



Becoming a Storefront

The changing roles of the regional examination centers.

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The model for obtaining professional credentials for the nation's merchant mariners is undergoing a sea change. For years, merchant mariners have completed their credential applications by hand and sent them to be

Centralization will allow RECs to evolve into storefronts, expanding their role as mariner advocates.

processed by one of the 17 Coast Guard-staffed regional examination centers (or RECs) around the country. On an annual basis, the RECs processed more than 84,000

credential transactions, administered examinations, and oversaw more than 1,800 commercial maritime training centers.¹

This credential production process has been a major source of frustration to the maritime industry (and a source of complaints as well). Just filling out the forms and collecting the required paperwork was a time-consuming and often complicated process.

Past Model: Full Service Regional Exam Centers

Under the old process, the staff at the RECs reviewed applications and worked with the mariners to obtain any information missing from the application submission. The RECs then evaluated each application, in-

Benefits to the Mariner

Improved consistency—It will be easier to monitor consistency from a single office, as opposed to doing so from 17 different offices. A key to this consistency will be the documentation of all processes and work instructions. As part of the restructuring process, NMC created the operations and oversight division (NMC-1). NMC-1 ensures all new processes are documented and implemented uniformly throughout the program. Presently, NMC-1 monitors over 100 documented processes, work instructions, forms, and guidance documents.

Reduced processing time—Having all evaluation resources located and managed centrally allows the NMC to quickly reallocate those resources in response to changing demand. By the end of De-

ember 2007, the average license renewal processing time had improved by 35% from the peak at the beginning of 2007.

Improved customer service—With the evaluation function shifted to the National Maritime Center, the REC storefront staff will be able to focus more individual attention on the mariners, helping to ensure their applications are ready to be evaluated. One constant drain on REC staff time was frequent calls from mariners asking about the status of their applications. In response, the NMC established a toll-free call center to answer questions and provide information to applicants. Soon mariners will be able to check the status of their credential application online.

cluding limited security background checks, reviews of the professional qualifications, and medical evaluations. Additionally, a mariner sometimes needed to

(whose full-time jobs were to review physicals for active duty Coast Guard employees) reviewed the mariner's physical. Needless to say, this created excessive turnaround time.

Complicating matters further, the waiver decisions were based on standards for Coast Guard military employees, not for a working maritime population.

In addition, the RECs conducted evaluations of the mariner's professional qualifications. Once the regional exam centers completed the entire evaluation process and found a mariner to be fully qualified, they printed a credential and issued it to the mariner. The overall turnaround time took anywhere between a few days and a year, depending on the quality of the submission and the responsiveness of both the Coast Guard staff and the applicant.

Unfortunately, processing times at the regional exam centers increased over the years due to regulatory changes and an increase in the number of mariners applying for credentials. In an effort to reduce backlog, many RECs stopped answering the telephone and curtailed

the hours they were open to the public.

Understandably, these adjustments led to a decline in customer service. Moreover, regulations and policies, issued by Coast Guard headquarters and the NMC, respectively, were subject to varied interpretation among the 17 RECs, resulting in escalating complaints about a lack of consistency.

Merchant Mariner Licensing and Documentation (MLD) Program				
Mariner File Organization & Mariner Application Submittal to NMC Checklist				
TOP	Date	Mariner Name:	REF:	X / NR
File Contents:				
▶	1 Camera set-up form with two passport photos (MMD and STCW only).			
	2 User fee sheet or Pay.Gov receipt			
	3 Application (CG 719B) (w/oath for original license and MMD only)			
	4 Written statement (who, what, where, when, and why) to any applicable "yes" answers and anything that pertains to the convictions i.e. court documentation			
	5 Physical (CG 719K) or Entry Lvl Physical (CG 719K/E), if applicable include any amplifying information from physician.			
	6 Drug Screen (CG 719P) or a letter from a marine employer or a drug consortium			
	7 Sea service			
	8 Course certificates - sighted (i.e. Radar, Master, or OUPV courses, 1st Aid/CPR)			
	9 Three (3) character references. (For original license only)			
	10 Two unexpired forms of identification per MLD-FM-REC-105. Proof of citizenship is required for first original credential (required at each application for foreign national).			
	11 Social security card or letter from Social Security Administration indicating assigned number - Sighted (For original transactions and first time vetting applicants only)			
	12 SF-86			
	13 Authorization for release of information (Optional)			
	BOTTOM	14 Copies of all credentials held (If Applicable)		
MMLD / LiveScan Requirements:				
15 Create new application in MMLD w/credential(s) transaction status of "REQUESTED" and record user fee payment(s) if applicable.				
16 Initiate vetting request (Status Request & Remark) and transmit fingerprints. See MLD-WI-NMC5-10 and NMC 03-06 for requirements.				
17 Check "Request MDR" box (If Applicable). See NMC 03-06 for requirements.				
18 MMLD correspondence entry: Method: "MAIL" - Summary: "Application mailed to NMC this date." * The date of this entry <u>must</u> coincide with the actual mail date of the application(s).				
Pilotage Requirements (Other than Renewals & Duplicates)				
19 Endorsement credential created in MMLD; REC retains route info & copy of 719B				
20 MMLD Correspondence Entry: "[Evaluator's name] is evaluating Pilotage info"				
Local Limited License (Other than Duplicates)				
21 Original credential created in MMLD; REC retains route info & copy of 719B				
22 MMLD Correspondence Entry: "[Evaluator's name] is evaluating Local Limited License info"				
Transfer:				
Prepare a per box packing list of all applications to include applicant last name, first name, & MMLD reference Number (Do not use applicant SSN). Include a copy in the box & e-mail a copy to: ARL-DG-NMC5USGC.				
The e-mail <u>must</u> indicate shipment date, courier used & box tracking number. Enclose an additional packing list for all other documents with POC for routing including what it is/who receives it.				

Figure 1: A checklist helps to ensure mariner credential applications are ready to be evaluated before forwarding to the National Maritime Center. USCG graphic.

take an exam at the regional exam center to demonstrate proficiency in a specific area.

The regional exam center also reviewed the mariner's physical and decided whether a medical waiver was necessary. Any waiver requests were sent to the National Maritime Center, who then forwarded them to Coast Guard headquarters. Once at HQ, doctors



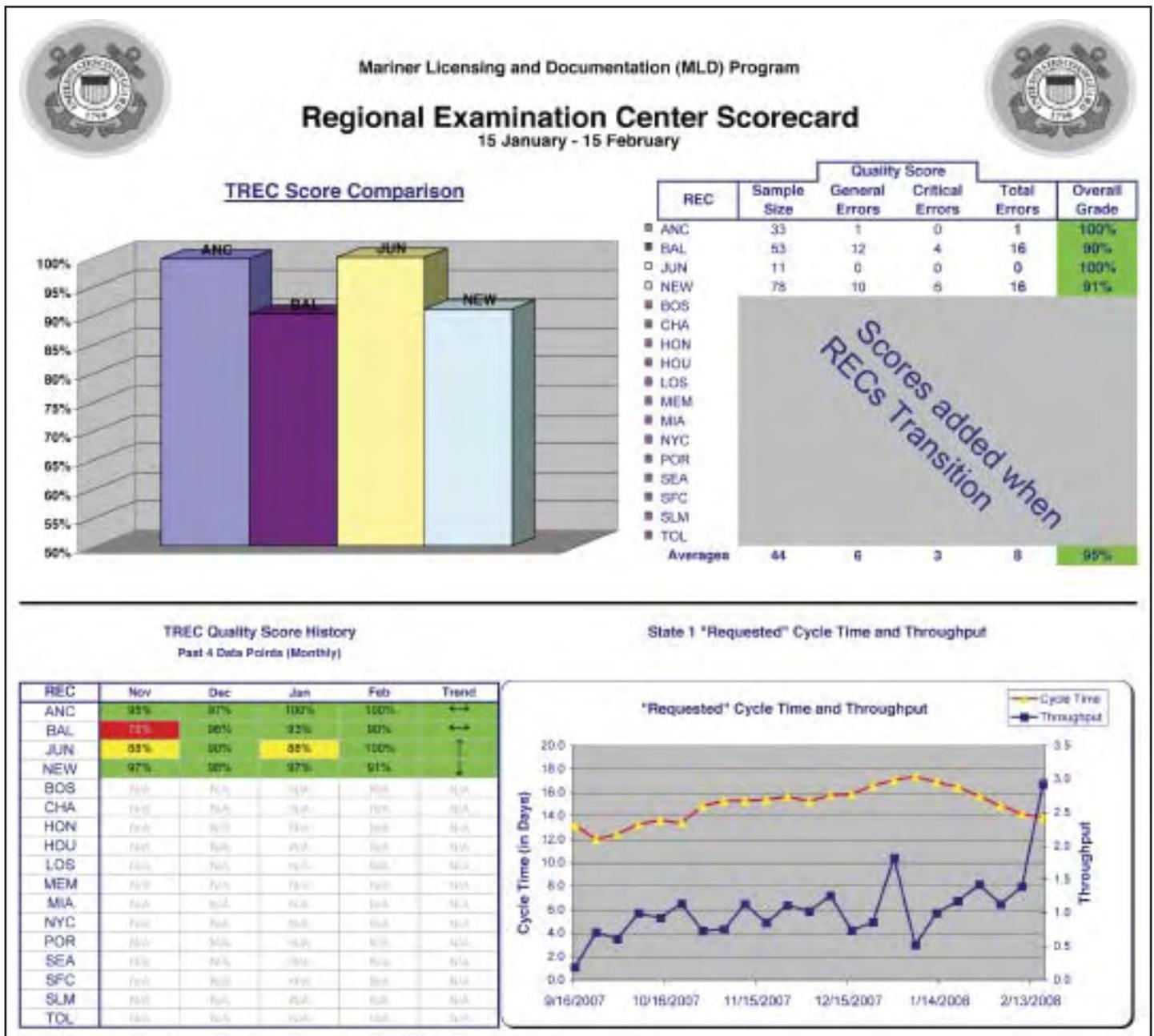


Figure 2: A Regional Examination Center scorecard, used to measure performance. USCG graphic.

The Future Model: REC Storefronts

Currently the NMC is working with each of the 17 regional exam centers to centralize credential application processing. Under centralized operations, mariners will still submit their applications to one of the 17 RECs. The regional exam centers will then ensure that each mariner's application is ready for evaluation. Using a detailed checklist, RECs will determine when an application is ready to be evaluated by the NMC (Figure 1).

Once they have completed this preliminary review, the regional exam centers will send the application to the

NMC for its staff to evaluate entirely, including the security evaluation, professional qualification review, and medical screening. The NMC will notify the mariner of any needed exams, and the regional exam center will administer the exam to the mariner and relay the score. The National Maritime Center will then issue a credential to the mariner.

In contrast to the full service model, in the centralized process it is not the RECs, but the NMC that notifies the mariner of any necessary tests and issues the credential. Overall, the centralization of the evaluation function will allow the transitioned RECs to evolve into storefronts,

REC	Final Transition Date	Final Count of Employees
New Orleans, LA	.31-Mar-08	14
Anchorage, AK	.31-Mar-08	3
Juneau, AK	.31-Mar-08	4
Toledo, OH	.31-May-08	6
St. Louis, MO	.31-May-08	2
Memphis, TN	.30-Jun-08	3
Los Angeles, CA	.30-Jun-08	5
Seattle, WA	.31-Jul-08	5
San Francisco, CA	.31-Jul-08	6
Baltimore, MD	.31-Aug-08	7
Portland, OR	.31-Aug-08	4
New York, NY	.30-Sep-08	8
Charleston, SC	.30-Sep-08	4
Honolulu, HI	.30-Sep-08	4
Miami, FL	.31-Oct-08	9
Houston, TX	.30-Nov-08	6
Boston, MA	.31-Dec-08	10

Table 1.

expanding their role as mariner advocates and allowing them to aid mariners in the application process.

Workforce Restructuring

To assist the transitioned storefronts, the NMC created a scorecard (Figure 2) to evaluate progress. This monthly scorecard monitors the quality of the RECs' application submissions, as well as how quickly the regional exam centers are sending them to the NMC. This will identify any training gaps and uncover potential process improvement opportunities.

All National Maritime Center staff members moved into a permanent facility in Martinsburg, W.Va., in January 2008. The 120-person staff consists of many former REC workers and credentialed mariners. The staff will expand to approximately 230 by December of 2008. By then, all of the RECs will have transitioned to storefronts (Table 1) and will be working directly for the NMC.

Staff levels at regional exam centers across the country will shrink to a total of 100 government employees,

with a minimum of two employees and a maximum of 15 at each.

A Long-Overdue Course Change

The mariner credential production process had long been a source of frustration to the maritime industry and the Coast Guard. After years of complaints and low customer satisfaction, we envision that this shift to storefront operations will allow the regional exam centers to act fully as advocates to our most important customer: the mariner.

About the author:

CDR Swirbliss manages ongoing improvements to the mariner credential production process and coordinates the efforts of the 17 regional exam centers. He previously served as REC chief in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. He is a Coast Guard Academy graduate and holds master's degrees in management and industrial and operations engineering.

Bibliography:

Adapted from the presentation entitled "Improvements to Mariner Licensing and Documentation," CAPT David Stalfort, Coast Guard National Maritime Center, January 2008.

Endnote:

¹ Williams, Laura, "G-I Pelorus: Restructuring and Centralization of the Merchant Mariner Licensing and Documentation (MLD) Program," March 23, 2005.

