

U.S. Department  
of Transportation

United States  
Coast Guard



United States Coast Guard  
Office of Budget

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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION  
U. S. COAST GUARD  
STATEMENT OF  
MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER ERIC A. TRENT  
ON THE  
FISCAL YEAR 1998 BUDGET REQUEST  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD  
AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION  
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to appear before this distinguished committee today to discuss quality of life issues that impact Coast Guard enlisted personnel and their families.

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to join the Commandant in thanking you for your strong support of the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 1996. Enactment of this legislation has certainly done much to strengthen the Coast Guard and improve the quality of life for our members.

My responsibilities as the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard include advising the Commandant on all matters that affect enlisted personnel and their families. I utilize several sources of information to ensure I am knowledgeable about enlisted members' issues, concerns, and needs. I have personally met with thousands of members during visits to more than 200 Coast Guard units in the past 33 months. I have 24 senior enlisted advisors in the field who regularly provide input regarding the morale and well-being of enlisted members. I also receive valuable input from my wife, Linda. She meets regularly with ombudsmen and spouses of enlisted members throughout the Coast Guard, providers of support services, and often has the opportunity to view family housing and child

development facilities. As a result, I have a very comprehensive view of enlisted quality of life and am confident in my ability to advise the Commandant.

The biggest issue affecting enlisted quality of life relates to increased workload. The Coast Guard is completing a four-year streamlining plan that has significantly impacted enlisted personnel. The enlisted force has decreased more than 11 percent, or 3,500 members, in the past three years and stands at just 26,933 today. This is the Coast Guard's smallest enlisted workforce since 1965. Although we have streamlined our organization, there has been no decrease in the demand for our services. Many of our people are working harder and longer than before to maintain this level of service. Last month, I visited the 26 men and women assigned to our rescue station at Neah Bay in Washington state. They regularly work 70 to 90 hours a week, continually standing 48 hours in a duty/work status and then 48 hours off. This is a standard duty rotation for Coast Guard small boat stations - called port and starboard duty. I have also recently visited the men and women assigned to the high endurance cutter MIDGETT. Like most of our deployable cutters, they average 90-hour work weeks when the cutter is underway, and it doesn't improve much when they are in port. The increased pace of operations brought on by Frontier Shield, our drug interdiction operation near Puerto Rico, has caused an additional hardship for our people.

I believe our members' willingness to work whatever hours are necessary to accomplish the mission, and their generally high morale, are a direct result of the way we take care of our people and their families.

During streamlining, everything possible was done to minimize the impact on members. All benefits authorized by Public Law 103-337, as well as

transition assistance services, were provided to separating and retiring service members. New workforce management tools were developed and implemented to help accomplish the streamlining targets in a fair and equitable manner, while having the least possible effect on advancements.

The Coast Guard has sought field input and worked hard to find potential "low or no-cost" policy adjustments that could improve the overall quality of life for our members. Some examples include:

- Allowing members that have been deployed more than 60 consecutive days during the previous year, or members denied leave due to mission requirements, to carry forward up to 90 days of leave at the end of the fiscal year. Previous policy permitted only 60 to carry forward.
- Delegating more award authority to Commanding Officers to improve the timeliness and benefits of personal recognition.
- Authorizing Commanding Officers afloat to administer enlisted advancement tests up to ten days early or late when underway, especially if operations or weather conditions are not conducive to optimum exam taking.
- Recognition of sea service in the enlisted advancement system.

When I testified before this committee last year, I asked for your support of several quality of life issues important to enlisted members. Congress has authorized several, once again providing a strong indication of its willingness to take care of members of the armed forces. Your action on the following items did not go unnoticed and, on behalf of the enlisted members of the Coast Guard, I thank you very much for your support:

- Basic Allowance for Quarters (BAQ) and Variable Housing Allowance (VHA) was authorized for First Class Petty Officers without dependents assigned ashore and Second Class Petty Officers without dependents

assigned afloat. This important benefit now provides our single career force the opportunity to reside ashore when their cutter is in port.

- Members married to other members who have no children are now authorized to draw BAQ and VHA at the single rate of the senior member while both are assigned afloat.
- Members married to members, with no other dependents, are now authorized Family Separation Allowance (FSA) when they are separated by military orders.
- Members enrolled in the Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP) now have the opportunity to convert to the Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB).
- For the second consecutive year, BAQ was increased by a larger percentage than basic pay. The increase is part of a multi-year plan to bring “out of pocket” housing expenses for members residing on the economy back down to 15 percent of the total housing expense.
- A Variable Housing Allowance Floor was authorized, which will help ensure a minimum threshold for housing allowances for junior personnel.
- Dislocation Allowance was increased to a more realistic two and a half times one month’s BAQ.

I have often heard Dr. Perry, former Secretary of Defense, say “if you take care of your people they will take care of you.” Well, that is what we do in the Coast Guard. I really believe that is why Coast Guard men and women have such devotion to duty - why they are Semper Paratus. The many accomplishments of our people in all mission areas every day clearly indicate the results of “taking care of your people.” I sincerely appreciate the action Congress has taken on these important issues, which, when combined with Coast Guard efforts, have taken care of our people by improving their quality of life.

Even with all that Congress has done, Coast Guard enlisted men and women need your assistance with several other important issues:

- I urge you to consider amending Public Law 103-337 to reduce the statutory threshold defining “high cost” areas that qualify for a Continental U.S. Cost of Living Allowance (CONUS COLA) and to authorize the funding necessary to support the payments. The Seventh Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC) recommended the payment of a CONUS COLA to members assigned to areas where non-housing cost of living expenses exceed the national average by more than five percent. The QRMC felt that threshold fairly considered career transfers and career purchasing power. Public Law 103-337 set the CONUS COLA threshold at eight percent.

Imagine for a moment, you are a Second Class Petty Officer assigned to a Coast Guard unit in the Portsmouth, Virginia area (Second Class Petty Officers are at pay grade E-5 and typically have four to ten years of service time). You barely manage to support a wife and two children on a salary of \$18,190.80 per year. Even though you never requested a west coast assignment, you receive permanent change of station orders to Morro Bay, California. Your purchasing power decreases significantly because the non-housing cost of living in Morro Bay exceeds that of Portsmouth by 8.4 percent, yet does not qualify for the payment of a CONUS COLA under Public Law 103-337.

While this is not a Coast Guard specific issue, our men and women are impacted the most. Over 90 percent of Coast Guard members are assigned to areas where the CONUS COLA index exceeds the national average.

- I also urge you to consider additional authorization to accommodate any Uniformed Services initiative that would reduce the inequities that exist in out-of-pocket expenses incurred when Coast Guard men and women obtain health care for their families. Because TRICARE Prime is only available to members residing in a Military Treatment Facility (MTF) catchment area, the current TRICARE Program for obtaining health care does not provide a uniform benefit to the eligible population.

The Second Class Petty Officer that is transferred from Portsmouth, Virginia to Morro Bay, California was able to obtain medical care for his family at an MTF in Norfolk, Virginia where care and prescription drugs were available at no cost. In Morro Bay, TRICARE Standard is the only option available. This member must now satisfy a \$300 annual family deductible, co-pay 20 percent of all the TRICARE Standard allowable charges, and pay all charges that exceed the TRICARE Standard allowable charge.

TRICARE Standard co-payments and deductibles should be waived for families of active duty members that are denied access to TRICARE Prime as a result of their assignment.

Like CONUS COLA, this issue is not Coast Guard specific. However, Coast Guard men and women are most impacted as 52 percent of our members' dependents reside outside military treatment facility catchment areas where they do not have access to TRICARE Prime.

- Another important issue is to maintain compensation parity with the other armed forces in pay, entitlements, and benefits for Coast Guard

members and maintain non-pay parity consisting of child care fees, tuition assistance, and quality of housing for Coast Guard members. *As one of the five armed forces, parity is essential for the Coast Guard to be the premier maritime service in the world; possible only by successfully competing against the other four armed forces for America's brightest young people.*

- Even though Congress has enacted legislation that authorizes those enrolled in the Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP) to convert to the Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB), I am disappointed for the thousands of service members that are not eligible to convert. I urge you to support an amendment to this legislation that authorizes those still serving on active duty who had enrolled in the VEAP to convert to the MGIB. *Most of those service members that have been excluded from converting their VEAP to MGIB were counseled during their careers that they could withdraw the funds they had in VEAP without disenrolling. This withdrawal is now excluding them from the conversion opportunity.*

Mr. Chairman, as I conclude my statement, I must ask for your continued support of the Coast Guard. Our people give you their youth, their energy, their enthusiasm, and, if need be.....even their lives. Coast Guard members BM2 David Bosley, MK3 Matthew Schlimme, and SN Clinton Miniken made the ultimate sacrifice last month as they responded to a call for help from a dismasted sailboat in distress off the Washington coast. The American people depend on the men and women of the Coast Guard, and they are depending on you to continue a path of improving their quality of life. I hope you will give serious consideration to the needs of Coast Guard enlisted men and women that I have outlined today. Your continued strong support is essential!

Mr. Chairman, I want you to know how much I appreciate the opportunity to meet with this committee today. Thank you for inviting me. I look forward to your questions.