

Central Bank

New National Maritime Center aims to please mariners.



A long-term goal is for mariners to carry a single passport-style credential.

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Mariners remember what it was like a few years ago when they tried to get their credentials renewed from the U.S. Coast Guard: long waits, sloppy service, complicated paperwork, unattractive offices, and a seemingly endless wait for the documents to arrive in the mail.

Today, the picture is much different. Documents are being turned around in several weeks on average, rather than several months. There's a real person, with a friendly demeanor, who answers the phone when a mariner calls a toll-free number with a question. The Web site is simple to navigate and packed with information, and the status of an application can easily be checked online.

But Capt. David Stalfort isn't satisfied, and he has even bigger plans for improving the way

mariner documents are processed. One day, he said, mariners will be able to upgrade or renew their credentials on demand from any location in the world, much like they access a bank account online or make a cash withdrawal from an ATM. Or, as he likes to say, the way taxes are paid online, as the eventual process will look similar to tax software programs that walk you through the steps of documenting and paying your taxes.

The credentialing process, he explains, will be built around a system that allows mariners, industry and other data providers to electronically submit information, such as sea service, training, course completion and physical exam results to the newly centralized National Maritime Center (NMC) in Martinsburg, W.Va., from anywhere in the world.

The electronic application will replace a paper file, and receipt of the application will launch an extensive three-part evaluation based on security, medical and profession qualifications. Mariners will be able to track the application each step of the way. Mariner credentialing is finally joining the modern-day world of information technology, and after years of disappointment and frustration, mariners are beginning to notice the difference.

"We provide a government service, and people should be satisfied with it," said Stalfort, commanding officer of the NMC, which processes documents from more than 210,000 mariners. "We're trying to run this program like a business, with low cost and high customer satisfaction." A top priority, he added, is to show respect for the mariner.

The NMC opened in late 2007 as part of an ambitious and much-overdue plan by the Coast Guard to restructure, centralize and modernize the Mariner Licensing and Documentation program (MLD). By the Coast Guard's own admission, the program had fallen into deep disarray, lacking leadership, direction, service and consistency in the way documents were evaluated and processed. In response to complaints from the marine industry and Congress, Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Thad Allen announced reforms in 2005. Congress provided about \$20 million for the consolidation, new building, ex-

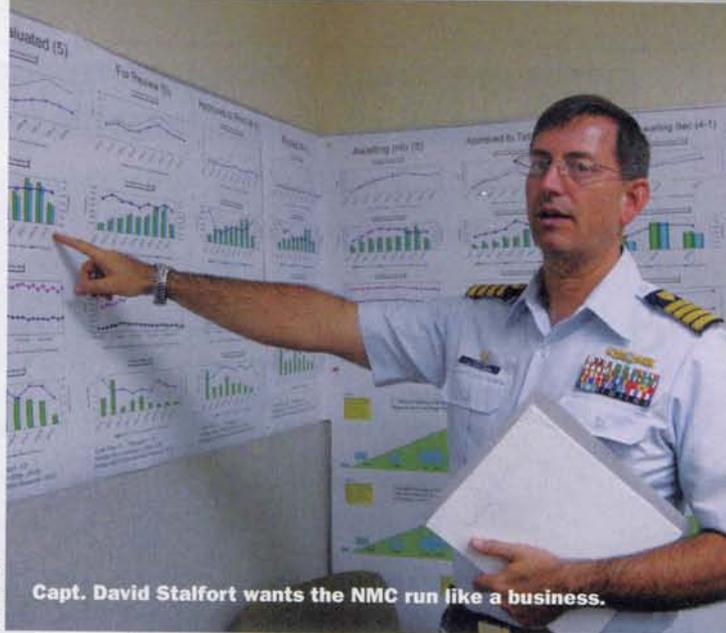
panded staffing and technology upgrades.

IMPROVED PROCESS

Under the old process, hand-written license and renewal applications were submitted, reviewed and issued at one of the 17 Coast Guard-staffed Regional Exam Centers (RECs). Staff would look over the application and make sure all the accompanying documents were in order. RECs then evaluated each application, including limited security background checks, and reviews of personal qualifications and medical evaluations. Exams would often be required to show that a mariner had proficiency in a certain area.

Once the review was completed, and the mariner was found fully qualified, a credential was printed and issued. The turnaround time was anywhere from a few days to a year. Processing time increased over the years due to regulatory changes and a spike in the number of mariners applying for credentials. New international and domestic mariner requirements made the process more complex, according to Stalfort.

As the workload grew, customer service slipped. The RECs often stopped answering phones or curtailed their operating hours in order to handle the large volume of applications. Also, staff often handled less complicated applications first, leaving those needing more information in an unfinished pile. This caused a large backlog of applications that are still being addressed at



Capt. David Stalfort wants the NMC run like a business.

the NMC.

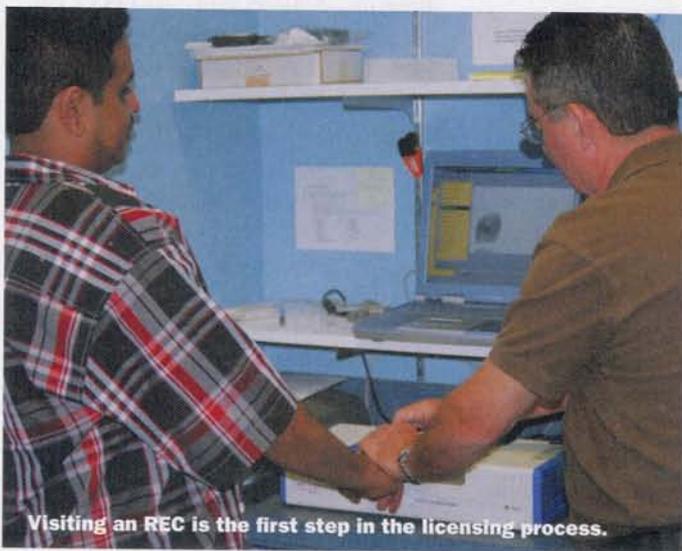
Another problem was inconsistency. In the absence of overall leadership and direction, each of the 17 RECs operated independently, following different procedures for processing and evaluating applications. "Mariners went shopping for the best REC," said Stalfort, who has worked in the marine safety program for 23 years. "This was no way to run a business."

Over the past year, application review duties at the RECs have been gradually transferred to the NMC. The RECs now serve as "storefronts and advocates" for mariners seeking credentialing services. Mariner exams are also administered there, and staff members audit approved mariner training courses.

Visiting an REC is the first step in the revised process. A mariner brings in his completed application, pays the fee and gets fingerprinted. The staff reviews the application to make sure it is filled out correctly and has the necessary documentation. This is extremely important, Stalfort said, because incomplete applications are the main cause for processing delays.

The application is then sent to the NMC, where trained and specialized teams evaluate each application to make sure the mariner meets the requirements of the credential being applied for. The process includes three evaluations: professional qualifications, safety and security, and medical.

Professional qualifications evaluators review the mariner's sea service



Visiting an REC is the first step in the licensing process.

Ken Hocke

NEW BUILDING, NEW WORKING ENVIRONMENT

You need a map, not a nautical chart, to find the new National Maritime Center in landlocked West Virginia. The center was moved from an office in Arlington, Va., to a sprawling new "green" building in Martinsburg that recently received a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design award.

Efforts are made to blend a nautical theme into the building's décor, with corridors named after the nation's waterways. The

first floor is called the lower deck, the cafeteria is the galley, and workers are referred to as "shipmates." This is, after all, a Coast Guard office, although the majority of the approximate 200 workers are civilians, many of whom have never been on the vessel types that they certify mariners to work on. Emphasis here is on knowing the in's and out's of the regulations, and on creating a convivial working environment that encourages professionalism and rewards exemplary performance.

This is part of the Coast Guard's plan to make marine safety positions more attractive to both career and civilian employees, who undergo a four-to-five month training program followed by on-the-job training with a qualified evaluator. The NMC is still hiring, especially medical personnel, said commanding officer Capt. David Stalfort.

"Before, getting an REC assignment was a career killer in the Coast Guard," Stalfort said as he escorted a visitor around the NMC. "The job wasn't appreciated in the Coast Guard, and you were out of sight, out of mind. The only time you got any attention was when a congressman was complaining. But now we have people asking to come here." — P. Glass



Pamela Glass

experience and training. Safety and security evaluators review the mariner's background to ensure that there are no security or criminal issues that would disqualify the mariner. (About 1 percent of applications are denied for infractions like drunk driving, narcotics violations and violent crimes.) Finally, medical evaluators, who are licensed doctors, doctor assistants and other medically trained personnel, review the physicals to make sure the person is physically and medically capable. (In the past, people with no medical training did these evaluations at the REC.)

MORE EFFICIENT

Stalfort said emphasis has been placed on streamlining the process and making it more efficient and consistent. Assigning daily production targets to each evaluator, for example, has helped move applications along more quickly. Results have been positive, and mariners have already seen some improvement, especially in application processing time. He said that completed, uncomplicated applications submitted

through the RECs are now being issued within 75 days on average. The goal is to cut that to 30 days or less by April 2009.

"We're constantly looking for what's slowing things down," he said.

Stalfort cited other improvements:

- Establishing performance metrics at the NMC to analyze and find solutions to bottlenecks and measure performance and the overall processing program.
- Reducing the inventory of applications that are over 120 days old.
- Improving customer service by setting up an e-mail link, Web site, a call center manned 12 hours a day, online application tracking, payment of fees online, and an e-mail sign-up that will send mariners automatic updates on MLD news and information.
- Creating a "trusted agent" program that would expand the number of locations where mariners can submit credential applications.
- Establish electronic record keeping. Perhaps the most important future improvement will be moving to an

entirely electronic application system, the Merchant Mariner Secure Electronic Application System, which Stalfort calls the "TurboTax for mariners." The system will be able to capture course completion data from approved schools, medical information from doctors, sea service data from marine employers, and personal information from mariners.

"As the industry changes, we must keep up," Stalfort said. "As OSVs get bigger and towboats change, they outgrow the current regulations. With tonnage changes, we must make sure the license is appropriate to that segment of the industry."

Another milestone will occur when mariners won't have to travel to RECs to get fingerprinted. Currently, mariners who also get their TWIC are getting fingerprinted twice: once by TSA for a TWIC and a second time by the Coast Guard for a credential. After April 15, when mariners are required to have a TWIC, TSA and the Coast Guard will share fingerprint and identification data and a second set of fingerprints won't

LICENSING PROCESS STILL HAS A WAY TO GO

While the marine industry has high praise for improvements made since mariner licensing was centralized into the National Maritime Center, many feel that these reforms are just the first steps in improving an overly complicated licensing system that often discourages new hires or career advancement.

"Things are moving in the right direction and are off to a good start," said American Waterways Operators spokeswoman Anne Burns.

But, she added, "We think the licensing process is still a work in progress. Specifically, the medical NVIC continues to be a concern to our members with regard to how it might affect efforts to attract and retain qualified vessel personnel."

The offshore service vessel industry says the actual licensing and credentialing process needs to be changed to make it easier for mariners to move up the career ladder.

"There are too many places where the complexities of the licensing process, especially in sea time and tonnage, result in confusion for mariners and Coast Guard evaluators alike," said Ken Wells, president of the Offshore Marine Service Association. "One of the examples that pops up in determining the proper license path is the term 'or equivalent service.' What does that mean? How does a mariner apply that to his own experience and

figure out what he has to do?"

Wells said that there are eight or more licensing paths that a mariner can take to become a captain of an OSV. But there is no clear roadmap that outlines all of those paths, and there are a number of pitfalls that can stall a mariner's career along the way.

The NMC must also do a better job communicating with the industry and mariner training organizations when it changes or considers changes to the way they interpret and implement regulations. "That will ensure the training schools and mariners can get the correct information or documentation to the NMC on the first submission and avoid spending time and money doing the wrong stuff to get their credential," he said.

The NMC acknowledges the complexity of the licensing process.

"We agree that the licensing regulations, and the different licensing paths available for mariners, has grown complex over the years and we are addressing this and other issues with the pending STCW Supplemental Notice of Proposed Rulemaking," said Capt. David Stalfort, NMC's commanding officer. "Ideally there would be one licensing path for all mariners to follow, but this would not meet the needs of the various maritime segments."

— P. Glass

be necessary, Stalfort said.

The long-term plan is to combine the TWIC with a consolidated Merchant Mariner Credential. This would be in the form of a single, passport-type document. Under the current system, mariners could potentially have three different Coast Guard credentials: a

license, a Merchant Mariner's Document, and an STCW Certificate. The new passport will combine them into one, as is already done in many other countries.

On the downside, medical evaluations are taking much too long, mostly because of a backlog from the RECs

and a shortage of medical staff to review them. There are currently 4,000 files pending. This is often the most time-consuming part of the evaluation, especially if a mariner has one or more medical conditions. "We urge mariners with medical conditions to apply early," Stalfort said.

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