

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 29, 2021

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are very concerned with the recent allegations of sexual assault by a female cadet at the United States Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) during her Sea Year experience in 2019. This brave female cadet not only shared her story on the terrible circumstance she endured while at sea, but also detailed alarming statistics regarding the number of other female cadets within her class who have also been harassed and assaulted. In response to the blog post, there have been countless other brave individuals who have come forward to share their personal stories during their time at sea. This incident sheds light on the toxic culture not only at USMMA, but within the maritime industry where cadets and mariners are in danger and have no escape from their perpetrators.

In 2016, the Department of Transportation (department or DOT) stood down the Sea Year program to implement changes to better protect students. But those changes clearly did not work, and we are concerned that the cadets remain in danger.

Despite the recent allegations, it has come to our attention that DOT is considering sending cadets back to sea on commercial vessels in a matter of weeks with few meaningful changes or safeguards in place. While we understand that improved communication devices would be provided to each student, this course of action on its own falls short and is unacceptable. Since the Department has given no indication that meaningful and necessary steps have been taken to ensure the safety of cadets in the Sea Year program, we believe the USMMA should not proceed with Sea Year this term. Prior to the resumption of Sea Year, we request the USMMA develop a public written action plan that includes detailed steps that will be taken to ensure the safety of cadets at sea.

While we understand the importance of a timely graduation for USMMA cadets, the safety of those same cadets should be your top concern. We stand ready to assist the Department in ensuring a complete educational experience and a timely graduation.

Furthermore, we believe there needs to be a change in the leadership of the USMMA. Vice Admiral Joachim Buono, USMMA Superintendent, has failed to take seriously the safety of his students and has not demonstrated a commitment to change the toxic culture at the Academy and during Sea Year. Superintendent Buono must be removed from his position.

We expect the department to adopt robust policy changes before the Sea Year program can resume. The maritime industry and United States Merchant Marine are a vital part of our national security and our nation's economy. Sexual harassment, sexual assault, and other offenses are

intolerable, and the department must take immediate and long-term action to stop these offenses to protect the cadets of the USMMA, both at the Academy and at sea.

Should you have any questions or require additional information please contact Matt Dwyer at (202) 617-5926 or Nicole Teutschel at (202) 224-4912.

Sincerely,

PETER A. DeFAZIO
Chair
House Committee
on Transportation and Infrastructure

MARIA CANTWELL
Chair
Senate Committee
on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

ADAM SMITH
Chair
House Committee
on Armed Services

JACKIE SPEIER
Chair
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
House Committee
on Armed Services

JOE COURTNEY
Chair
Subcommittee on Seapower
and Projection Forces
House Committee
on Armed Services

SALUD CARBAJAL
Chair
Subcommittee on Coast Guard
and Maritime Transportation
House Committee
on Transportation and Infrastructure

cc: Lucinda Lessley
Acting Administrator of Maritime Administration