



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

H.R. _____, the “Coast Guard Academy Improvement Act”

As Introduced by Representative Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Original Cosponsors: Rep. Elijah E. Cummings (D-MD), Rep. J. Luis Correa (D-CA), and Rep. Cedric Richmond (D-LA)

Established in 1915, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy (USCGA) is the smallest of the five federal service academies. Unlike the other academies, it does not accept congressional nominations and uses an admissions process that closely resembles one at a civilian college or university. Though USCGA leadership has focused on improving diversity numbers over the past ten years, there were only 66 African-American cadets enrolled out of 1,053 total cadets in 2017 (6 percent).¹ In 2017, the USCGA graduating class had only four African-American graduates in a class of 195 (2 percent).²

In September 2017, a Connecticut newspaper brought to light allegations of a discriminatory and racially hostile environment within the USCGA that was not being adequately addressed by leadership.³ Conditions within the USCGA seemingly contributed to a marked decline in retention rate among cadets from racial and ethnic minority groups from 2013 to 2017.⁴ In December 2018, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General investigation substantiated that the USCGA retaliated against an African-American female officer after she made discrimination and harassment complaints against her superiors.⁵

At the request of the USCGA, the Center for Urban Education conducted a thorough examination of the outcomes for cadets of different racial, ethnic, and gender groups.⁶ In March 2018, its data-based examination validated what many concerned alumni and faculty, as well as cadets, have shared through anecdotes over the years—that minority, particularly African-American, cadets have a different experience

¹ Letter from the Eclipse Legacy Fund Governance Committee of the Coast Guard Academy Alumni Association to the USCGA Superintendent, 2017. Available at:

https://www.cgaalumni.org/s/1043/images/editor_documents/emails/eclipse_legacy/letter_to_the_superintendent--final_draft.pdf?sessionId=d298702b-ae11-4dd3-bc18-87a6ab7a27ac&cc=1.

² *Ibid.*

³ Bergman, Julia. “CGA works to address concerns of minority treatment, retention,” *The Day*, September 2, 2017. Available at: <http://www.theday.com/military-news/20170902/cga-works-to-address-concerns-of-minority-treatment-retention>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General, “Whistleblower Retaliation Report of Investigation,” Case Number: W17-USCG-WPU-16018, December 4, 2018.

⁶ Hanson, D. & Bensimon, E. M. (2017). *The U. S. Coast Guard Academy 2017 Vital Signs Report*. Los Angeles, CA: The Center for Urban Education, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California. Available at: <https://cue.usc.edu/files/2018/04/Vital-Signs-Report-FINAL-032818-V2.pdf>.

at the Academy than their peers.⁷ Moreover, the report found that African-American cadets had the highest rate of disenrollment (43.2 percent) in the classes of 2015, 2016, and 2017, compared to other groups such as white cadets (11.3 percent).⁸

To improve diversity and bolster cultural competency within the Academy, the Coast Guard Academy Improvement Act:

- Directs the Secretary of Homeland Security to establish a Coast Guard Academy Cultural Reform Commission to make recommendations to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment;
- Allows each Member of Congress to nominate up to three qualified candidates to the USCGA to help put talented young people from across the country on the path to rewarding Coast Guard careers; and
- Authorizes important programs to bolster diversity at the USCGA and Coast Guard as a whole.

THE COAST GUARD ACADEMY IMPROVEMENT ACT would—

Assess and Enhance Cultural Competence within the Academy. The bill requires the Secretary of Homeland Security to establish a Coast Guard Academy Cultural Reform Commission to assess and enhance cultural competence within the Academy. In addition to valuing and understanding cultural diversity, cultural competency requires critical self-assessment and meaningful changes in policies and procedures to prevent and respond to social injustices and inequities.

Require a Comprehensive Recruitment and Retention Plan. The bill requires that DHS, in consultation with the Coast Guard, issue a plan to improve recruitment and retention of cadets, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds. The Commission would have an advisory role in the implementation of this plan.

Authorize the Academy Minority Outreach Team (AMOT). The bill would formally authorize a currently active, volunteer-based outreach program – the Academy Minority Outreach Team (AMOT) – that both alumni and Academy leadership have credited with helping recruit and retain more minority cadets. However, because Academy leadership have relied heavily on volunteer alumni to keep the AMOT active, there have been years in which diversity levels plummeted. Formally authorizing this program would help ensure this program is effective and sustainable.

Open the Academy to Congressional Nominations. Under the bill, the Academy would be required to select up to 50 percent of each incoming class from a congressionally-nominated candidate pool. Each Member of Congress would be allowed to nominate up to three candidates. The selection criteria would be the same as those offered appointments without Member nominations.

Authorize the College Student Pre-Commissioning Initiative (CSPI). This bill would formally authorize an existing scholarship program for eligible undergraduate students to enlist and receive a guaranteed commission as an officer in the Coast Guard. Currently, only undergraduate sophomores and juniors at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and minority-serving institutions (MSIs) are eligible to participate in the program. To expand the reach of CSPI, this bill will also open the program to qualified students who are active in minority-serving organizations pursuing degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics at institutions of higher education at other colleges and universities.

⁷ Bergman, Julie. “Equity report: Black Coast Guard cadets more likely than peers to face inequalities,” *The Day*, April 6, 2018. Available at: <https://www.theday.com/article/20180406/NWS09/180409508>

⁸ *Ibid.*