

VOLUNTEER SERVICE FOR LIFE (VSL)

Volunteer Service for Life (VSL) Program Proposal Presented to the CG National Retiree Council

Doug Clapp, CAPT, USCG (Ret)
John Marks, CAPT, USCGR (Ret)

Our primary goal in presenting this proposal for a *Coast Guard Volunteer Service for Life (VSL) Program* to the CG National Retiree Council (CGNRC) is to convince the Council to include this initiative in its *top priorities* and recommend its implementation by the CG to the Commandant, MCPOCG, and other CG senior leadership. This with an eye toward the Coast Guard “*Bias for Action*” culture, convincing CG leadership that the operational risk/cost of inaction (*status quo*) exceeds that of needed CG resources to implement.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(What/Why)

A **Coast Guard Volunteer Service for Life (VSL) Program** would effectively leverage highly skilled, pre-vetted CG military retirees as an economical, short-notice surge force, in ideal alignment with the Commandant's **Force Design** goals of maximizing *Strength, Agility, Capability, and Responsiveness*, while helping to fill critical workforce “gaps” highlighted in recent reports by the U. S. Government Accountability Office and Congress.

WHAT COULD VSL PROVIDE:

~ A means to source unique military, scientific or technological shortfalls and gaps in skills and experience necessary for optimum mission capability and execution. Offsetting backfill shortfalls encountered while surging CG assets and personnel among various mission sets.

~ Creation of a temporary force multiplier of highly skilled and experienced personnel with knowledge of Service culture, platform capabilities, systems capacities/failure rates, resourcing and training processes.

WHY:

~ To fill time-sensitive temporary or unique skill gaps for mission, operation or project success.

~ To provide broad Service cultural understanding and insights to project/task teams, avoiding extensive project/task ramp-up in development of strategies, plans and task outcomes.

VOLUNTEER SERVICE FOR LIFE (VSL)

~ To continue to reap value - post separation - from the Coast Guard's significant prior investment in recruiting, training/educating, and qualifying members of its HR force components.

~ To take advantage of additional or unique skills obtained post-retirement/separation which can assist the CG meet emergent or critical current, future mission requirements.

~ To achieve the creation of well-conceived annual Capital Investment Plans and Major Acquisition Reports to Congress.²

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has issued multiple reports and testimony addressing the Coast Guard's annual Capital Investment Plan (CIP) and its major acquisition portfolio management, highlighting recurring challenges and recommendations for Congress.³

Key GAO Findings (portions removed for brevity)

4. Unmet Long-Term Planning Requirement

In 2014, GAO recommended the Coast Guard develop a long-term plan to manage its highest-priority efforts. The agency agreed and statute directed it to do so, but as of June 2024, it had not produced one U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO).

GAO Recommendations

Annual CIPs should reflect acquisition trade-off decisions and their effects, aligning with cost estimating best practices U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO)+1.

Long-term planning should be developed to guide major acquisition investments beyond the 5-year CIP horizon U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO)+1.

Congressional Matters for Consideration

GAO has identified two open matters for Congress to address, including mandating that the CIP include information on trade-off impacts and ensuring the EOC's charter supports long-term portfolio reviews U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO).

In summary: The GAO's work shows that the Coast Guard's reliance on short-term budget cycles and an incomplete CIP undermines long-term affordability and strategic planning. **Addressing these gaps through statutory changes,**

VOLUNTEER SERVICE FOR LIFE (VSL)

transparent reporting, and a formal long-term plan would strengthen congressional oversight and improve acquisition outcomes.

WHO:

~ Separated military and civilian Coast Guard members who want to continue to serve the nation, the Coast Guard and the public.

~ Others with specialized skill sets who don't fit traditional Coast Guard accession programs but want to volunteer their specialized skills in support of identified Service talent gaps (e.g., cutting edge tech skills in support of R&D projects, artificial intelligence (AI) projects and critical cyber defense/offense needs).

HOW:

Provide these skilled, experienced and qualified personnel with a federal status to enable temporary, intermittent, or special project use of their talents.

- * Prior AD military: status as either Coast Guard Reserve (CGR) or CG Auxiliary member
- * Prior CG civilian: CG Aux membership
- * Other civilian: CG Aux membership

Develop a skill{s}, qualifications{s}, and certifications inventory and VSL volunteer call-up system, marrying catalogued/vetted inputs from the VSL volunteers with current, projected or future envisioned Service talent requirements.⁴ This would incorporate those skillsets attained during their CG Career as well as skillsets attained post-retirement that meet current/future CG requirements. The system would be an electronic application for assignment officer/detailer use.

WE RECOMMEND:

That the National Retiree Council recommend the Commandant charter a Volunteer Service For Life (VSL) Working Group to develop the VSL talent retention program

VOLUNTEER SERVICE FOR LIFE (VSL)

outlined here, with appropriate participation/input from workforce planning, legal, operational programs, and C4I.

Alternatively, if it is determined the VSL program and talent inventory system cannot be resourced at this time, we recommend the National Retiree Council, potentially in partnership with other "stakeholders" like the CPOA and CWOA, develop a "bite-sized" VSL project to demonstrate proof of concept.

ISSUES FOR WORKING GROUP CONSIDERATION

1. Funding for per diem/travel - similar to CG AUX – reimbursed?
2. What legal statutes/authorities exist or are needed to utilize VSL volunteers?
3. What capacity does CG presently have for tracking/matching skill sets?
4. What has CG already identified as contingency planning surge needs?
5. What added skillsets are necessary for successful specific contingency scenario survival?
6. Has CG identified specific qualifications needed, but absent or untracked, within the Officer, Enlisted and Civil Service workforces?
7. What specific secondary skill sets are operation centric (e.g. Explosive Hatch Supervisor; Military Cargo Load Supervisor)?
8. Once skillset requirements are established and gaps identified, what specific timeline for skills retention and what training/hands on experience is needed to retain said skill(s). Skills atrophy after a period due to modernization of equipment, personnel qualifications degrade - (use it or lose it), etc. VSL should set “time limits” on critical mission skill sets that cannot be easily updated via online, hands on training – task performance. CG under “Force Design 2028” is updating and defining specific skillsets/qualifications. Once the AD finalizes this process, perform a “matching” process to encapsulate the VSL qualifications/skills within the AD system so there is no confusion/disappointment upon utilization of a Volunteer Retiree to ensure that the expectations are met.

FUTURISTIC FORCE MULTIPLIER

VOLUNTEER SERVICE FOR LIFE (VSL)

The Coast Guard's purchase of the Birmingham-Southern College campus for a new training center to meet today's and future staffing needs within all mission areas will need administrative and teaching staff.⁵ While the Coast Guard expands its workforce it is simultaneously increasing the number of aircraft, ships, and special mission units while currently lacking full staffing levels. VSL could be utilized in both the Training Center's HR and Instructor Staffs, allowing more AD personnel to remain within the fleet thus ensuring more efficient, cost-effective mission accomplishment.

Recent U.S. Naval Institute "Proceedings Magazine" contained several articles wherein VSL can be of use, when the articles' content are acted upon.

The first article deals with the suggested establishment of a Coast Guard west coast Shipyard at Mare Island. The article suggests that Mare Island would serve a multitude of purposes, shipyard repair services for all west coast cutters, homeport for the icebreakers designed to meet Arctic, Antarctic, and domestic mission needs, as well as an asset for the U.S. Navy as it builds its new Frigate based upon the NSC's hull design, to use the workforce's skillsets for shipyard services. VSL – again, during the rehabilitation of Mare Island, like a "pre-com detail," retirees could be used within the facility design team, short-term project management, identification of specialty equipment needs, etc.⁶

The second article is entitled "Foresight, Force Design, and How the Coast Guard Can Win the Long Game." The article references staffing of Forward Operating Bases (FOB) and use of an alternative ready surge force, Adaptive Force Packages (AFPs). constructed of personnel and modular capabilities that can be configured quickly for various missions, disaster response, drug or migrant interdiction, etc.⁷

End Notes:

1. GAO-26-109215 Published: Jun 30, 2026. Publicly Released: Jun 30, 2026. COAST GUARD: Actions Needed to Help Ensure Effective Use of Billions in Funding for Modernization Efforts; Statement of Triana McNeil, Director, Homeland Security and Justice; GAO-25-107481 and GAO-26-108751
2. "Coast Guard Force Design: Modernization or Managed Decline?"
By Legis1 Editorial – Edited by Joanne Levine, Friday, March 20, 2026
3. Statement of Heather MacLeod, Director, Homeland Security and Justice
Testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security,
Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives. GAO Release
Tuesday, February 3, 2026 GAO-26-108901
<https://www.gao.gov/reports-testimonies>

VOLUNTEER SERVICE FOR LIFE (VSL)

4. Force Design 2028
5. <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2026/03/04/us-coast-guard-announces-new-training-center-alabama>
6. USN Institute “Proceedings” August 2026, pages 20-25 “Reclaim Mare Island as an NSC Center of Excellence” by LCDR Keith Blevins, USCG
7. USN Institute “Proceedings” August 2026, pages 39-43 “Foresight, Force Design, and How the Coast Guard can WIN the LONG GAME” by Captain Craig Allen, USCG