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Homeland Security

United States
Coast Guard



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DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

U. S. COAST GUARD

STATEMENT OF

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ON

THE NATIONAL MARITIME CENTER AND MARINER CREDENTIALING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JULY 9, 2009

Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I am Rear Admiral Kevin Cook, Director of Prevention Policy for Marine Safety, Security, and Stewardship, United States Coast Guard. I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Coast Guard's role in the Mariner Credentialing program.

Mariner Licensing and Documentation Program (MLD) Overview

The Coast Guard aims to ensure that ships of the U.S. merchant marine are manned by qualified, trained, and competent personnel; to that end, the Coast Guard administers the Mariner Credentialing program. The program's standards fulfill the U.S. responsibilities under the International Maritime Organization's Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers Convention (STCW Convention), 1978, as amended.

On October 17, 2007, the Coast Guard testified before this Subcommittee on Maritime Education and Workforce on the project to centralize and restructure the Mariner Licensing and Documentation program. In the last two years, the Mariner Credentialing program has undergone a significant transformation. The National Maritime Center has moved to Martinsburg, WV, where the entire credentialing program is now centralized. Today the National Maritime Center is responsible for evaluating all applications for merchant mariner credentials, and is responsible for producing these credentials. The evaluations cover criteria such as the mariner's suitability for service, including: security, safety and suitability, medical, and professional qualifications.

The centralization and restructuring process transitioned operations at the 17 regional examination centers to the centralized West Virginia location. The regional locations act as mariner application acceptance agents: they assist with application submission, administer professional examinations, and oversee and audit the approved training courses offered in their local area. The staffs at these offices have clear guidance to assist mariners in completing their applications to avoid preventable delays, and the 17 offices report directly to the National Maritime Center to ensure consistency of operations throughout the United States.

The new centralized system ensures consistency and evaluation standardization, allowing the Coast Guard to better monitor the performance of the mariner credentialing program. Centralization also provides the opportunity to establish, analyze, and monitor performance goals for the reduction of processing time and quality assurance. Part of the centralization project allowed the establishment of a national call center that provides mariners free access to answers to their questions. Additionally, the centralization allowed the Coast Guard to establish a medical evaluations branch staffed with medical professionals to conduct evaluations of mariners found to have medical conditions that might impact the safety of life, the environment and property.

In our effort to improve services to the merchant mariner, the Coast Guard sought and achieved ISO 9001:2008 Quality Management Systems compliance for the Mariner Credentialing program. This was accomplished, in part, by establishing centralized credential processes that are monitored within our Mission Management System, which is the quality management system being implemented throughout the Coast Guard's Marine Safety, Security and Stewardship program. In keeping with the United States obligations

under the International Convention on the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978 as amended, the Mariner Credentialing program has been assessed and audited by Transport Canada. This independent review of our program found that we were in overall compliance with our international obligations.

The intended long-term benefits for the centralization and restructuring of the Mariner Licensing and Documentation program include:

- Decreased processing time – Prior to centralization, each of the 17 Regional Examination Centers had unique process for issuing credentials. Today, there is only a single evaluation and production facility and one process to monitor and improve. This has allowed us to streamline the process, making it easier to reduce the time it takes to process an application. Also, having all evaluation resources managed within one location facilitates allocation of these resources in response to changing demand.
- Consistency of service – by centralizing evaluators, the Coast Guard is able to assure consistency while maintaining expertise through cross-training as well as both formal and informal knowledge sharing.
- Improved customer service - Centralizing creates economies of scale and process consistencies that make it possible for mariners to check the status of their credential application online via a Coast Guard website, <http://homeport.uscg.mil/>. A toll-free call center is also available (1-888-IASKNMC / 1-888-427-5662) to answer questions and provide information to the mariners.

Credentials

Prior to April 15, 2009, the Coast Guard issued multiple credentials to mariners. A mariner could receive a merchant mariner document, a merchant mariner license, a certificate of registry, and a Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) endorsement. With the additional requirement for a Transportation Security Card established in 46 United States Code 70105, some mariners might be required to carry as many as five credentials. In response to this situation, the Coast Guard developed and implemented a new credential that combines the elements of the four Coast Guard-issued credentials into one document called the Merchant Mariner Credential (MMC). The MMC retains the characteristics of a qualification document but also serves as an identification document.

Today's merchant mariner credential is a more secure credential than any previously produced by the Coast Guard. The credential is similar in appearance to a passport and contains many of the security features of a passport. Also, since this credential was developed in conjunction with the Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC), which is administered and issued by the Transportation Security Administration, processes were developed to ease the burden on mariners who previously were required to appear at one of the 17 regional examination centers. Now, they may appear at any of the approximately 140 TWIC enrollment centers. The TWIC enrollment centers obtain the information necessary to positively identify the mariner, including fingerprints, and conduct a security threat assessment. The information gathered and associated documentation is then shared with the Coast Guard. This greatly reduces the cost and

time previously required of the vast majority of mariners when applying for a Coast Guard-issued credential.

The benefits experienced to date:

- Savings of 36,000 hours in application processing. With the establishment of the data-sharing processes with the Transportation Security Administration, the Coast Guard requires less time to conduct the safety and suitability checks of mariners.
- Savings of \$700,000 in fingerprinting costs per year and the avoidance of \$4 million in equipment recapitalization costs.
- Prevention of fraud through the enhanced security features of the MMC .

Current Operations

Along with the aforementioned benefits of centralization, there have been some associated challenges, including a shifting workforce, an unexpected workload increase, and the difficulties inherent in introducing a new style of credential with associated process-adjustments. Each challenge has been met by actions that not only addressed the specific concern but also sought to ensure continued safety of the maritime environment.

During centralization of the Mariner Credentialing program, some regional examination credentialing personnel chose not to relocate their employment to the centralized National Maritime Center (NMC). This initially resulted in the NMC moving through the transition phase with reduced overall experience level. As a result of this shortfall, the Coast Guard started a robust program to train new employees on their duties. This effort helped the workforce quickly learn their positions.

The centralization of the Mariner Credentialing program to the National Maritime Center revealed that a large number of medical waivers were previously granted to mariners under the previous Mariner Credentialing program. As part of the centralization plan, a medical evaluation branch was established and staffed with qualified medical personnel; however, the numbers of mariners with medical issues was not fully anticipated during the planning stage. After the centralization and the restructuring phases were completed, the full extent of the number of required medical evaluations was identified. In response to the need, the Coast Guard surged the Medical Evaluation Branch with uniformed doctors from units throughout the United States as well as qualified medical personnel from the reserve and Coast Guard Auxiliarists. This surge activity, as well as process improvements, allowed the National Maritime Center to reduce the backlog of medical evaluations. As a long-term measure the Coast Guard is hiring additional full-time personnel for the medical evaluation staff.

Shortly after the medical evaluation process was improved, the MMC was implemented, requiring new software. The complexity of application evaluation in conjunction with the new software resulted in the average processing time for applications to reach 80 days. In order to reduce the processing time, the Coast Guard instituted immediate process changes to expedite mariner applications, specifically for those mariners at risk of having their current credentials expire. The Coast Guard also streamlined the processes for those mariners seeking entry-level credentials and made changes in the evaluation and production software to improve the product, as well as increased the network capability at the National Maritime Center. As the National Maritime Center has

done in the past, resources are being surged to assist in the professional qualification evaluation branch. This will improve throughput to reduce the backlog caused by the switchover to the new MMC and the setbacks initially encountered from the processing software.

Public Outreach

The National Maritime Center has established bulk processing procedures for maritime academies and union schools to ensure on-time delivery of credentials. The Coast Guard is also examining the applicability of such a program for larger companies. The Coast Guard has also sought changes to the Merchant Mariner Licensing and Documentation database to enable improved tracking of applications and to monitor process efficiency.

In order to simplify the application process, the Coast Guard has provided mariners with two methods to track the status of their application: the Mariner Information Call Center and an online application status tracking system. The Mariner Information Call Center was established to allow mariners to inquire about the status of their application or to obtain other information regarding their file. The call center receives an average of 12,000 contacts each month via email or toll free telephone calls. The online application status tracking feature provides those mariners with internet access to track the status of their application as it progresses through the evaluation and issuance process. Each month, mariners conduct an average of 25,000 status checks using this system.

The Coast Guard is still refining the methods for checking applications. The National Maritime Center has added additional communication lines to handle call volume. The online application tracking system provides the mariner with information about the location of his or her application in the paper-based process, but the information provided is limited to the data fields captured in the Merchant Mariner Licensing and Documentation Database; in order to capture all relevant data, the Coast Guard will design and develop a new mariner application process.

In addition to these methods of communicating directly with the mariner, the Coast Guard has also established methods to provide information throughout the industry. The National Maritime Center staff conducts regular listening sessions to hear the concerns from various segments of the industry. Information bulletins are developed to communicate any changes or clarifications as quickly as possible. Information bulletins and current policy are provided through the National Maritime Center's website or through a list server. These methods are provided to ensure those interested are able to obtain the latest information from the National Maritime Center.

The Coast Guard is currently testing an online application to allow employers to verify mariner qualifications. This ability will be provided to the industry to ensure that properly qualified personnel are operating ships of the United States.

Future Plans

The Coast Guard recognizes the improvements that need to be made to the current processing time, with a goal of reducing the processing time to 30 days. This goal will

require that in the short-term, the Coast Guard will need to surge capabilities to remove the backlog of outstanding evaluations.

The Coast Guard further recognizes that the current paper-based Mariner Credentialing program requires an overhaul. Short-term plans include the development and implementation of an electronic application form to assist the mariner in completing the application and to reduce errors. The Coast Guard is currently looking into options to further improve the Merchant Mariner Credential program, including the potential development of an internet-based application submission and evaluation capability.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard believes that our recent centralization and reorganization of the mariner credentialing program has significantly enhanced the application and issuance of credentials by decreasing processing time, and ensuring consistency of service, while improving maritime safety and security. While we've made significant progress, we are focused on the upcoming improvement in the months ahead.

The Coast Guard continues to work diligently to resolve the immediate challenges impacting the mariner credentialing program as well as to plan for future operations through continued process improvements, technological advances, training, and adjustments to staffing. Measures have been taken to provide open lines of communication with the mariner and industry, and the National Maritime Center will employ new methods of communication as they become available. Our goal is to issue credentials to qualified mariners in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Coast Guard's mariner credentialing program. I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.