



Looking Out for Seafarers

The U.S. Coast Guard and seafarer welfare organizations.

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The Coast Guard provides unique benefits to the nation because of its distinctive blend of military, humanitarian, and civilian law enforcement capabilities. Quite frequently, Coast Guard units blend the fundamental roles of maritime safety, maritime security, maritime mobility, national defense, and the protection of natural resources to meet the needs of the country and the seafarer simultaneously.

At times, however, mariner needs may be outside of Coast Guard boundaries.¹ This is where outside organizations, such as Apostleship of the Sea, The Mission to Seafarers, and other seafarer welfare organizations get involved.

Seafarer Welfare Organizations

Seafarer welfare organizations, whether faith-based or secular, welcome journeyers into ports throughout the United States. They offer hospitality to mariners who may not have seen land for weeks. These organizations work through a collection of personnel who roll out the port's "welcome mat." These personnel are commonly referred to

as ship visitors, and they offer solidarity, corporal gifts, and spiritual gifts to support these visiting mariners. Many times these gifts contain a local "flavor" to orient the seafarer to his or her present environment.

Other resources these organizations offer include access to free transportation and conveniences such as high-speed Internet and pre-paid phone cards. Many seafarer centers also have big screen televisions with international channels.

The relations between the local Coast Guard and seafarer centers keep the needs of the seafarer at the top of the list of port priorities.

Seafarer Access and Living Conditions

With the advent of the Maritime Transportation Security Act of 2002 (MTSA), critical facilities must outline how access is restricted to secure areas. Coast Guard requirements outline that owners of these facilities ensure coordination occurs to provide for the needs of crewmembers and the vessel in advance of the vessel's arrival. Seafarer welfare organizations provide Coast Guard officials feedback when the coordination breaks down and the crewmember or vessel becomes stranded.

Coast Guard program managers continue to move forward to further facilitate seafarer access. Recently, the Coast Guard determined that captains of the port (COTPs) may mandate that MTSA-regulated facilities provide reasonable access to seafarers. In cases where a facility denies access to seafarers, charges exorbitant rates to provide access, greatly limits the hours for access, or institutes other overly restrictive policies that discourage or refuse access, COTPs may invoke en-



Coast Guard Chief Warrant Officer Jamie Wilson, Sector Houston/Galveston marine inspector, checks a vessel's medicine chest. All photos U.S. Coast Guard.

In the summer of 2008, Coast Guard Sector Houston/Galveston staff worked with the Apostleship of the Sea to aid a mariner.

Excerpts from the e-mail correspondence follow.

5/25/08 Seafarer's spouse to Coast Guard

Coast Guard, Please help. My husband is aboard a vessel which is travels (sic) on the high seas between the United States, Europe, and Trinidad. He is very sick with the flu and the symptoms are causing him to slowly lose his hearing. He is not able to see a qualified doctor because such doctors are not available onboard the vessel or in Trinidad.

Now that the vessel has returned to the Gulf Coast of the United States, immigration personnel are unable to sign the referral form before the vessel leaves for the high seas. I do not know what to do because he will not be able to continue his work as a seafarer with a loss of hearing, and my family of three children greatly needs his full health and support. Please help me and my husband.

Signed ... Wife of foreign crewmember aboard a foreign-flagged chemical carrier calling on the port of Houston in May 2008.

5/28/08 Coast Guard to seafarer's spouse

Ma'am, we have inspected the vessel aboard which your husband works. During our crew interviews and competency assessments, we found that he is able to perform the tasks of his license and watchstanding duties, which are those of a third engineer. Your husband's medical needs are presently being taken care of by doctors here in Houston.

Signed ... Chief, Inspections Division, Coast Guard Sector Houston/Galveston.

5/28/08 Seafarer's spouse to Coast Guard

Thank you for your great help. Thank you very much because the medical attention needed by my husband requires constant oversight.

6/3/08 Seafarer's spouse to Coast Guard

Coast Guard, I am sorry if I interrupted you again but my husband has been diagnosed by the doctor with a perforated eardrum. He is diagnosed as being fit for work but is suffering through a lot of pain.

Can you help us to have my husband sent home and have the company provide medical assistance? The ship will be in the United States again on June 10. I am very sorry for my interruption but I do not know where to seek assistance. I hope you understand.

6/3/08 Coast Guard to seafarer's spouse

Ma'am, researching the Notices of Arrival supplied to the Coast Guard by the master, I see that the vessel trades regularly in the United States. May I direct you to seafarer representatives, who will be able to provide you with options of how to handle such requests? ...

... At the end of our correspondence, I have included a website that lists the people who minister to the needs of seafarers like your husband. I routinely work with two of the Texas port chaplains listed on this page. If you are not able to establish communication with a port chaplain, please let me know.

6/3/08 Seafarer's spouse to Coast Guard

Thank you very much. Indeed the information you gave me will give a lot of help for us. Thank you and God bless.

6/4/08 Coast Guard to the president of the Apostleship of the Sea in the United States

Good morning. Late yesterday, I responded to an e-mail provided to me from the wife of the third engineer aboard a foreign-flagged chemical carrier. The Coast Guard has been in contact with the engineer and with the wife and there are some areas of concern that are outside of Coast Guard jurisdiction.

I bring this to your attention in order to alert you of this ongoing situation, and of the reference I made to your good organization.

Signed ... Chief, Inspections Division, Coast Guard Sector Houston/Galveston.

6/4/08 Apostleship of the Sea in the United States to Coast Guard

I will keep an eye out for the vessel. Thanks for thinking about us. I will try to visit the ship when she comes into our port.

I will also pass the word along to other seafarer welfare organizations that might be able to help while the vessel is visiting another country.

Signed ... president of the Apostleship of the Sea in the United States.

6/25/08 Resolution

Vessel arrives in Vancouver, Wash. Through the efforts of the Coast Guard, the Apostleship of the Sea, the owner of the vessel, and shipping agents, the third engineer of concern is removed and provided the necessary medical treatment in his country of origin.

forcement action until seafarer access provisions are determined to be adequate.

Additionally, living conditions on a vessel are determined by the economic health of the operator and the cultural traditions of the crew. What is "clean" for one crew may be considered unhealthy or substandard by another.

Without specific international standards for living and working conditions, port stakeholders are left asking questions like: Do problems exist when vessels do not meet the hyper-clean standards Americans are used to? Is there sufficient quantity and variety of food, or are the dietary needs of the crews being put at risk?

It is much easier to determine whether the lifeboat davits work than to know if the vessel provides adequate accommodations.





Sector Houston/Galveston marine inspector ENS Josh Love checks to ensure all seafarers aboard the vessel meet minimal age standards.



Ship visitors Sinclair Oubre and Doreen Badeaux welcome a vessel's master to port.

Help Is on the Way

The regulation entitled the Maritime Labour Convention of 2006 is expected to standardize the living and working conditions for mariners while at sea. These regulations are the first attempt to set minimum requirements for seafarers, including conditions of employment, hours of work and rest, accommodations, recreational facilities, food, health protection, medical care, welfare, and social security protection.

If ratified, much of the present ambiguity will be quantified by these new regulations, and the dilemmas port state control inspectors currently face will be significantly reduced.

Future Focus

Cooperation among the Coast Guard and seafarer welfare agents allows the concerns of mariners to be echoed throughout multiple communities. As resources increase and more organizations get involved, concerns can be better acted upon.

Utilizing this interconnected network, which includes secular, spiritual, and regulatory representatives, solutions can be reached that are in the best interests of the mariner, fellow crewmembers, the employer, and the port community in general.

About the authors:

LCDR Pail has served in the U.S. Coast Guard for 15 years and has received the senior marine inspector designator. He has inspected foreign-flagged vessels and has written national policies for the inspection of foreign-flagged vessels for more than 13 years of his Coast Guard career. He is currently serving within Coast Guard Sector Houston/Galveston's Prevention Department.

Father Oubre is the president of the Apostleship of the Sea of the United States of America, a membership organization dedicated to promoting the Catholic ministry to the people of the sea. Additionally, he holds a merchant marine credential as AB-limited. He continues to sail during his vacation from parish work. He is the pastor of St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in Port Arthur, Texas, and St. Paul Mission in Sabine Pass, Texas. He is also the unlicensed deck department member of the USCG Merchant Marine Personnel Advisory Committee.

Endnote:

¹ The guidelines Coast Guard inspectors use to assess the shipboard conditions available to seafarers are published in the International Labour Office's Merchant Shipping (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1976.



Ship crewmembers use the resources at one of the nation's seafarer centers.

SPEAK SOFTLY AND CARRY A TWO-BY-FOUR

Fr. Sinclair Oubre, J.C.L.: In the religious community, we like to use the phrase, "Speaking truth to power." However, I find it never hurts to have a nice two-by-four to get the attention of those to whom truth is being spoken.

In the maritime world, the U.S. Coast Guard in general (and port state control inspectors in particular) are tremendous assets in promoting seafarer welfare, and make great "moral" two-by-fours.

On one particular occasion, the radio officer of a flag of convenience ship called me on a Saturday evening. He was concerned that a concrete patch that was installed on the raw water intake would not hold when they went back out to sea. Though the Coast Guard inspectors had visited the vessel earlier in the ship's port call, they were unaware of the patch because it was under the deck plates.

I contacted our Marine Safety Unit, and the watch officer immediately contacted the port state control team. Within a few minutes, they were back with me. I passed on the information that was relayed to me, and they made a follow-up visit to the engine room, "just to look around."

They found the patch, and made arrangements for the ship to complete more permanent repairs.