Improving Service to the Mariner

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The U.S. Coast Guard's National Maritime Center (NMC) is restructuring and centralizing the Mariner Licensing and Documentation (MLD) program to reduce credential processing time, improve customer service, and ensure the consistency and quality of U.S. credentials. An article in the Summer 2005 *Proceedings* introduced the restructuring and centralization project.

Ongoing projects include centralizing (at NMC) many MLD functions that had been performed at 17 regional exam centers (RECs) to streamline NMC credential production processes; aligning the RECs so that they report directly to the National Maritime Center; relocating program policy functions to U.S. Coast Guard headquarters; and divesting three NMC subunits.

Why Centralize?

Simply put, our customers demanded better service. Workload within the MLD program has risen steadily over the past 10 years and has become increasingly complex, due mainly to changes in international and domestic requirements. The implementation of the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, as amended in 1995, substantially increased the program's work. Additionally, the regulations implementing the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 required mariners to renew their merchant mariner documents, which increased activities throughout the program.

As the workload and demand continued to grow, RECs experienced delays in processing mariner credentials. In response, many regional exam centers began to reduce the hours during which they were open to the public, so staff could focus on processing. This resulted in a steep decline in customer services.

Finally, in response to the growing complaints of mariners, the marine industry, and Congress, the Coast Guard developed the restructuring and centralization plan, which was approved in 2005. Now, with a renewed commitment to making significant improvements to the MLD program, many initiatives have already produced notable results.

Results

With 17 RECs each issuing credentials, there were just as many different processes being used. This made it difficult to analyze process performance and identify where to make improvements. Once many of the credential production functions are centralized, it will be easier to streamline the processes. Centralization has already improved credential processing time.

Under centralized operations, many of the functions that were historically accomplished at regional exam centers will be shifted to the NMC in West Virginia. This shift of work will enable the REC staffs to focus their efforts on customer service efforts, such as helping mariners through the application process. Centralizing also creates economies of scale and process consistencies that make it possible for mariners to check the status of the credential application or obtain information from a call center or website.

Just as processing time varied among the re-

THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT ARE SIMPLE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD, YET CHALLENGING.

We will drastically reduce the time it takes to issue a credential.

We will dramatically improve customer services.

We will improve customer satisfaction by issuing a quality product and providing a quality service to mariners and the marine industry.

gional exam centers, so did the interpretation of MLD regulations and policies. By centralizing evaluations, we can assure consistency and maintain our evaluator expertise through cross-training and both formal and informal knowledge sharing. In this way, we will assure the safety and security of the maritime transportation system by only issuing credentials to mariners who are fully qualified.

Functions at the Regional Exam Centers

Mariners will submit their credential applications to their local REC, where the staff will review the applications to ensure they contain sufficient information to begin the evaluation. This role is especially important, as incomplete applications are a leading cause of processing delays. Further, many mariners need assistance, as the application process is often confusing and complex.

Once ready for evaluation, the regional exam centers will forward applications to the National Maritime Center to begin the evaluation process.

RECs will continue to administer examinations to mariners. Additionally, with the evaluation functions shifted to the NMC, the regional exam centers will also begin conducting audits of approved training courses. This will fill a long-standing gap in the MLD program.

Functions at the National Maritime Center

NMC teams will evalute mariner applications to ensure they meet the requirements for each credential sought. All mariners undergo:

- a professional qualification evaluation,
- a safety and security evaluation,
- a medical evaluation.

The professional qualification evaluators review mariners' sea service experience and training to ensure they meet the requirements for the particular type and grade of credential being applied for. The safety and security evaluators review the mariners' backgrounds to ensure there are no issues that would prevent the Coast

CENTRALIZATION IS WORKING!

Several improvements aimed at reducing processing time have already been completed and are producing notable results. Applications that are complete when submitted to NMC via the centralized RECs are being processed faster.

Process improvements (completed)—In July 2007 the evaluation processes at NMC were adjusted to eliminate bottlenecks in the professional qualification evaluation branch. This resulted in a 30% reduction in inventory, which contributed to faster processing of credentials.

Electronic application forms (completed)—In October 2007, NMC deployed electronic versions of the credential application forms. Built-in business rules alert mariners to missing information to assure that the forms are complete before they submit the forms to the REC.

Making it easy to contact us (completed)—We've established multiple ways to contact us or obtain information about the MLD program, including a "live person" call center, online application tracking, online user fees, and subscription e-mail updates to MLD news and information.

Other developments have resulted in improvements in consistency and quality.

Medical evaluation system (completed)—Beginning in December 2006, as part of the centralization efforts, the evaluation of all merchant mariner physicals were conducted at the NMC.

Credential aging inventory initiative (ongoing)—NMC moved to reduce the inventory of aging credentials and reduce processing time by focusing efforts on completing applications over 120 days old. This effort reduced the nationwide inventory by 23% and helped reduce overall processing time.

Online sea service calculator (completed)—Just like many people are using online retirement calculators on financial websites to plan for their retirement, we see a need to provide a tool to help mariners plan their career progression. The NMC has launched a sea service calculator that enables mariners to identify the type of credential they are qualified for based on the amount of sea service and training they have accumulated. Mariners are also able to see the impact of additional sea time or training so they can better plan and understand how to progress through the deck and engineering license structure.

Guard from issuing them credentials. The medical evaluators, which include licensed physicians, physician assistants, and other medically trained staff, will review the mariners' physicals to ensure applicants are physically and medically competent to be issued a credential. Once qualified in all three areas, the NMC will create the credential and mail it directly to the mariner.

NMC maritime experts who are unlimited licensed masters and engineers also review and approve maritime training courses and qualify instructors to teach these courses. These experts also develop and update the professional exams administered to the mariners by the regional exam centers.

On the Horizon

The Coast Guard is committed to making significant and lasting improvements to the mariner licensing and documentation program. Our priorities for 2008 are to complete the transition of all of the RECs to centralized operations and to streamline the centralized credential processing operations so that mariners can receive their credentials as quickly as possible.

While we understand that our past performance may not warrant giving us the benefit of doubt just yet, we ask that you continue to challenge us to improve, and please be patient as we do.

About the author:

CAPT David C. Stalfort is the commanding officer of the Coast Guard's National Maritime Center. He and the crew of the NMC are leading the effort to re-engineer the mariner licensing program and achieve the vision described in this article. CAPT Stalfort has worked in the Coast Guard's marine safety program for 23 years. He also holds a Coast Guard license as a master of steam, motor, or auxiliary sail vessels.

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Other improvements are planned for the future.

Trusted agents (planned)—NMC is expanding best practices from REC Houston's "streamlined evaluation program" into a nationwide program of trusted agents. Under this program, maritime academies, union schools, and individual companies will soon be certified as credential acceptance agents and perform application-related functions.

Electronic records (planned)—NMC will establish the electronic information in MMLD as the official record, thereby eliminating the requirement to save paper files containing mariner information. All important paper documents will be returned to the mariner once the application is processed. The mariner will then retain all the documents needed for future credential transactions.

Eliminating license creep (planned)—As the processing time for credentials increased over the years, many mariners began applying to renew their credential up to a year early. When the new credential was issued, the expired credential became invalid, often before its expiration date. As a result, the expired credential was not valid for the full five-year period, even though the mariner paid a user fee for a five-year credential. The phenomenon became known throughout industry as "license creep." We are taking steps to have a renewed credential become "valid" upon the expiration of the existing credential.

Electronic application system (planned)—In an effort to leverage existing technology and simplify the application process, we are developing the Merchant Mariner Secure Electronic Application System, or MM-SEAS. This system will be the "TurboTax" for mariners to use to submit their credential applications and for NMC personnel to use to process them. The system will also be capable of capturing course completion data from approved schools, medical information from physicians, sea service information from marine employers, and personal information from individual mariners.

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