

# POLITICO Pro Q&A: Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz

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The Coast Guard is still training recruits and carrying out most of its missions amid the coronavirus pandemic, though the service's top admiral expects disruptions to shipbuilding operations and a hit to readiness levels.

At shipyards building Coast Guard vessels, "We're sustaining some operations, but with reduced crewing. So there'll be a longer term readiness deficit we'll have to dig out of," Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz told POLITICO in an interview.

The Coast Guard, with about 41,500 active-duty members, 6,000 reservists and 9,000 civilians, had 90 cases of Covid-19, 30 recoveries and zero deaths as of Thursday.

Schultz spoke with POLITICO via Skype about how the life-saving service is responding to the coronavirus outbreak and working with state and federal agencies to provide support, how its modifying recruiting, training, and shipbuilding timelines, how the pandemic will impact readiness levels, and the lessons already learned from the global health crisis.

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

## **What is the Coast Guard's role in the coronavirus response and how has the service's priorities shifted during the pandemic?**

We've been focused first and foremost on protecting our people and maintaining our service readiness. I think we've found that balance. We're doing those missions America expects, but focus on a few. We all know the impacts to the economy. One of our key banner missions is economic prosperity, facilitating the marine transportation system. I think that's as critical today as ever before. Ninety-five percent of the goods we all buy in America enter through seaports, so we are focused on the 355 seaports, the 25,000 miles of navigable water, keeping the maritime flow of commerce. The day-to-day rescue work of the Coast Guard continues.

Supporting, enabling the marine transportation system, rescuing mariners in distress, our ongoing security missions, law enforcement, counter narcotics, border security. Those are the issues we're most keenly focused on, and doing. We've got the contingency response for Covid — clearly that's top of our list. We've got Coasties sprinkled at different places — two commanders up in New York City that are interfacing between the USNS Comfort and the entire New York City infrastructure.

We speak to ICS [the integrated command system], and we connect to the DoD as an armed force ... [Coast Guardsmen] onboarded patients to the hospital ship ... being really an interagency player, parked over here at DHS. We're jurisdiction multilingual. And we're a member of the National Intelligence Community and an armed force. So I think this is where you see us work really well in that middle space, where we need to communicate with a lot of different stakeholders.

**The Army, among other services, has suspended or delayed basic training, moved to new models of recruiting, and considered changing exercises overseas. Have you made any modifications in those areas?**

We've been able to keep Recruit Training Center in Cape May, New Jersey, going. We took about a three-week hiatus when we turned off any new recruits going there. We wanted to make sure we could continue to train in a socially distancing responsible manner. [Cape May does] not [have] a lot of infrastructure, not a lot of medical infrastructure there. So we've been partnering with the Cape May County emergency management officials, with the local government. We do not want to overwhelm your local health care system. I think we've done this, working with Congressman [Jeff] Van Drew up there a little bit to make sure he knows what we're doing and so far so good. It's been a throttling down of throughput, but we continue to train recruits, which is absolutely essential to necessary end strength.

We've got call-up authority, along with DoD, for reservists — our call-up authority is up to 1,000 reservists. I'm just into less than 10 percent of that right now, but these are sort of niche, people to go do some of that incident management. We're just putting out a call out for 24 medical professionals. I asked that we send some additional medical professionals [to Cape May] that aren't part of the training environment to make sure we got clear eyes. We actually shortened [training] up to six weeks now in this environment, but I want folks to make sure we see any indicators of problems early, and we attenuate them.

**How has the pandemic impacted your readiness levels?**

The Coast Guard stands ready ... this is the same organization that weathered the 35-day partial government shutdown at the end of 2018, into early part of 2019 and coming out of that, we had a little bit of a readiness deficit. Some contracts for shipyard repair are going to get kicked and deferred here, so there will be a readiness impact. We're smarter from the shutdown to look for some of those indicators now. In some of our facilities ... we're sustaining some operations, but with reduced crewing, so there'll be a longer term readiness deficit we'll have to dig out of. We'll just have to really work hard to close some of those gaps.

[After the shutdown], we really took a turn at what's defined as mission-essential employees. That multi-week shut down made us realize folks that order parts and stock parts and ship parts ... it changed our thinking a bit and now we're [a] much smarter organization.

In this Covid environment, where some of that work doesn't lend itself to the CDC-recommended six-foot social separation ... you got some challenges on the land base, the distribution. Now, you're starting to see some Covid impacts on truckers, some delays of offloading supplies and warehouses and grocery stores. We're tied to that logistics system that supports the nation so some of that will have a rolling cumulative detrimental impact.

**In February, you said a new national security cutter was expected to be finished some time in the fall or early winter, work was to begin on a new heavy security cutter, and you've got maintenance on the Polar Star. Do you suspect that any of the Coast Guard's shipbuilding timelines will be pushed back?**

The shipyard has a determination that work on the Polar Star is mission-essential work. So they're operating, they're doing work on the Polar Star's hull. That ship will be there through the summer into the mid-early fall. She'll go back to Seattle ... right around the Thanksgiving holiday she'll sail for Antarctica again. I haven't heard anything that's right now significantly detrimental to our timelines. My understanding is [Eastern is still building the offshore patrol cutters](#) right now. I'm not familiar with any big impacts to Coast Guard, new shipbuilding programs, but we'll have to see where this goes.

**Do you have concerns for the safety of Coast Guardsmen when it's sometimes impossible to keep a six-foot separation, especially while continuing to train new recruits?**

We've looked at that long and hard. [Keeping the Cape May center open] was probably the highest risk thing we were going to continue to do in the Coast Guard. I mentioned putting some extra medical folks there. For ships ... we do operate at sea. They're some unique challenges there. I won't tell you that we have it all figured out. [We have] some national guidance to help our sailors, our commanders in the field think about: How do you clean the vessels, how do you respond when you got something? We've created flowcharts to determine when somebody needs to go out and self-quarantine, when somebody should probably go get tested. Our people that operate in and around Seattle were dealing with things differently. They were the canary in the coal mine for the rest of the Coast Guard, so I think it's made us very adaptive even more so than in the past.

**How will the pandemic affect the way the Coast Guard operates and what have you learned so far?**

This will exacerbate some of those readiness challenges. We've absolutely got to get mobility in the hands of my recruiters. They're making their contacts in a virtual manner and they've got to be able to do that from their homes, from their apartments, from their vehicles. Right now, I don't have very good mobility in their hands; we don't compete as well as our fellow armed forces here. Just from a recruiting standpoint, there's a technological impediment there. I think we're going to have to provide more opportunities for our folks to telework. There's probably more flexibility that we can inject into people's lives here with some of the lessons we've learned. We've got to define what are those metrics by which we gauge our productivity from a telework environment.