

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement Chairman Carolyn B. Maloney

Hearing on “Righting the Ship: The Coast Guard Must Improve its Processes for Addressing Harassment, Bullying, and Retaliation”

December 11, 2019

This hearing follows years of oversight of the Coast Guard led by our late Chairman Elijah Cummings. He strongly supported the Coast Guard and was extremely proud of the men and women serving our country. He also held the Coast Guard to the high standards that we should expect of all branches of our military.

Joining us in this critical oversight has been our good friend, Chairman Thompson of the Committee on Homeland Security, who jointly conducted this 18-month investigation into the Coast Guard’s handling of harassment, bullying, and retaliation. I also commend Rep. Joe Courtney, who has been a partner in this effort from its inception.

This morning, our Committees are issuing a joint staff report finding that allegations of bullying and harassment have not been investigated promptly, thoroughly, or impartially at the Coast Guard. The report details weak policies that fail to require investigators to be trained adequately or to prohibit actions that could have a chilling effect on investigations.

Most troubling, however, the report also reveals numerous actions by senior Coast Guard officials that demonstrate confusion and disregard for Coast Guard procedures for handling allegations of harassment and bullying.

Committee staff examined in depth the case of a whistleblower, Lieutenant Commander Kimberly Young-McLear, who is testifying here today.

She is a member of the permanent military faculty at the Coast Guard Academy. She holds a doctorate and is presently on detail to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency at DHS.

Lieutenant Commander, thank you for your service to this country and for your willingness to share your story.

My colleagues have detailed how the Coast Guard failed to examine allegations of harassment and bullying. I want to talk briefly about the importance of effective policies and procedures for addressing these types of allegations.

The men and women who serve in the Coast Guard have a critical mission to keep this country safe and secure. They should be able to carry out this mission without being harassed or bullied, and without fear of retaliation when they report abusive behavior.

We need effective anti-harassment and anti-bullying programs carried out promptly and impartially by senior leadership. This is essential to ensuring that Coast Guard men and women have the workplace they deserve—where they can be fully effective in jobs that frequently require them to put their lives on the line in the service of our nation.

The investigative staff report shows that the Coast Guard does not have effective anti-harassment and anti-bullying programs in place. This failure can irreparably harm individuals like the Lieutenant Commander who is appearing here today.

This failure also may be contributing to an environment in which, according to a 2019 Rand study, the Coast Guard had a 12 percent lower retention rate after 10 years of service for both female officers and enlisted personnel from 2005 to 2016, as compared to male service members.

As the new Chair of the Oversight Committee, let me be clear that whistleblowers are critical to the Committee's mission to combat waste, fraud, and abuse across the federal government, and I will continue our Committee's long, bipartisan tradition of supporting them.

Retaliation against whistleblowers is not only prohibited by policy—it's illegal. When other employees see whistleblowers retaliated against—as the Lieutenant Commander was—they are far less likely to come forward themselves to report wrongdoing, including national security vulnerabilities.

It is very troubling that the Commandant is not here to explain the steps the service will take to improve its anti-harassment and anti-bullying policies or to explain how those who retaliate against whistleblowers will be held accountable.

Admiral Schultz must lead the Coast Guard's effort to right its ship by strengthening policies and procedures for handling allegations of harassment, bullying, and retaliation. By failing to appear today, Admiral Schultz has missed the opportunity to begin that critical effort.

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