Auxiliarists of the Regional Examination Centers

by Mr. Marvin Butcher
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On November 13, 2007, a merchant seaman entered a regional examination center remote customer assistance office in St. Paul, Minn. He presented an application for renewal of his license.

During his appointment, his application was checked and verified for acceptability; he was fingerprinted; his payment was verified and accepted; his citizenship documents were examined, verified, and copied; and his package was then sent to the REC.

There were no active duty, reserve, or civilian employees of the REC involved in the process, since all members of this customer assistance office are auxiliarists.

As a merchant seaman, I have spent a good portion of my professional life either obtaining my licenses and documents or maintaining them. As you can imagine, this has brought me into frequent contact with various RECs of the United States Coast Guard.

I can summarize the frustration of most merchant seamen when I state there are two major problems associated with the merchant seaman licensing and documentation process. First, the requirements are a maze that an individual must work through virtually unassisted. Second, the process is time-consuming, requiring extensive travel to one of the 17 RECs.

What Does This Have to Do With the Auxiliary?
After all, the Coast Guard Auxiliary is a civilian voluntary organization, best known for its recreational boating safety programs. And when the Coast Guard Auxiliary was established in 1939 (as the Coast Guard Reserve), there was no thought of auxiliarists supporting the merchant seaman licensing and documentation program.

In fact, the Coast Guard only assumed responsibility for licensing and documentation of merchant seaman as a temporary wartime measure in February 1942.[1] This transfer was made permanent on July 16, 1946, which marked the first time that all maritime safety functions were merged under a single agency.[2] It wasn't until October 19, 1996, that auxiliarists were even eligible to participate in activities outside of recreational boating safety.[3] On this date, as authorized by the Commandant, the purpose of the auxiliary was changed to assist the Coast Guard in performing any Coast Guard function, power, duty, role, mission, or operation authorized by law.[4]

Today, Coast Guard Auxiliarists are not only eligible to provide support to the mariner licensing and documentation program, but are actively engaged in doing

Auxiliarists of REC RCAO Branson, Mo. work in the verification room with a merchant seaman to ensure his paperwork, fingerprints, and application are ready to send to the REC in St. Louis. From left to right: merchant seaman, AUX Carol Sarver, AUX Jerry Domann, and AUX Bill Sarver (designated Coast Guard official). USCG photo.

so at many RECs. Auxiliarists fill various functions at these RECs, from fingerprint technicians to license and document evaluators and examiners. Whatever their assignment, auxiliarists are employed by the RECs to speed up the process of license and document delivery to the customer.

Lack of security clearances and screenings originally hampered use of auxiliarists for these functions. However, as of December 31, 2007, all members of the Coast Guard Auxiliary must have received a favorable background screening from the Coast Guard security center to attain or retain membership. Additionally, any auxiliarist assigned as a fingerprint technician must receive a favorable national agency check (law enforcement and credit) determination. The same is true for all auxiliarists assigned to function within the RECs. For the first time in its history, all auxiliarists are vetted in the manner of active and reserve forces.

Training

As with any specialized job, auxiliarists involved in these types of support duties receive training sufficient to perform the tasks. This training crosses a broad spectrum, from on-the-job training, to personal qualification standards, to classroom instruction and practical demonstrations. For example, in order for auxiliarists to be designated as fingerprint technicians, they must pass a written examination, then perform a series of practice exercises under the supervision of a fingerprint technician.

Within the marine safety and environmental protection specialty of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, two of the 16 personal qualification standards address qualifications for support to the mariner licensing and documentation program—assistant license and document evaluator, and assistant license and document examiner. These are virtually the same positions as those held by our active duty counterparts. The same standard of completion is required, and each auxiliarist must pass an oral examination and be designated in writing by the captain of the port or officer in charge of marine inspection. Only then can an auxiliarist function in any capacity as an evaluator or examiner.

Auxiliary Support

Presently, only 13 RECs utilize auxiliary personnel, with another REC in the process. However, the RECs with auxiliarists assign them to numerous duties. In some, auxiliarists are needed for duties of an administrative nature, including receptionist, telephone operator, and utility yeoman services. In other RECs qualified auxiliarists supervise examinations, conduct surveys of Coast Guard-approved training facilities, and perform evaluator duties under the guidance of an appropriate supervisor. Auxiliarists also function as "designated Coast Guard officials" and perform duties, such as administering oaths, as directed by the officer in charge of marine inspection. In a few RECs auxiliarists are involved in all of these functions.

For appointments at any Remote Customer Assistance Office, call REC St. Louis at (314) 269-2504.

Remote Customer Assistance Office
2720 Shepherd of the Hills Expressway
Branson, MO 65616

Remote Customer Assistance Office
7355 W. 88th Avenue
Westminster, CO 80021

Remote Customer Assistance Office
6228 NW Barry Road and I-29
Kansas City, MO 64154

Remote Customer Assistance Office
Henry Whipple Federal Building
1 Federal Drive
Saint Paul, MN 55111

The Regional Examination Center Remote Customer Assistance Office

One of the most exciting and important projects the auxiliary has become involved in is an offshoot of direct support to the Regional Examination Centers—the regional examination center remote customer assistance office (RCAO) project. This project was designed to reduce merchant seamen's travel costs and decrease their document turnaround time.

For example, the auxiliary's 8th Western Rivers region has an REC main office in Memphis, Tenn., and a satellite office in St. Louis, Mo. These two offices cover the 16 state areas composed of Sector Upper Mississippi River and Sector Lower Mississippi River. In the past, in order for mariners to obtain licenses and documents, many needed to travel hundreds of miles and incur significant personal costs. In August 2006, the chief of the REC monitoring unit in St. Louis requested auxiliary assistance to provide remote customer assistance. Numerous auxiliarists volunteered to work in this special pilot program. The program was conducted in five phases and was implemented over a period of 14 months.

The mission definition—to expand the opportunities for merchant mariners to obtain their license/documents without traveling excessive distances by providing the following services:

- evaluating an applicant's application for acceptability,
- ensuring the proper amount and method of payment of fees,
- examining and verifying citizenship documents,
- fingerprinting all applicants,
- administration of the oath (if required),
- compiling all application paperwork and mailing it to the respective REC.

After careful consideration, a decision was made to create four RCAO offices located in Branson, Mo.; Kansas City, Mo.; Denver, Colo.; and St. Paul, Minn. Additionally, 23 auxiliarists were selected from a group of volunteers to receive specialized training to support the proposed mission.

First, all 23 auxiliarists completed Incident Command System courses. After this, all were certified as fingerprint technicians. An Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency certified trainer provided forensic document examination training. Every volunteer was required to complete forensic documents examination training in order to examine and verify citizenship paperwork.

The next stage of training involved familiarization and training with REC procedures and forms. Finally, several auxiliarists were selected for specialized training to receive a letter of designation as a designated Coast Guard official (DCGO). In total, eight auxiliarists were designated as DCGOs.

Auxiliarists demonstrate fingerprinting techniques using one of the fun volunteers from the Missouri Career Center, co-located with RCAO Branson. From left to right: AUX Carol Sarver, the Auxiliary's Safety Panda, AUX Jerry Domann, and AUX Bill Sarver. USCG photo.

From inception to completion, the project required 14 months to implement. Considering that the entire project was established and run by auxiliarists, who are by definition volunteers, this is a remarkable achievement.

In the first year of operation, the RCAOs processed:

- Branson, Mo., 32 merchant mariners;
- Kansas City, Mo., 27;
- Denver, Colo., 18;
- St. Paul, Minn., 48.

This is truly amazing when one considers that each RCAO is open only two days per month.

Looking Ahead

With the qualification process, the security vetting process, and the skill sets open to auxiliarists, all RECs should be able to employ auxiliarists to provide meaningful assistance.

I think it is safe to say that the limits of the auxiliary's usefulness are only limited by the imagination of the REC personnel in charge.

About the author:

Mr. Marvin Butcher served 27 years in the U.S. Navy, where he commanded several warships before retiring at the rank of captain. He then served as a merchant marine ship's master of a U.S. Navy special mission ship. Mr. Butcher was named the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliarist of the Year for 2006 and is currently the branch chief for regional examination centers.

Endnotes:

1. Executive Order 9083 of 28 February 1942, Franklin D. Roosevelt.
2. Coast Guard Reorganization Plan Number 3, July 16, 1946.
3. Coast Guard Authorization Act of 1996 (Public Law No. 104-324, 110 Stat. 3901).
4. 14 U.S.C. § 822