

# Measuring Our Performance, Improving Our Service



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Since September 1, 2008, all new applications submitted to Coast Guard regional examination centers (RECs) have been forwarded to the National Maritime Center (NMC) in Martinsburg, W.Va., for evaluation and credential issuance. Referred to in the past as “Black Hole, West Virginia,” many in industry were concerned and skeptical of the Coast Guard’s ability to truly repair a legacy system that was overburdened, inefficient, and inconsistent.

In this article we will shine light on this “black hole” and provide you, the merchant mariner applicant, a look at exactly what happens after you have delivered your application to an REC.

To better understand the processing of applications, one must understand that all credentials requested follow a structured “state” process from start to finish. These states, which are maintained in our merchant mariner licensing and documentation (MMLD) web-based computer system, are defined by distinct business/process rules and let us accurately measure a credential’s progress as it moves through the evaluation system. With this capability, we are able to identify process bottlenecks that may slow or otherwise impact overall efficiency.

## Performance Measures

Since all credentials follow these states, the National Maritime Center uses the MMLD data acquired from this process to measure the performance of each state

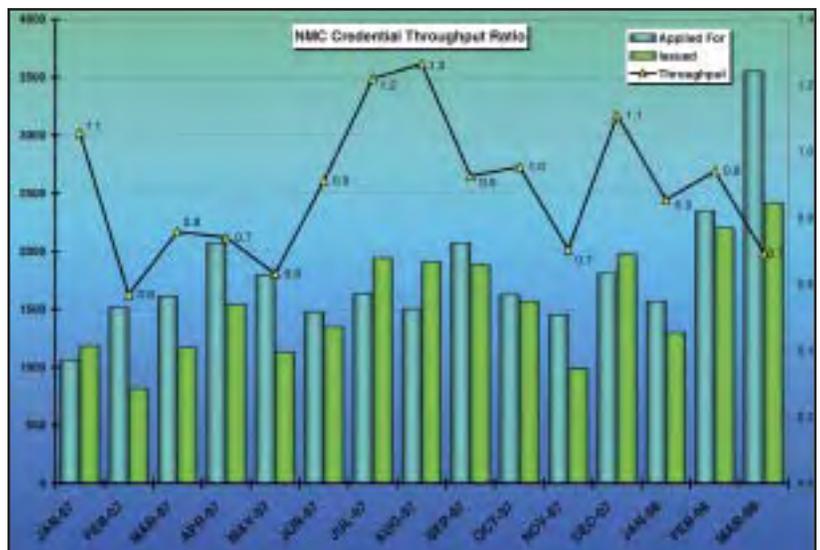


Figure 1. Measuring throughput is critical. USCG graphic.

and the entire program. Although there are many performance measures, we focus primarily on:

**Throughput:** The ratio of what is requested to what is issued. Measuring throughput is critical to the MLD program’s success, as we must ensure the ability to produce as much or more of our requested workload (Figure 1).

**Cycle time:** The total process time, commencing when a credential is requested and concluding when it is issued. Our goal in the existing process is a two-business-week cycle time. This goal excludes credentials that are missing required information, need additional testing, or have security/medical issues (Figure 2).



**Inventory:** The total number of credentials that are a “work in progress” at any given time. Significant growth of inventory in any state signifies a bottleneck (Figure 3).

### What the Future Holds

Today we are using a legacy paper-based system to process requests for merchant mariner credentials, but over the past few years this system has been integrated with a web-based computer tracking and production software suite. As with any process, technology affords us all the opportunity to expand and continually improve.

Although we will continue to perfect our existing process and make that two-business-week cycle time the “norm,” the Coast Guard recognizes that the MLD program is quickly approaching the end of an era. In order to meet the demands of a growing and vibrant maritime industry, we must look to deploy innovative and sophisticated processes.

A vision has already been established at the NMC in which one day mariners will be able to apply for creden-

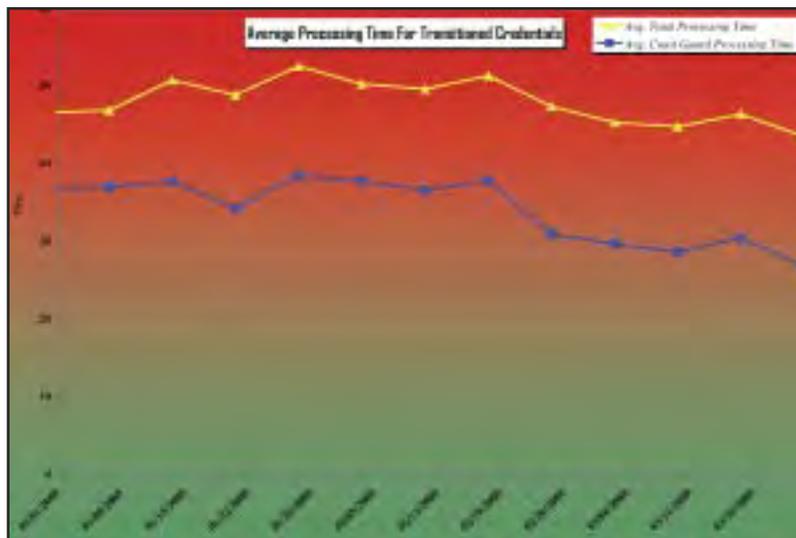


Figure 2. Our goal is a two-business-week cycle time. USCG graphic.

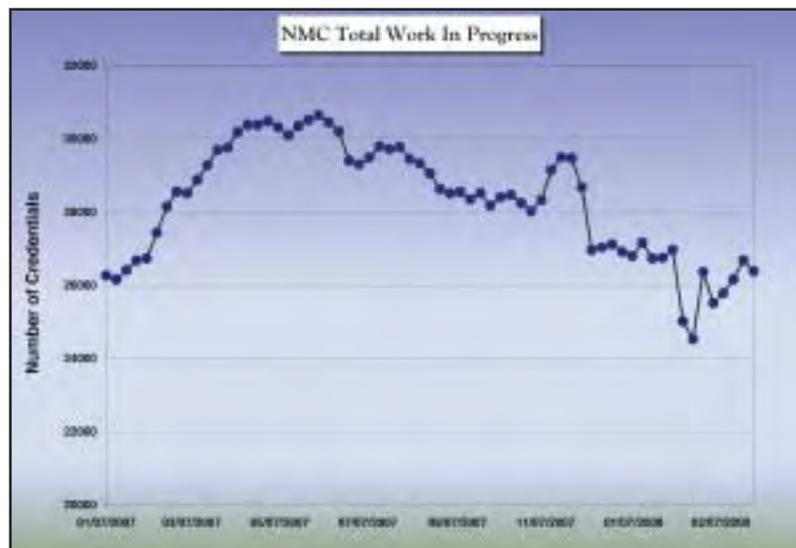


Figure 3. Significant growth of inventory signifies a bottleneck. USCG graphic.

tials from home. Physicians, training institutions, and others will be able to forward each piece of the mariner’s application package electronically for processing and, in turn, the Coast Guard will be able to quickly and accurately produce merchant mariner credentials. The time is upon us all—the Coast Guard and our industry partners—to make this future vision a reality.

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# So What Are These States Anyway?

MMLD system “states” are the specific steps a credential must go through to become an issued product. Some states in the process are optional, as not every credential requested leads to a credential issued, while others are mandatory.



USCG graphic.

**Requested (mandatory).** When a merchant mariner delivers an application package to an REC, that submission is recorded in MMLD as an accepted application, with all associated credentials applied for automatically placed in the “requested” state. This step gives us a clearly marked starting point for measuring the process time.

**Notification (optional).** On occasion, some applications received at the REC are missing items that would unnecessarily prevent or delay the evaluation process. These items are referred to as “critical” items<sup>1</sup> and must be addressed before the application package can come to West Virginia.

So, for example, let’s say you are applying to renew your OUPV license and submit a complete application to the REC, with one exception—results of a physical examination. In this case, the REC will move your credential from the “requested” state to the “notification” state. At the same time, you are given a 60-day notification letter requesting the missing information. If you do not provide it, your application and its credentials would be automatically closed in the system and your application package would be returned to you.

**In transit (mandatory).** Once your application is deemed complete, the REC will create a packing list. Credentials that are in the “requested” state will automatically shift to “in transit.” This accounts for the time it takes to mail an application from the REC to NMC. Currently we use commercial express services, and delivery time is approximately two business days.

**Received/awaiting security (optional).** The safety and security background check commences at the onset of the process while you are at the REC. The electronic fingerprints, identification, and citizenship documentation you provide is used to initiate this process. Typically, by the time the application arrives at NMC, the background check is complete and the application can move on. However, sometimes the results of the background check are not complete, and the credential applied for is moved to a holding state.

These credential applications do not move forward until this step is complete. In the unlikely event of a denial due to criminal convictions, the credential is removed from the process and the appropriate written correspondence is communicated to the applicant. This affects less than three percent of all credentials requested nationwide.



**Ready to be evaluated (mandatory).** At this point your application submission is ready to be assigned to the professional qualifications evaluations branch (PQEB). Unless unique circumstances exist, these assignments are normally performed first-in, first-out.

**Being evaluated—PQEB (mandatory).** While your credential is in this state, a professional qualifications evaluator has your file on his/her desk and is calculating sea service and verifying that training and/or assessment requirements have been met.

**Being evaluated—MEB (optional).** Some applications contain physical examination reports that indicate the presence of a medical or physical condition that could potentially interfere with a mariner's ability to safely perform his/her duties. These applications are forwarded to the medical evaluation branch (MEB).

Much like with the safety and security background check process, in the unlikely event of a denial due to medical/physical reasons, the credential is removed from the process and the appropriate written correspondence is communicated to the applicant. This affects less than one percent of all credentials requested nationwide.

**For review (mandatory).** This state indicates that the credential is on the desk of an authorized approving official. These senior evaluators review the entire application submission and associated MMLD data entry for accuracy and completeness.

**Awaiting info (optional).** This identifies that something required for credential issuance is missing. You are given a 90-day awaiting information letter

requesting the missing information. If you do not provide it, your application and its credentials would be automatically closed in the system and your application package would be returned to you. Providing the missing information within the 90-day period allows us to move the credential back to "being evaluated" and eventually on to issuance.

**Approved to test (optional).** Certain credentials require examinations. Provided that the application submission is satisfactorily complete in all aspects of documentation, sea service, and training, the approving official will move the credential to "approved to test." At that time you would be given an approved to test letter, which is valid for one year from the date of the letter.

**Approved to print (mandatory).** You have completed the evaluation process, provided any additional items requested, and satisfactorily completed your examinations. Your file is then transferred to the credential production branch and awaits its turn to become a merchant mariner credential.

**Printed (mandatory).** A member of the NMC credential production team has produced your license, merchant mariner's document, and/or STCW endorsement.

**Issued (mandatory).** Your credential has been mailed to you.

**Endnote:**

<sup>1</sup> For a complete list of "critical" items visit <http://homeport.uscg.mil> or contact 1-888-IASKNMC.