

Improving Service to the Mariner by Centralizing the Mariner Licensing and Documentation Program

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The U. S. Coast Guard's National Maritime Center (NMC) is currently restructuring and centralizing the Mariner Licensing and Documentation (MLD) program in order to reduce credential processing time, improve customer service, and ensure the consistency and quality of U.S. credentials issued to more than 210,000 mariners. The major components of the project include centralizing many MLD functions that have historically been performed at seventeen Regional Exam Centers (REC) at the NMC, which is now located at a new facility in Martinsburg, West Virginia; streamlining credential production processes at the NMC; aligning the organization of the RECs so that they report directly to the NMC; relocating the MLD program policy functions to US Coast Guard headquarters; and divesting three NMC subunits. An article in the Summer 2005 Proceedings provided readers with an introduction to the restructuring and centralization project. This article provides a project update, along with a summary of the improvements already made and planned for the future.

Benefits of Centralization

Centralization is resulting in many improvements to the MLD program including faster credential processing time, improved customer services and assurances that the products and services provided to the mariners by this program consistently meet high standards of quality. Centralization presents opportunities to set a

new focus and set new goals to improve service to the mariners. It also presents huge opportunities to reengineer the MLD processes by embracing technology in order to increase productivity and reduce the time it takes to issue credentials. There are also huge opportunities to improve customer service by offering new services such as a call center staffed by MLD experts that can answer mariner's questions, by offering capabilities for the mariner to pay user fees on line and even apply for their credential on line. There are huge opportunities for mariners to actually be delighted by their experience with the credentialing process.

By centralizing the core functions of the MLD program, mariners will benefit in several ways. With 17 REC each issuing credentials, there were many different processes being used. This made it difficult to analyze process performance and identify where to make improvements. With many of the credential production functions centralized, it will be easier to streamline the processes and reduce processing time. Just as processing time varied among the RECs, so did the interpretation of MLD regulations and policies resulting in inconsistencies. By centralizing evaluations, we can assure consistency while blending and maintaining our evaluator expertise through cross training in both formal and informal knowledge sharing. Centralizing also creates economies of scale and process consistencies that make it possible for mariners to check the status of their credential application or obtain information

from a call center or an improved web site. The goals of the project are simple, straightforward, yet challenging. We will drastically reduce the time it takes to issue a credential. We will dramatically improve customer services and we will improve customer satisfaction by issuing a quality product and providing a quality service to mariners and the marine industry. While we are making these improvements, we will also assure the safety and security of the Maritime Transportation System by only issuing credentials to mariners that are fully qualified.

Getting to West Virginia

For the past 16 months, the NMC has been effectively proceeding with efforts to centralize MLD program functions at a new facility in Martinsburg, West Virginia. An Implementation Team, known as the I-Team, was established to assist the NMC and was instrumental in getting several major initiatives started. The team, which consisted of Mr. Michael Rosecrans, Capt David Kranking, CDR Nancy Goodridge, Mr. Gary Chappell, LCDR Jim Rocco, and LCDR Jim Flaherty, and a contracted project manager, created detailed billet maps and reorganization plans to change the alignment of the RECs and divest the NMC of three subunits, including the Marine Safety Center, the National Vessel Documentation Center, and the Marine Safety Lab. The I-Team accelerated moving MLD operations to West Virginia when they saw an opportunity presented by Hurricane Katrina. REC New Orleans, which was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, was temporarily moved to Memphis. The I-Team acted quickly to establish temporary work facilities in Kearneysville, West Virginia by negotiating leased office space through GSA. In November, 2006, the first contingent of what would become the future NMC staff arrived in West Virginia. Ms. Tina Bassett assumed duties as the chief of the new Mariner Evaluation Division in West Virginia and began leading a team of government and contract personnel with processing mariner credential applications from mariners that used to be serviced by REC

New Orleans. In December 2006, a new Medical Evaluation Branch, staffed by a licensed physician and medically trained personnel, was established to centralize evaluations of mariner's physicals and to review waiver requests submitted by the Regional Exam Centers. Also in December 2006, a call center was established at the temporary spaces and began receiving telephone calls and emails from mariners, mainly from the Gulf Coast. As word spread throughout the industry, the call volume began to increase dramatically. By March 2007, the call center employees were handling over 2,000 calls per month. In May 2007, RECs Anchorage and Juneau transitioned to centralized operations and began sending new applications to the NMC temporary spaces in Kearneysville for processing. By this time, the staff at the NMC in West Virginia was processing over 28% of the nationwide credential applications.

In June 2007, the operations at the West Virginia facilities began to take off. With many of the new senior staff positions at the NMC now filled, leadership of the project implementation shifted from the I-Team to the NMC senior staff. The first priorities for the new NMC senior staff were to fill the remaining vacant billets, develop a strategic direction, and identify key factors impacting the unit's mission and performance. In July 2007, the NMC senior staff met at a 3-day leadership retreat where they listened to the concerns and suggestions from a group of people representing various sectors of the marine industry. The staff also outlined a vision of the future for the MLD program and identified key performance goals that would be used to drive improvements that were to come.

With production operations in place in Kearneysville, the NMC staff prepared to begin the transition of the RECs and assume an additional workload. REC Baltimore became the fourth REC to shift to centralized operations in September 2007. This increased centralized production at the NMC to 34% of the nationwide volume.

In October 2007, NMC operations in Arlington were shutdown and the staff relocated to Kearneysville. Also in October the MLD program management and policy development functions, headed by Captain David Kranking, were moved to headquarters. Additionally, the Marine Safety Center, National Vessel Documentation Center, and the Marine Safety Lab, which had been subunits of the NMC, were realigned to report directly to Coast Guard Headquarters. The events in October marked an end to a 12-year era of NMC operations in Arlington and marked a major shift in the mission focus of the NMC. As a result the MLD program responsibilities are now shared among three entities; NMC – for credential production, CG-522 – for maritime personnel regulations, and CG-5434 – for maritime personnel policies.

Following the completion of the new building, the NMC staff moved to their new permanent location and began operations on January 7, 2008, which marked another major milestone in the restructuring and centralization project. For the first time the 170 people working at the NMC were co-located in a building specifically designed for centralized credential productions.

In February, 2008, the remaining 13 RECs began their transition to centralized operations, beginning with RECs Toledo and St. Louis. Through the remainder of 2008, two RECs per month will transition so that by December 31, 2008 the centralization aspects of the project will be completed.

How Will Centralized Operations Work?

Under centralized operations, many of the functions that were historically accomplished at an REC will be shifted to the NMC in West Virginia. This shift of work will enable the REC staffs to focus their efforts on helping mariners through the application process.

Functions at the RECs

Mariners will submit their credential applications to the REC where the staffs will review the applications to ensure they

contain sufficient information to begin the evaluation. This role is critically 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 RECs will forward these applications to the NMC to begin the evaluation process. The RECs will continue to administer examinations to mariners. With the evaluation functions shifted to the NMC, the REC staffs will also begin conducting audits of approved training courses. This will fill a long-standing gap in the MLD program, which was identified in a Quality Standards System Audit in 2003.

Functions at the NMC

Highly trained and specialized teams at the NMC will receive the mariner's application and conduct detailed evaluations to ensure the mariner meets applicable requirements for the credential sought. All mariners will be evaluated in three specific areas including a professional qualification evaluation, a safety and security evaluation, and a medical evaluation. The Professional Qualification Evaluators review the mariner's 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 will review the mariner's background to ensure that there are no issues that would prevent the Coast Guard from issuing a credential to the mariner. The Medical Evaluators, which include licensed physicians, physician assistants and other medically trained staff, will review the mariner's physicals to ensure applicants are physically and medically competent to be issued a credential. Once qualified in all three areas, the NMC will print and mail the credential directly to the mariner. Maritime experts at the NMC, which include unlimited licensed Masters and Engineers, will also review and approve maritime training course and qualify instructors to teach these courses. These experts also develop and update

professional exams, which are administered to the mariners by the RECs.

Centralization is Working!

There are major improvements being made to the MLD program as part of the restructuring and centralization project. Some of these improvements have already been implemented and many projects are in the works.

Faster Processing Time

Several improvements, aimed at reducing processing time, have already been completed and are producing notable results. Analysis showed that since January 2007, applications that are complete when submitted to NMC via the centralized RECs are being processed faster and credentials are now being issued within 10-28 days. A mariner in Alaska recently praised the fast processing time claiming that she had received her credential from West Virginia in two weeks.

✓ **Process Improvements (completed)**

- In July 2007 the evaluation processes at NMC were adjusted to eliminate bottlenecks in the Professional Qualification Evaluation branch. The process was streamlined and the workflow was revised to improve efficiencies. Additionally, daily production targets were assigned to each evaluator. Performance data is reviewed monthly to identify bottlenecks and make continuous improvements to the processes. This improvement 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. This enabled mariners to complete the forms using a computer. Built-in business rules alert the mariner to missing information to assure that the forms are complete before the

mariner submits the forms to the REC. These new electronic forms are now being used at the large union schools and maritime academies. As the quality of applications increase, processing time will decrease.

✓ **Process Performance Metrics (completed)**

- What gets measured gets managed. Measurement and process management experts at the NMC established performance metrics to analyze processes, identify bottlenecks, and measure performance. These experts also wrote complex queries to gather data from the Coast Guard's Merchant Mariner License and Documentation system (MMLD), which now produces regular performance information to aid NMC decision makers in identifying areas to reduce processing time.

✓ **Credential Aging Inventory Initiative (on-going)**

- In October NMC initiated a nation-wide initiative to reduce the inventory of aging credentials and reduce processing time, by focusing efforts on completing applications over 120 days old. This business approach is similar to efforts made by for-profit agencies to reduce the age and size of "accounts receivable". By the end of January 2008, this effort reduced the nationwide inventory by 23% and helped reduce overall processing time.

Improved Customer Service

- Other efforts, aimed at improving customer service, have been completed and are already being noticed by mariners. The President of a national marine industry trade association noted, "Because of the improvements that have been made, we don't have anything to complain about anymore!"

✓ **Making it Easy to Contact Us (completed)**

- In an effort to improve

customer service the NMC is making it easier for mariners to conduct business with us and contact us with questions or to obtain information. We've established multiple ways to contact us or obtain information about the MLD program including:

- o Mariner Information Team (call center) - 1-888-IASKNMC
- o Main Phone - 1-304-433-3400
- o Email - iasknmc@uscg.mil
- o Web sites - www.uscg.mil/stcw and homeport.uscg.mil
- o List server subscriptions - <http://cgls.uscg.mil/groups.php?ID=10>

✓ **Call center (completed)** - Established in December 2006, this call center is staffed with a team of customer service experts, who each receive an average of 55 phone calls or email a day from mariners. Since established, growth in the volume of calls has increase 6% per week and has now leveled off at about 5,500 calls per month. Mariners are thrilled that someone answers the phone and that they can actually talk to someone about their application. One mariner was so surprised when a call center representative answered the phone that he got flustered and hung up as he was expecting to have to leave a voice message and wasn't ready to talk to someone about his question!

✓ **Online application tracking (completed)** - Most of the phone calls received by the call center were from mariners inquiring about the status of their application. In response to the high volume of these types of calls, in March 2007 the NMC launched a new tool enabling mariners to check the status of their application online via the Coast Guard's Homeport portal. To access this feature, go to homeport.uscg.mil then to Merchant Mariners.

✓ **Online user fees (completed)** - To simplify and streamline the process of collecting user fees, the NMC established methods in March 2007 for mariners to pay user fees using the government's online features on www.pay.gov. Additionally, user fee related functions and billets were transferred to from the NMC to the USCG Finance Center, to assist in further streamlining the user fee process. At some RECs, 99% of the mariners now use the on-line user fee payment methods.

✓ **Subscription to email updates to MLD information (completed)** - Mariners can now sign up to receive automatic emails when MLD information is posted on the NMC's web site. This feature, which uses the Coast Guard's List Server, was launched in November 2007 and now has over 1,100 subscribers who receive an average of 5 updates per month, keeping them up to date on the latest MLD program news and information.

Improved Consistency and Quality

- Other improvements have resulted in improvements in consistency and quality.

✓ **Centralized evaluations (completed)** - Centralized evaluations of credentials by highly trained teams at the NMC in West Virginia is already improving the consistency and quality of evaluations and credentials issued to mariners. Consistency is being achieved through continuous training and quality review procedures at the NMC. Consistency is also being achieved by having all of the evaluators co-located at a single facility.

✓ **Medical Evaluation System (completed)** - Three major improvements have been made to the NMC's medical evaluation system. Beginning in December 2006, as part of the centralization efforts,

the evaluation of all merchant mariner physicals were conducted at the NMC. To ensure qualified people conduct these evaluations, a staff of medical professionals was hired. Finally, guidance to evaluate these physicals was developed and is being published as national guidance in the form of an updated Navigation and Inspection Circular (NVIC).

Future Improvements – Other improvements are planned for the future.

√ **Trusted Agents (planned)** – To leverage limited resources at the RECs and expand the number of locations where mariners can submit credential applications; the NMC is expanding best practices from REC Houston's Streamlined Evaluation Program into a nationwide program of trusted agents. Under this program, maritime academies, unions schools, and individual companies will soon be certified as "Credential Acceptance Agents" (CAA) and perform many of the application related functions at the RECs. As a Credential Acceptance Agent, entities will be able to accept application from mariners and pre-process the applications, saving valuable time and ensuring that the applications are complete. Applications processed by a CAA will be submitted directly to the NMC, bypassing the RECs and saving time.

√ **Electronic Records (planned)** – To save money and storage space, the NMC is taking steps to establish the electronic information in MMLD as the "official record" thereby eliminating the requirement to save paper files containing mariner information. With an electronic record, all important paper documents will be returned to the mariner once their application is processed. This will help the mariner,

as they will retain all the required 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 as much as one 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 phenomena became known throughout industry as "license creep". In an effort to increase the actual validity of the credential to the full five years, the Coast Guard is 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, the NMC is developing the *Merchant Mariner Secure Electronic Application System, MM-SEAS*. This system will be the "turbo-tax" for mariners to use to submit their credential applications and for NMC personnel to use to process the application. 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. This system will eliminate the paper-based application system, increase the quality of applications being submitted for evaluation, and streamline the processing time for conducting evaluations of applications at the NMC.

√ **Online Sea Service Calculator (planned)** – Just like many people are using online retirement calculators on financial web sites to plan for their retirement, the NMC sees a need to provide a tool to help mariners plan their career progression. The NMC is planning to develop and launch a sea service calculator that will enable mariners to identify the type of credential they are qualified for based on the amount of sea service and training they have accumulated. Mariners will also be 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.

The Need for Change

So why was all this improvement needed? Simply put, our customers demanded better service. Workload within the MLD program has risen steadily over the past ten 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 MLD 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 began to experience delays in processing mariner credentials. While the staffs at the RECs were augmented with contractor support, work continued to grow and many RECs began to reduce the hours in which they were open to the public so the staffs could focus on processing credentials. This resulted in a decline in customer services as mariners experienced difficulties in contacting people working in the RECs. Finally, in response to growing complaints by 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.

The Coast Guard is committed to making significant and lasting improvements to the MLD 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 fast 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.