below, we summarize our findings as they relate to key requirements:

**Investigating.** In all 14 incidents, the commands conducted a preliminary inquiry to determine whether an investigation was warranted. Twelve commands initiated investigations to gather more information and determine whether it was a substantiated social climate incident. In one case, the command did not initiate an investigation because Coast Guard Investigative Services had already investigated the incident and in another case, we were unable to determine from

the documentation if an investigation was conducted. In 10 cases where we were able to determine that investigations were conducted, the assigned investigating officer interviewed involved service members and anyone else with knowledge of the incident, such as witnesses.

**Coordinating internally.** In nine of the 14 incidents, we were able to determine that commands ensured that their area Civil Rights Service Provider was informed of the reported incident. In 10 incidents, commands contacted their servicing legal office for guidance.

**Reporting to headquarters.** In all 14 incidents, the commands reported the incident to the CRD through a final report summarizing the incident and a description of planned or completed actions taken, as required. In 10 cases where we were able to determine time frames, commands reported incidents to headquarters within the CRD's established time frame.

**Overseeing the process.** Overall, we requested that the CRD provide us with documents for a nongeneralizable sample of 30 reported social climate incidents, including the 14 discussed above. This represented about half of all incidents reported in the last five years. However, the CRD was unable to locate any documents—including the required final reports—for six of the 30 reported incidents (or 20 percent). CRD officials noted that document collection and retention varies by region and that they had identified a need for standardization. According to the Civil Rights Manual, within headquarters, the CRD is responsible for overseeing the process for managing reported social climate incidents, and commands are required to work with area Civil Rights Service Providers and submit final reports to the CRD.

The National Archives and Records Administration requires agencies to implement a records maintenance program so that complete records are identified and preserved and so that records can be readily found when needed.<sup>6</sup> Coast Guard policy further requires management to follow *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.<sup>7</sup> Under Principles 10 and 12, management establishes control activities through policies and procedures to achieve objectives and respond to risks in the internal control system.

However, the CRD does not currently have documented procedures for collecting and retaining documents related to social climate incidents. In response to our inquiries, CRD officials said that they are reviewing their processes and developing a standard operating procedure for the collection and retention of these documents but they could not provide any additional information, such as a timeline or estimated completion date. Completing this effort could help the CRD better oversee and manage the response to social climate incidents.

---

### What actions has the Coast Guard taken to respond to and prevent incidents?

The Coast Guard has taken various actions to respond to social climate incidents depending on the unique circumstances of each incident, according to our review of a nongeneralizable sample of 25 incidents reported from fiscal years 2020 through 2024 and interviews with Coast Guard commands. As discussed above, we initially requested documents for 30 reported incidents. The Coast Guard was able to provide documentation for 24 of these incidents plus an additional one, which we included in our sample. Coast Guard actions we identified included some of those listed in figure 7 above, such as taking steps to ensure member safety and support, informing and engaging with local officials, recommending and facilitating a social climate incident transfer, and promoting positive community relations. Additional actions included communication with local members. In some cases, the command found that no response was warranted.<sup>8</sup>

**Ensuring member safety and support.** In 16 of the 25 cases we reviewed, the command provided resources to the affected Coast Guard member. In one case, the command offered counseling services for the member's child who witnessed a reported incident of verbal harassment. The command also provided legal resources to the same family who decided to file a police report. In another case, the unit command did not take immediate actions to ensure member safety and support. However, according to the documents we reviewed, the sector command later stepped in to investigate and provide necessary support to the member after the member requested a transfer.<sup>9</sup>

**Informing and engaging with local officials.** In eight of the 25 cases, the command reached out to community leaders to address the reported incident. For example, in one case the incident involved a community member leaving a perceived racially motivated item on a member's doorstep. The command reached out to the apartment complex owner to discuss increasing security and surveillance measures. Another incident involved a restaurant that reportedly refused service to a member due to their race. The command coordinated a meeting with the local business association to address the issue. The command also met directly with the restaurant owner.

**Recommending and facilitating a social climate incident transfer.** Additionally, commands can support a member by approving a request to transfer to a different duty station. From fiscal years 2020 through 2024, members requested nine social climate incident transfers. Commands approved, and the Personnel Service Center granted, all nine of these. In one series of incidents that led to a transfer, the member reported multiple hostile and harassing acts, including when the member was walking in their community and a stranger called the member racial slurs while following them in a vehicle.

**Communicating with local members.** In five of the 25 cases in our analysis, the command informed local Coast Guard members of a reported incident, including through briefings. In seven cases, the command reported plans to offer local Coast Guard members additional civil rights resources or social climate incident procedure training. In one case, the command briefed all personnel on reporting perceived social climate incidents and directed a Coast Guard advisory council to gather data on the pervasiveness of similar instances experienced by other Coast Guard members in the area.

**Promoting positive community relations.** The documents we reviewed did not include clear examples of promoting positive community relations, but Coast Guard district, sector, and unit commands told us that promoting positive relationships with their communities is a way to prevent social climate incidents. Many service members volunteer through a Coast Guard sponsored program to give back to their community.<sup>10</sup> One command told us that the community in his area has an annual Coast Guard Day celebration.

---

## How aware are Coast Guard commands of monitoring tools?

Coast Guard district commands are not fully aware of the social climate incident monitoring tools on the CRD's website. The CRD maintains an internal SharePoint website available to all Coast Guard personnel with information on social climate incident policies and reported incident data. The website provides information that can help commands—particularly new commands—in monitoring social climate incidents and working to prevent future incidents.<sup>11</sup> The website includes monitoring tools such as maps of reported incident locations and charts showing reported incident data trends. For example, the website includes a map of reported incidents in the last 10 years, with incident icons color-coded by year. Commands and members can filter the map by year or location and select a reported incident on the map to see more details about it.

However, commands from seven of the nine districts told us that they were not aware that the CRD shared social climate incident data on an internal website. One district command—from a district with several reported social climate incidents—was not aware that the website existed and said that they did not think the average enlisted member had access to a website to view civil rights data. Commands in two districts told us that they were aware of the website.

According to the Civil Rights Manual, one of the CRD's strategic goals is to conduct activities and develop tools that assist and support commands in proactively preventing unlawful discrimination. Another strategic goal in the manual is for the CRD to support commands in their efforts to integrate civil rights into the Coast Guard's strategic mission. Additionally, Coast Guard policy requires management to follow *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.<sup>12</sup> Principle 14 says that management should internally communicate quality information to enable personnel to perform key roles in achieving the entity's objectives.

The CRD has not taken sufficient steps to ensure that district commands are consistently aware of the social climate incident tools available on the CRD SharePoint site. CRD officials told us that personnel are informed of reported social climate incidents and available monitoring tools through a triennial civil rights training and internal and external messaging systems. The CRD includes information on social climate incidents in the civil rights training every three years, but the extent to which these tools are discussed depends on the presenter. The CRD also published two articles in 2020 and 2023 (one public and one internal) with information on social climate incidents, and provided a link for personnel to the internal SharePoint site.

However, these efforts have not been sufficient to ensure district commands are consistently aware of the monitoring tools available on the CRD's website. CRD officials said that retention of the information provided in training is imperfect and said that district command's familiarity with the SharePoint site may vary based on their level of exposure to social climate incidents within their district. Officials noted that they are evaluating ways to improve awareness, but did not provide additional details on these efforts.

By ensuring that all commands are consistently made aware of the social climate incident tools available on the internal SharePoint site, the Coast Guard could better prepare commands to prevent and respond to incidents by improving their awareness of the social climate in the communities they serve. This could help commands fulfill their responsibilities to prevent incidents and monitor the local social climate.

---

## Conclusions

The Coast Guard stresses the importance of treating all personnel fairly and with respect in order to be successful in its missions, including in surrounding communities. We found that Coast Guard commands and investigating officers have generally followed civil rights policies to respond to reported social climate incidents. Commands have also taken a number of actions to address these incidents.

However, the Coast Guard did not use a consistent definition for what constitutes a social climate incident. Clarifying the definition of a social climate incident in its policies could help the Coast Guard ensure that it consistently applies its policies to investigate and address reported incidents. A clearer definition could also help ensure the CRD receives and disseminates consistent information on reported incidents.

The Coast Guard's CRD was also unable to locate any documents for six of the 30 social climate incidents we requested to review. Developing and implementing a standardized process for the collection and retention of required documents could help the CRD better oversee and manage the Coast Guard's response to social climate incidents.

Additionally, Coast Guard district commands are not fully aware of the CRD internal SharePoint site's social climate incident monitoring tools. Ensuring that all commands are consistently made aware of the CRD's internally available website and its social climate incident monitoring tools could help Coast Guard commands more effectively prevent and respond to social climate incidents. For example, this could include enhanced messaging and outreach to commands.

---

## Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following three recommendations to the Coast Guard:

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the CRD reviews and clarifies the definition of a social climate incident and ensure that the term is defined the same way in all agency policies, including its Civil Rights Manual and Assignments Manual. (Recommendation 1)

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the CRD develops and implements a standardized process for the collection and retention of required social climate incident documentation. (Recommendation 2)

The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the CRD consistently makes all commands aware of the CRD's social climate incident tools, including the incident reporting data provided through the internal SharePoint website. (Recommendation 3)

---

## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DHS for review and comment. DHS provided written comments, which are reprinted in appendix I. In its letter, DHS stated that the department concurred with our recommendations and described the Coast Guard's planned actions to address them. DHS also provided technical comments, which we incorporated into the report as appropriate.

---

## How GAO Did This Study

To conduct this work, we examined Coast Guard policies and procedures pertaining to social climate incidents, including the Civil Rights Manual and the Assignments Manual. We further reviewed relevant laws prohibiting discrimination and relevant training and educational materials provided to Coast Guard members.

To address each of the questions in our review, we interviewed officials at different levels of the Coast Guard. Specifically, we interviewed CRD officials as well as commands from all nine Coast Guard districts to learn more about their roles and responsibilities in addressing and monitoring social climate incidents.

We also interviewed officials from four Coast Guard sectors, multiple units within those sectors, and Civil Rights Service Providers from these areas. We selected sectors with comparatively higher numbers of reported incidents to learn more about how commands in these areas work to prevent and respond to social climate incidents and what steps they take after a member reports an incident. We further assessed the Coast Guard's efforts to implement its social climate incident policies and command awareness of monitoring tools against selected *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.<sup>13</sup>

To determine the number and characteristics—including the locations and perceived motivations—of social climate incidents reported by Coast Guard members, we reviewed CRD data from fiscal years 1998 through 2024. The

Coast Guard started collecting data on reported social climate incidents in fiscal year 1998. We reviewed data through 2024 as it was the most recent complete year of data at the time of our review. CRD officials said that they received three additional social climate incident reports from October 2024 through August 2025. However, as of August 2025, they had not provided documentation on the incidents.

To further examine Coast Guard command responses to reported social climate incidents, we selected a non-generalizable sample of incidents that members reported from fiscal years 2020 through 2024. Specifically, we selected all 12 incidents that were indicated in the data as either resulting in a transfer or transfer status unknown. We randomly selected an additional 18 incidents, for a total of 30.

For each incident in the selection, we reviewed available incident documentation, including investigation reports, internal e-mails, and final reports. The Coast Guard was unable to find underlying documentation for six of the 30 requested incidents. The Coast Guard also provided us with the documentation for one incident that we had not requested, which we chose to include.

In total, the Coast Guard was able to provide documents on 25 social climate incidents. These 25 social climate incidents included 24 of the original 30 requested incidents and one incident we did not originally request but we included after receiving documentation from the Coast Guard. After reviewing the documents, we determined that nine of the 12 incidents indicated as transfer or unknown did result in a social climate transfer and three did not.

To assess whether Coast Guard commands and investigating officers followed required response policies, two analysts independently reviewed the documentation for 14 incidents (these consisted of the nine transfers and an additional five incidents that we randomly selected from the original 18 randomly selected incidents). The two analysts assessed these documents against the CRD requirements laid out in the Civil Rights Manual, discussed any discrepancies, and reached consensus on their determinations.

To assess the reliability of available Coast Guard data on social climate incidents, we compared the data to the underlying documents from our non-generalizable sample to ensure that the data accurately described the incidents. We discussed the data with district and selected sector and unit level commands to ensure that the data included all incidents with which they were familiar. We reviewed the data to identify any missing variables or inconsistencies, discussed with agency officials how to resolve any such inconsistencies, and corrected the data as appropriate. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of reporting trends in the numbers and characteristics of reported social climate incidents.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2024 to February 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

---

## List of Addressee

The Honorable Rick Larsen  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
House of Representatives

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

---

## GAO Contact Information

For more information, contact: Heather MacLeod, Director, Homeland Security and Justice, [MacLeodH@gao.gov](mailto:MacLeodH@gao.gov).

Public Affairs: Sarah Kaczmarek, Managing Director, [Media@gao.gov](mailto:Media@gao.gov).

Congressional Relations: David Powner, Acting Managing Director, [CongRel@gao.gov](mailto:CongRel@gao.gov).

**Staff Acknowledgments:** Sarah Turpin (Assistant Director), Cristina Norland (Analyst in Charge), Nasreen Badat, Michele Fejfar, Eric Hauswirth, Emily O'Brien, Calin Popa, and Christopher Zubowicz.

Connect with GAO on [Facebook](#), [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#).  
Subscribe to our [Email Updates](#). Listen to our [Podcasts](#).

Visit GAO on the web at <https://www.gao.gov>.

This is a work of the U.S. government but may include copyrighted material. For details, see <https://www.gao.gov/copyright>.



Homeland  
Security

BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

January 23, 2026

Heather MacLeod  
Director, Homeland Security and Justice  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548-0001

Re: Management Response to GAO-26-107875, "Coast Guard: Additional Actions Needed to Address Reports of Community Discrimination Against Service Members"

Dear Ms. MacLeod,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS, or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's acknowledgment that the U.S. Coast Guard stresses the importance of treating all personnel fairly and with respect to ensure mission success, and that Coast Guard commands and investigating officers generally followed civil rights policies in responding to reported social climate incidents. DHS remains committed to the Coast Guard protecting its workforce and their families from discrimination through activities such as fostering clear communication channels, ensuring members are aware of reporting procedures, and creating an environment where personnel feel comfortable reporting social climate incidents.

The draft report contained three recommendations with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing several accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO's consideration, as appropriate.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

JEFFREY M BOBICH Digitally signed by JEFFREY M  
BOBICH  
Date: 2026.01.23 15:02:11 -05'00'

JEFFREY M. BOBICH  
Director of Financial Management

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations  
Contained in GAO-26-107875**

GAO recommended the Commandant of the Coast Guard ensure that the Civil Rights Directorate (CRD):

**Recommendation 1:** Reviews and clarifies the definition of a social climate incident and ensure that the term is defined the same way in all agency policies, including its Civil Rights Manual and Assignments Manual.

**Response:** Concur. The Coast Guard's CRD will clearly outline the definition of a social climate incident as well as the categories considered to be discriminatory based on the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's definition of unlawful discrimination. Specifically, the CRD will ensure the definition is consistent in the Civil Rights Manual and will coordinate with the Assignments Office to ensure the same definition is used in the Assignments Manual. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): September 30, 2026.

**Recommendation 2:** Develops and implements a standardized process for the collection and retention of required social climate incident documentation.

**Response:** Concur. On January 15, 2026, the Coast Guard's CRD established an interim standardized reporting repository to ensure consistent collection and retention of required social climate incident documentation. The CRD will also modify existing software to create a standardized system of record for social climate incident documentation. Once completed, this will include a secure, case-specific document upload and shared access to support standardized tracking, retention, and follow-up actions. ECD: June 30, 2026.

**Recommendation 3:** Consistently makes all commands aware of the CRD's social climate incident tools, including the incident reporting data provided through the internal SharePoint website.

**Response:** Concur. New Commanding Officers are trained on the social climate incident process through the prospective Commanding Officer/ Executive Officer course, ensuring leaders assume command with clear understanding and accountability. This foundation is reinforced through annual workforce training and targeted briefings that address emerging trends and available resources.

Currently, real-time reporting is enabled through an interim standardized social climate incident repository integrated with a live Power BI dashboard, providing workforce-wide access to comprehensive data. As previously noted, the CRD will also modify existing software to create a create a standardized system of record for social climate incident documentation. Legacy data dating back to fiscal year 1998 will also be incorporated to support historical analysis and informed decision-making. ECD: June 30, 2026.

3

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Department of Homeland Security, *U.S. Coast Guard Civil Rights Manual*, COMDTINST M5350.4E (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>The Coast Guard told us that as of August 2025, there had been three reported incidents in fiscal year 2025.

<sup>3</sup>COMDTINST M5350.4E.

<sup>4</sup>Department of Homeland Security, *Military Assignments and Authorized Absences*, COMDTINST M1000.8A (Washington, D.C.: June 6, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-25-107721](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2025).

<sup>6</sup>36 C.F.R. § 1222.34.

<sup>7</sup>[GAO-25-107721](#).

---

<sup>8</sup>Some incidents did not warrant further actions according to the documentation we reviewed. Coast Guard commands also have actions available to them that are not necessary for every incident. Of the cases we reviewed, no incident warranted establishing a location off-limits, such as a restaurant or bar. Coast Guard officials told us that this is typically used for gambling establishments and smoke shops. Commands also have access to the Department of Justice Community Relations Service for services such as mediation and training intended to assist communities in addressing discriminatory practices based on race, color, or national origin. However, none of the commands we spoke to had experience using this resource to respond to social climate incidents.

<sup>9</sup>In the final report about the incident, the sector command also outlined additional steps to address discrimination within the community and to address concerns that the unit had not appropriately handled the incident.

<sup>10</sup>The Coast Guard Partnership in Education program is a program where service members can volunteer in communities through tutoring and other activities.

<sup>11</sup>According to the Coast Guard, the SharePoint website can also help all members and their families make informed assignment decisions, particularly when considering assignments to an area with reported social climate incidents.

<sup>12</sup>[GAO-25-107721](#).

<sup>13</sup>[GAO-25-107721](#).