

**Chairman Susan M. Collins Opening Statement  
Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation,  
Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies**

**Hearing titled “Protecting Our Midshipmen: Preventing Sexual Assault  
and Sexual Harassment at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy”**

**April 5, 2017**

*(As prepared for delivery)*

Today, our subcommittee is holding this hearing on the United States Merchant Marine Academy’s (USMMA or Academy) response to reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment, an unacceptable problem for the Academy that has existed for far too long. As a result, the Academy’s accreditation status is in jeopardy.

The U.S. Merchant Marine Academy is a critical institution dedicated to ensuring that our country educates and retains credentialed officers in our armed services and merchant mariners for the maritime industry. Graduates of the Academy are essential for our nation’s defense, and in times of war are crucial to moving our troops, supplies, and equipment.

Unfortunately, just like many other universities, service academies, and even the U.S. Gymnastics team, the USMMA continues to face challenges in addressing incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment both on its campus as well as during the Sea Year, when midshipmen are sent to train on U.S. flagged commercial vessels.

When parents send their children off to college, the last thing they expect is for them to endure repugnant and at times criminal behavior, and to find themselves unable or unwilling to seek help or report their experience. Let me be clear: sexual assault is a heinous crime that must be eradicated in every corner of our society.

But it is particularly important since parents entrust their children to our nation’s service academies, we bear the responsibility to ensure the safety of the young people enrolled.

According to the most recent anonymous survey, four percent of midshipmen experienced unwanted sexual contact in the last academic year, but for female midshipmen, this number was nearly 20 percent. This roughly translates to 27 of the 150 female midshipmen at the Academy who experienced inappropriate sexual contact, and another 6 incidents involved male cadets, for a total of 33 incidents.

Even more alarming is the fact that only four of these 33 midshipmen felt comfortable enough to file a restricted report of their experience, which allowed them to receive appropriate medical, legal, and counseling services. It is appalling that none of the 33 felt safe enough to make an unrestricted report that would allow law enforcement to investigate. That is simply unacceptable.

For too long, the Academy passively accepted a culture where midshipmen who experience sexual assault or harassment are either too afraid of reporting incidents or are fearful of

retribution from their peers. A recent report comparing our nation's five service academies showed that the USMMA has the highest rate of sexual assaults based on anonymous survey data but the lowest rate of formal reports.

The crisis at the Academy was highlighted in June 2016, when former Secretary Foxx temporarily suspended the Sea Year program until he could guarantee the safety of all Midshipmen training on commercial vessels. During the suspension, the Department worked with the maritime industry and labor unions to develop a course of action to address sexual assault and sexual harassment, and assigned midshipmen to federal vessels and provided other training opportunities to prevent delaying graduation for any student.

Just last month, the new Transportation Secretary Chao resumed the Sea Year program with specific eligibility criteria set by the Shipboard Climate Compliance Team. To date, five companies that have met these requirements are able to once again provide the necessary training to midshipmen on their vessels in a safe, zero tolerance environment.

Sexual assault and harassment incidents led the Middle States Commission on Higher Education to issue a warning to the Academy last year that its accreditation status may be in jeopardy. According to the Commission, the Academy failed to meet five of its 14 standards, and the assessment highlighted that the campus climate and incidents of sexual assault and harassment have been a serious and recognized problem for over a decade but still have not been addressed adequately.

The Commission also noted that the Academy has been slow to hire and retain key leadership personnel. I am particularly concerned that the Sexual Assault Response Coordinator, who was making effective changes on campus, is no longer with the Academy, and the position remains vacant.

The good news today is that current leadership at the Academy and at MARAD have shown a willingness to provide the necessary training and assistance, and more important, to change the culture and environment at the Academy to zero tolerance for sexual assault and sexual harassment. Victims must not face retribution for speaking up.

I want to ensure the midshipmen, parents, and everyone associated with the Academy, that this is a problem we can solve, and absolutely must solve.

I am very pleased to be joined by the ranking member, Senator Jack Reed. I want to welcome our panel of witnesses. We are joined today by:

- Joel Szabat, Executive Director of the Maritime Administration (MARAD);
- Rear Admiral James Helis, Superintendent of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy; and
- Calvin Scovel, Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Let me now turn to Senator Reed for his opening remarks.

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