

# Your Opinion Matters

## USCG Mariner Licensing & Documentation Program



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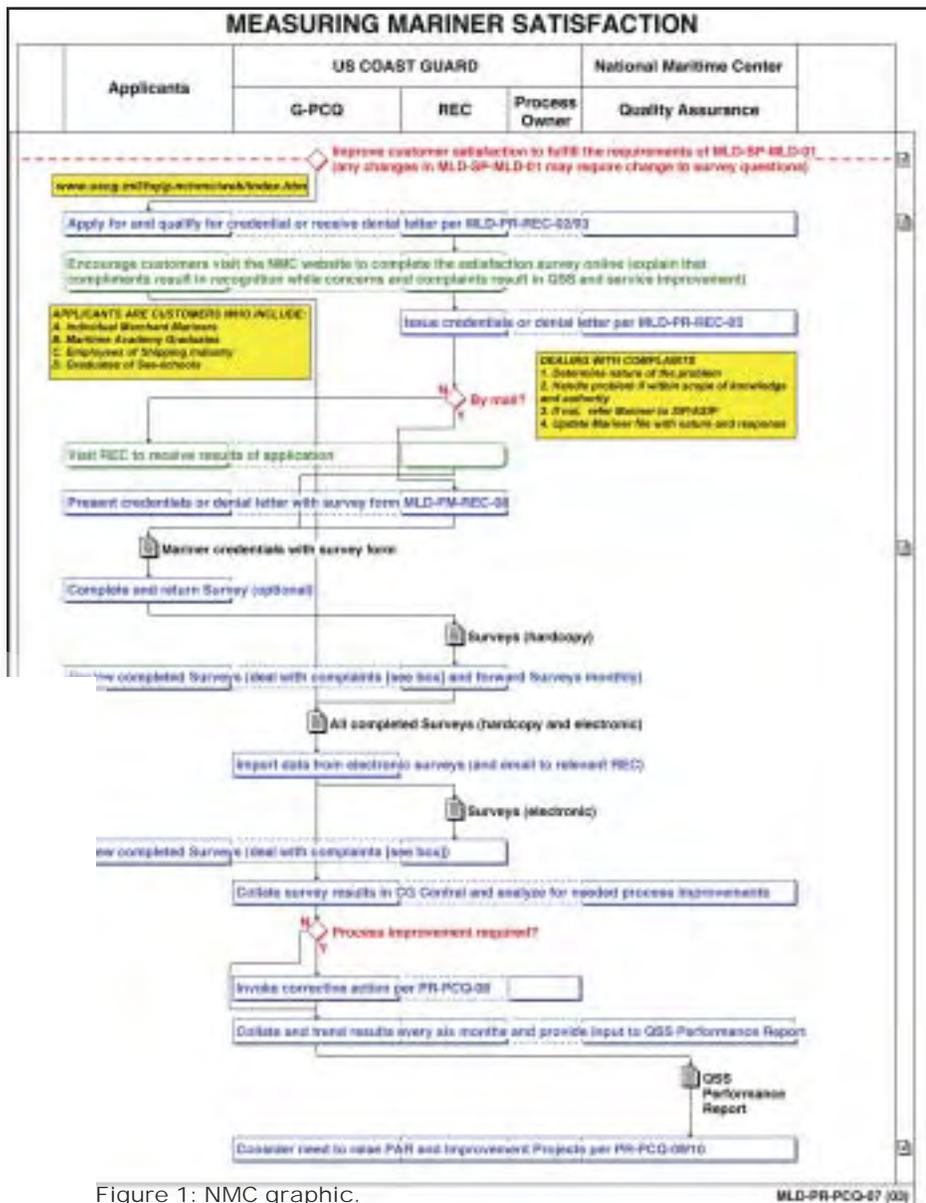


Figure 1: NMC graphic.

The Mariner Licensing and Documentation (MLD) program continually strives to understand the needs, opinions, and satisfaction of its customers. The challenge is to satisfy the mariner without compromising regulations. The office of quality assurance and traveling inspectors at Coast Guard headquarters (CG-546) designed the overall process called “measuring mariner satisfaction” (Figure 1).

The operations and oversight division at the National Maritime Center (NMC) implements this mariner satisfaction survey system throughout the MLD program, and coordinates the actions among the regional examination centers (RECs) and these Coast Guard offices.

### Current Collection Process

The formal collection process is not unlike the process of filling out a customer satisfaction card after getting an oil change, eating at a restaur-



rant, or purchasing an appliance. In the same manner, when mariners are issued a professional credential, they also receive a customer survey form (Figure 2).

There are four primary sections on the customer survey form:

**1. Mariner contact information:** The mariner can fill out contact information in case he/she would like to be contacted by a Coast Guard representative.

**2. Transaction section:** This section assists the Coast Guard in targeting the part of the process that might need improvement. This section, in particular, has become more crucial over the past year now that the RECs are no longer the only Coast Guard entity the mariner will encounter.

**3. Agree/disagree section:** This contains specific, targeted questions about services and products received that the mariner can rate on a “1” to “10” scale.

**4. Please contact me:** If mariners want to talk to someone about a specific problem encountered during the credential production process, a Coast Guard staff member will contact them to find out the nature of the issue. If the problem resides with a specific REC, then a staff member from that REC will contact the mariner. If there is a comment regarding the overall process, the NMC staff will take appropriate action.

A few RECs also provide a list of questions on the back of the survey form to target REC-specific concerns, such

as ease of parking and mode of transportation. Surveys are optional and confidential. There is absolutely no connection between the survey form and the mariner’s records; the Coast Guard will not withhold services or otherwise retaliate in light of a less-than-favorable customer survey form. If mariners are uncomfortable fill-

The image shows a customer survey form titled "USCG Merchant Mariner Licensing and Documentation (MLD) Program Your Opinion Matters!". The form is divided into several sections:

- Contact Information:** Fields for "Your Name:", "Date:", "Contact Phone / Email:", and "Zip Code:".
- Business Nature:** A table with columns for Method, Location, Credential, Transaction Type, and Service, each with checkboxes for various options.
- Location Choice:** A section asking "Why did you choose this location?" with checkboxes for "Closest to my location", "My file is located here", "Professionalism of service", "Speed of service", and "Other (Please comment below)".
- Agree/Disagree Scale:** A horizontal scale from 10 (Strongly Agree) to 1 (Strongly Disagree) with a grid for rating 10 statements about the service.
- Please Contact Me:** A checkbox for "Would you like someone to contact you (have you included your contact details?)".
- Footer:** A "Thank You!" message, "Print Form" and "Submit by Email" buttons, and a footer note: "This is a voluntary survey form approved by OMB through 7/6/2009. OMB #1625-0080 MLD-794-REC-08-025".

Figure 2: Customer survey form at <http://homeport.uscg.mil/mmcsurvey>.

ing out the paper survey form, they are encouraged to fill out the customer survey form online via the Homeport website at <http://homeport.uscg.mil/mmcsurvey>.

The paper survey forms have the local REC’s address printed on them so they can be mailed back to the correct location. Mariners may choose to mail back the survey form or to return it by hand to the local REC. Once

the REC receives the survey form, its staff will examine it and contact the mariner as soon as possible, if requested. Some mariners attach written comments or complaints addressing a specific problem, for example, an uncomfortable examination room temperature or unfriendly staff. If applicable, the REC immediately addresses these complaints with the mariner. When the REC is finished processing the paper survey form, the staff then mails it to CG-546, where the data will be centrally collected and collated. The CG-546 staff imports the numerical data into a database where the data will be systematically analyzed.

The electronic survey form that the mariner fills out on Homeport follows a different path than its paper twin. After the electronic survey form is completed, it is submitted directly via e-mail to CG-546. If a mariner requests to be contacted, a staff member from CG-546 contacts the mariner directly. Otherwise, the information on the form is imported into the database and the electronic form is e-mailed directly to the relevant REC or the NMC for action.

There are potential problems with using a self-reporting form. Mariners tend to fill them out only when they receive good service, when they already have their credential in hand. When they are experiencing difficulties with the credential production process, the mariners are less apt to fill them out, possibly in fear of further complications. Moreover, if mariners choose to return their paper customer survey forms via mail, they must provide their own stamps, possibly further suppressing the amount of responses mailed in.

Mariner feedback often comes through less formal channels. Sometimes specific concerns are brought forward when the National Maritime Center leadership meets with maritime industry leadership at industry events and conferences. Occasionally other Coast Guard commands pass along specific concerns to the NMC. In addition, mariners will call the NMC's toll-free call center with specific complaints or concerns. Overall, our feedback comes from many sources—paper or electronic surveys, formal and informal communications, or the customer service call center.

### **Responding to the Surveys**

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*When we receive mariner feedback, our first priority is to identify any problems or complaints regarding the local REC, the NMC, or the program as a whole and quickly address these complaints.*

whole and quickly address these complaints. Regardless of the source, all complaints and concerns will be entered into the system and dealt with in a timely manner. By observing specific complaints over time, we are able to identify trends and respond by changing process or policy to address them. For instance, mariners often commented in their surveys that our application form was difficult to fill out. This led the NMC to develop an interactive, fillable PDF application form with built-in error checking. This form is available on NMC's website and has received glowing reviews from industry. In addition, frequent complaints about poor customer service led to the implementation of our toll-free customer call center. We currently receive about 14,900 phone contacts and 1,600 e-mail contacts per month!

### **Analyzing the Data**

After the NMC addresses immediate issues, the CG-546 staff reviews the survey satisfaction data on a global level to help prioritize projects for the NMC. The numerical data are analyzed to target REC-specific or program-level improvement opportunities. Four key objectives, represented by the targeted questions on the survey form, are measured relating to:

- application evaluated per expectation,
- application or examination information available as needed,
- prompt application or examination support,
- professional application or examination support.

CG-546 and the NMC jointly analyze the summary data monthly, and improvement opportunities are identified as a result.

### **Why Measure Feedback?**

The Coast Guard and the maritime industry share a common goal of wanting the credential process to be quick, efficient, and accurate. With a program objective of increasing mariner customer satisfaction, having a mariner survey system in place allows us to prioritize



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and refine the credential production processes as required.

It is not the surveys alone that drive improvement. In the summer of 2007, during the initial phases of the centralization process, the NMC leadership met with selected industry leadership to ask for their assistance in prioritizing the NMC agenda. The following are concrete improvements made to the credential production process per industry leader suggestion:

**Prioritize applications.** The industry leadership said it is most important to ensure no current working merchant mariners lose work due to credentialing process difficulties. When feasible, we give top priority to renewal applications over original applications.

**Take full advantage of websites.** Industry leaders stated that they would like mariners to be able to make better use of Internet resources. The NMC has since implemented online application tracking via the Homeport website and online fee paying via the Pay.gov website. Additionally, the NMC is in the planning stages of developing online electronic applications.

**Address bulk application processing.** There are seven maritime academies and numerous schools and maritime companies who regularly submit credential applications in bulk to the Coast Guard. Industry leaders had concerns about complications caused by the centralization process changes and its impact on “bulk processing.” Currently the NMC is developing the new processes and new work instructions for bulk application processing.

#### **What's Next?**

We are currently redesigning and updating the mariner survey form to better reflect the changes the credential

production process has undergone, but also to make it easier for the mariner to use. For example, there will be questions specifically asking about contacting the toll-free call center or using our websites to check application status.

We are also updating the format of the survey to make it more user-friendly. The questions will flow in a more logical fashion, making it easier for the mariner to navigate. We will ask the mariner to rank their preferences on the survey form, which should make it easier to measure which aspects of the process the customers value the most. One example of such a question is “What is most important—fast service, courteous staff, ease of payment, or accuracy of final product?”

Lastly, our newly designed surveys will include business reply mail, which will likely lead to greater participation since mariners won't have to purchase their own postage.

In the future, the Coast Guard will capitalize on technology by making the data fields on the survey forms machine readable. In addition to electronic and paper surveys, it is possible that the NMC information staff will be conducting customer satisfaction surveys via telephone.

Once we have responded to initial complaints and analyzed the data, we will make the data results visible and available—not only to the Coast Guard staff, but to the public, as well. We currently have a Coast Guard listserv on our website where we notify subscribers of news regarding our process. We will relay the survey results to our mariner customers via this listserv or simply publish the results on the website.

#### **About the author:**

*CDR Swirbliss manages ongoing improvements to the mariner credential production process and coordinates the efforts of the 17 RECs. 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 in industrial and operations engineering.*

*Go to <http://homeport.uscg.mil/mmcsurvey> for online customer service survey.*