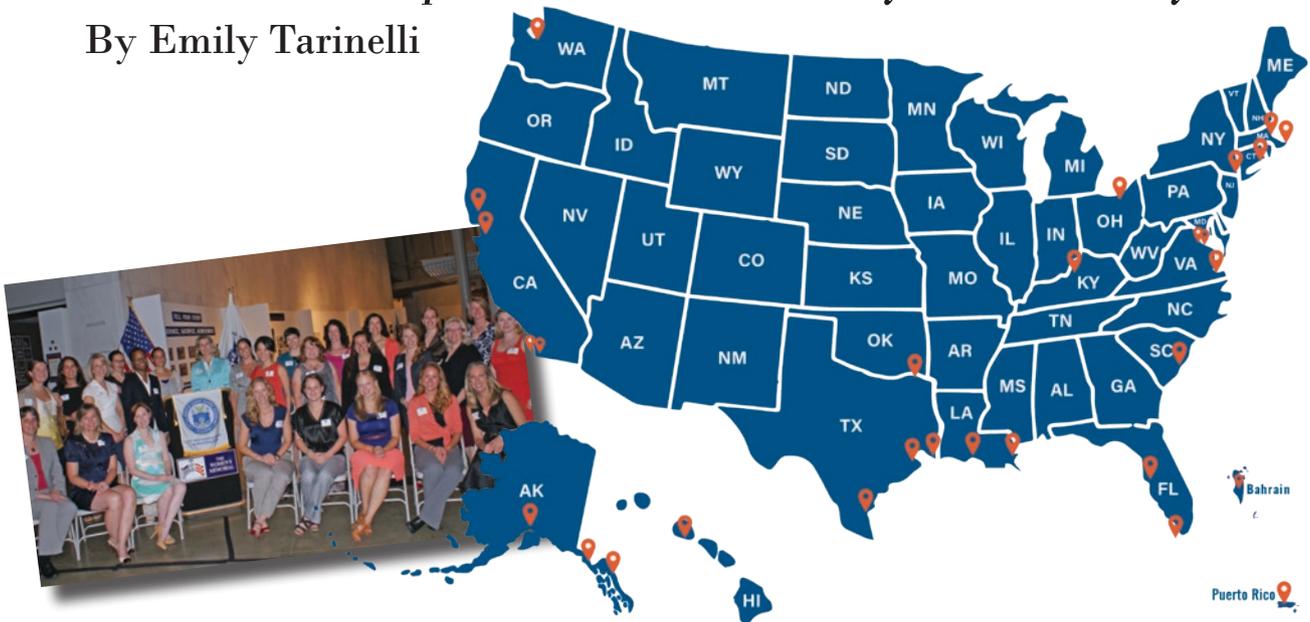


“It isn’t just for women, it’s for the Coast Guard”

Women’s Leadership Initiative celebrates 10-year anniversary

By Emily Tarinelli



Since launching in 2012 at an event in D.C. (above), the USCG Women’s Leadership Initiative has grown to more than 30 chapters worldwide, supporting women’s retention in the Coast Guard, while also recently achieving their goal of raising \$1,000,000.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Women’s Leadership Initiative (WLI), the Coast Guard affinity group dedicated to empowering service women in their professional development within and beyond the Coast Guard. Over the past decade, the WLI has diligently worked to increase women’s retention in the Coast Guard and inspire more equitable policies relating to gender.

A Movement is Born

Formed in the spring of 2012, the idea for the WLI—then known as the Women’s Leadership Initiative Fund—was first conceived by RADM Melissa Bert ’87. Bert recalled that the idea originated at an Alumni Association meeting, when she realized that most fundraising events attracted more men than women donors.

“It was very obvious, very quickly, that women were not invested in the Coast Guard the way men were,” Bert said, who was actively serving on the Alumni Association Board at the time. It seemed, she said, that men were more likely to feel a sense of ownership of the organization than women.

From there, the vision to create better networking opportunities for Coast Guard women blossomed. After some discussions with senior leadership and recruiting other impassioned individuals to the cause, the Alumni Association identified the establishment of a WLI endowment as one of the 15 projects of their *All Present* campaign in 2014.

The initiative became the fastest growing fund in Alumni Association history. It quickly surpassed its initial goal of raising \$500,000 and exceeded its \$1,000,000 goal last year. The income generated by the endowment funds networking opportunities such as conferences, symposia, and professional development for Coast Guard women. Since launching their Program Support Awards in 2016, more than 60 have been awarded totaling over \$65K distributed to their extensive chapter network.

Exceeding that initial \$500K goal “was the point at which I think it moved from an idea to an actual movement,” said Stephanie Young ’07, a member of the governance committee.

A Grassroots Model

As opposed to existing as one central committee for the entire nation, the WLI functions under a local chapter model. The model was a big success: in 2018, the WLI saw a 57% increase in the number of chapters, with 11 total at the time. Today, the WLI has 30 chapters nationwide. “It definitely had a grassroots feeling to it. It was organic,” Young said. “As we started to gain traction [and] interest, we were able to create more governance and more structure, and with that, [more] impact.”

Sarah Juckett P.E. '99, the geographic liaison of the governance committee, commented about the impact of using a self-sustaining chapter model.

“We’ve now grown to be not just a trusted organization at the Coast Guard leadership level, but [also] at the unit level, and at the chapter level—because that’s where we’re going to make the greatest difference in retention,” Juckett said.

MCPO Renee Hellinger, also a member on the governance committee, spoke highly of the influential reach that the chapter model enables.

“[With] the amount of people that we’re reaching, and because of that, [with] the recognition that we’re getting from headquarters, our reach is far and wide and very much respected,” Hellinger said.

The chapter model remained successful even during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I was really impressed with how much we grew, even during COVID,” said CDR Monica Hernandez, the current chair of the WLI. “That was a really telling thing, because we put up so much programming, and we were able to reach so many more people.”

The adoption of the chapter model also allowed it to directly empower local communities.

“There’s so much power and great work being done just by people all over the Coast Guard, [in] chapters everywhere,” CDR Amy Wirts '98 of the governance committee said. “The rapid growth of chapters is evidence that there was a need for this [initiative, and] that people are seeking opportunities to connect with others for leadership development.”

In 2018, the WLI became an official Coast Guard affinity group, which allowed the Initiative to operate with more influence and even gave it access to engagements with the Commandant.

Impacting Women’s Retention

Among many successful policy influences and sponsored events, one of the most notable milestones for WLI was its support of the Coast Guard’s Women’s Retention Study conducted by the RAND Corporation. Until the study’s implementation in 2018, it had been nearly 30 years since research was conducted to examine Coast Guard retention rates as it related to gender. CDR Patti Tutalo '00, conceived of the idea for the 2018 study while she was serving as the Gender Policy Advisor in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, with the goal of understanding why women were leaving the Coast Guard at greater rates than men. According to a report edited by Wirts and LCDR Maureen Johnson '01, between 2006 and 2015, women withdrew from the Coast Guard at a 10-20% higher rate than men in the middle segment of their careers.

“I suspected there was more to the story,” said Tutalo, also a member of the



Since becoming an official Coast Guard Affinity Group in 2017, WLI has had a direct tie to Coast Guard leadership (as seen here meeting with ADM Zukunft and ADM Schultz). This has resulted in policy changes that have directly impacted the retention of women, including changes to the postpartum weight policy and parental leave requirements.



WLI launched a new logo in 2016 to better represent the ways in which the USCG Women's Leadership Initiative seeks to engage the entire Coast Guard community, igniting that fire that builds opportunity for all.

Governance Committee. "The Women's Retention study was really about peeling back the onion of why women are leaving and what all the reasons are."

The WLI was vital to getting women to participate in the study. The qualitative part of the study consisted of in-person focus groups in every district of the Coast Guard. The WLI leaders in each location coordinated participation in the focus groups by spreading the word, encouraging senior leader support and answering questions about the study. These focus groups concentrated on the layers of participants' experiences in the Coast Guard that other research methods, such as surveys, would not be able to fully capture.

After the WLI put the word out about the study, it garnered an overwhelming participant turnout at over 100% participation. Tutalo cited the credibility of the WLI as a reason for the high volume of participants, in addition to the fact that the study was completed external to the Coast Guard.

The study shed light on issues impacting not only women, but men as well. Following the study's release to the public, the Personnel Readiness Task Force was stood up and made several policy changes. Even though a retention gap is still present, it has since shrunk. Recently, at the State of the Coast Guard address, Admiral Schultz reported that the Coast Guard has seen a 28% increase in women's retention of those in the mid-level ranks. This is after numerous policy revisions recommended by the study and WLI were implemented, including policies relating to postpartum weight criteria and parental leave requirements.

The WLI is for Everyone

While its name specifically references women, the WLI exists to uplift people of all genders in the Coast Guard. Its leaders stressed that everyone—including men—is welcome to get involved.

"Everyone can come to our meetings. We invite everybody to come to our events and just really participate in the leadership development and the networking in the mentoring that happens," Juckett said.

MCPO Neena Cicinelli, also a member of the governance committee, noted that it is especially important for men to be involved in the WLI. "Every man in the Coast Guard will eventually, one day, work for a woman, or will have a woman work for them, or will be friends with a woman who works for somebody," she said. "Therefore, [the WLI] applies to everybody."

When asked about the journey of seeing WLI's advocacy come to fruition, many of the governance committee members visibly or audibly brightened. The pride and excitement in their smiles and their voices were undeniable.

The most common answer was, "It's amazing."

"It's amazing to see how this core group of women, many of whom were there from the start, [have remained] committed to it," CAPT Andrea Marcille '89, the President of the Alumni Association, said. "I can't think of many other efforts that have sustained this long with a group of volunteers and has grown [this] quickly and [this] broadly."

"It's amazing," Cicinelli said. "I get in a room or on a Zoom call with these women, and I get 30% smarter... and I love it."

"It's amazing. It really is," Wirts said. "I am so proud of us, [and] of what our organization has been able to accomplish."

Others expressed sentiments of gratitude and fulfillment.

"It's definitely humbling," Young said. "It's a lot to ask for somebody to look at a military leader and say, 'I think this issue is meaningful enough and I would rank it against other priorities for you to help with.' That requires a lot of trust."

Bert said that the WLI's success inspired a lesson for her.

"If you have something that's important to you, and you talk to other people about it, and have that excitement, people want to help you," she said. "They're going to not only help you, but they're going to build something much bigger than what you could ever do."

Despite the WLI's many achievements, its work is far from over. CDR Erica Mohr '96, the first chair of the WLI, posed questions that demonstrate the



Scenes from events held throughout the country over the last ten years hosted by various chapters of the USCG Women's Leadership Initiative. From book clubs to large symposia, chapters operate at the grassroots level to offer "opportunities to connect with others for leadership development." There are now 30 chapters worldwide.

importance of the WLI's continued advocacy: What should one say to an 18-year-old enlisted man who asks, "Why do we need WLI?" Why should he, as an 18-year-old enlisted man, care about the WLI's work?

"I think it's that that 18-year-old should want to join an organization that empowers its people to create its culture," said Mohr, "and the WLI is a representation of an organization that supports this kind of leadership."

In addition, the WLI is a crucial part of creating a more inclusive space within the Coast Guard. "The Coast Guard will be richer if [that man] has the opportunity to work with people from diverse backgrounds and with diverse viewpoints," Mohr added.

Hernandez also spoke about the WLI's role in expanding diversity and inclusion. "If you see somebody like you, you might think, 'Oh, I can do that' ... Especially because people who aren't in the military have a lot of misconceptions about who can be in the military and what it takes," Hernandez said. "So it helps when you see folks have different backgrounds." She added that creating a landscape with more diverse leadership will directly help with recruitment and retention efforts.

Furthermore, while the gap in retention rates between Coast Guard men and women has been reduced, it exists nonetheless. "Until that [gap] is closed, we definitely have a mission," Wirts said.

The Future of Women's Leadership

With the successes of the past decade to support them, members of the WLI now look to the future of women's leadership within and beyond the Coast Guard.

"My hopes and goals are that the WLI continues to be an organization [for] good change," Juckett said. "The real work is happening at the local level ... so success for me would be a continued expansion of our chapter network that's even stronger than it is today."

"I hope it also serves as inspiration and is viewed as a collaborator and an ally [to] other minority groups within the Coast Guard," Mohr said, citing racial and LGBTQ+ affinity groups. "I hope that they view the WLI as an inspiration and an ally."

Alumni who are interested in supporting the WLI can help the initiative by staying informed via the Alumni Association newsletter, attending events hosted by the WLI, and financially supporting the organization. Supporting the WLI and its mission are critical to creating a more rewarding Coast Guard experience for all.

The WLI's impact, Mohr said, is invaluable. "It gives women an opportunity to participate in their own belonging," she said. "They are ... actively creating spaces where they belong. Rather than paternalistically waiting for the organization to create those spaces on their behalf, they are creating the environment that they want to live in, and there is something so empowering [about that.]"

"Our organization isn't just for women," Juckett said. "It's for the Coast Guard."

Get involved at www.uscgwli.org

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