

A8 SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2005

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Regional FEMA Head Defends Qualifications

John Pennington won the job with help from ex-Rep. Jennifer Dunn.

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KATRINA | Expect Poor Conditions

FROM A1

because it can be used to purchase food, clothes and necessities near the affected areas, helping maintain economies and allowing victims faster access to goods that would otherwise have to be shipped across the country.

Anyone wanting to donate money should give it to a reputable organization helping with Katrina relief. What the county is looking for in this instance are people who can donate time.

Meanwhile, other recruiters haven't been so fortunate—most notably those in the Army, which is trying to avoid mislead recruiting goals as it shoulders the bulk of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Coast Guard expects to meet its goal of 4,100 new active-duty members this fiscal year, extending a streak that stretches back to 1999.

That's a much smaller order to fill than the Army, whose 80,000 recruits is about double the entire standing Coast Guard force.

The attraction, officials say, lies in the Coast Guard's peacetime mission, its variety of careers, and its tendency to give new members a lot of responsibility at a young age.

And while some Coast Guard members are performing security missions overseas, most of the agency's jobs offer the obvious benefit of operating at a good distance from a war zone.

"We've not seen pictures of Coast Guard guys getting shot at," said Lt. Lane Sotak, chief of enlisted recruiting in Arlington, Va. "Parents don't want to send their children to war."

But if they weren't held back, Coast Guard recruiters say they could lose conventional enlistment targets.

In terms of money and training, newly minted coasties are on par with the four

the people overseeing a disaster to know what it's all about.

Holdeman said Pennington at least relies on experienced staff, including his deputy director, Tammy Doherty, a 15-year emergency manager.

Pennington, 38, was appointed head of FEMA's Region 10 office following the September 11th, 2001, terror attacks. He earns an annual salary of \$138,000 overseeing the federal disaster response in Washington, Oregon, Alaska and Idaho.

Pennington received a bachelor's degree in business administration from California Coast University in Brea, Calif. At the time it was an unaccredited correspondence school.

Last year during testimony before Congress, investigators for the General Accounting

Office called it a diploma mill. The university was one of three unaccredited schools investigated because they received \$950,000 in government funding to cover tuition for 483 federal employees enrolled as students.

GAO special agent Paul DeSautiers told The Times that the California Coast University sold degrees for a flat fee.

In January, California Coast obtained federal accreditation from the Distance Education and Training Council, according to Sally Weick, the council's assistant director.

"It was a pretty questionable school for a lot of years," he said. "They had to make a lot of changes."

Pennington said he knew the school was not accredited as a federal disaster relief school. He defended his education and insisted he is qualified for the

FEMA job, California Coast fit his needs, he said, adding that fitness forced him to forgo a ROTC scholarship to Vanderbilt in his hometown of Nashville, Tenn.

"I was not looking to build my credentials," he said. "I worked hard to do what was best for me."

His interest in disaster management began as he saw the result of floods and landslides in Cowitz County since the mid-1990s. He became directly involved after a slide in Koko destroyed 14 structures.

At the time, Pennington was a two-term state representative. He lobbied FEMA and later President Clinton to have the area designated as a federal disaster.

"I got on to-depth working knowledge of Region 10 in that process," he said.

COAST | Goals Likely To Be Met

FROM A1

"I like the fact that we're seeing pictures of Coast Guard guys getting shot at. Parents don't want to send their children to war."

COAST GUARD RECRUITING

traditional military branches: They start on the same pay scale and have to complete a single-week boot camp.

The destruction of Hurricane Katrina has once again highlighted the Coast Guard's role as a front-line rescue squad in disasters.

Even in the bustling port city of Seattle, where Coast Guard choppers and boats are as familiar a sight as television images have prompted more than a few calls from would-be recruits, said Randall Dennis, chief of the city's recruiting office.

"These disasters that happen — the Coast Guard is at the forefront of rescuing people," Dennis said.

Though its latest media campaign plays up the Coast Guard's part in the Department of Homeland Security, those traditional rescue and service jobs are likely just as powerful in attracting recruits, the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon said.

It's really quite an important set of missions and they've just added one he said. "It's not as though the Coast Guard was known to

have stopped another 9/11. There's not this big platoon-size case."

The Coast Guard's population increased about 25 percent after the 2001 terrorist attacks, including armed maritime security, and its budget jumped as well.

Some observers, however, say that new spending was still not enough, leaving the Coast Guard with a small force and an aging fleet.

And while battles over the agency's multi-billion-dollar fleet renovation plans have drawn attention in Congress, a robust roster of coasties also is important, O'Hanlon said.

"They've only gotten a little bit bigger in personnel," he said. "I think people are probably as key as anything."

For recruiters like Dennis, the budgetary brakes do provide some benefits — instead of gobbling up every recruit they can find, many Coast Guard offices can take their pick, he said.

"For every hundred people we talk to, we can bring one person in," Dennis said. "We're right now, the employer of choice."

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