

**Statement of
The Honorable James L. Oberstar
Subcommittee on the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
Hearing on
“The National Maritime Center and Mariner Credentials”
July 9, 2009**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for scheduling today's hearing to evaluate the Coast Guard's National Maritime Center. This hearing is a testament to your on-going support of our U.S. mariners and will up us ensure their needs are met by the Coast Guard.

On January 7, 2008, the Coast Guard opened the doors of the National Maritime Center (NMC) in Martinsburg, West Virginia. The function of the NMC is to consolidate and centralize mariner credential and license processing from 17 Regional Exam Centers into one single location where applications can be processed in a standardized manner. The Coast Guard's testimony states that the intended long-term benefits of the NMC are to be decreased processing times of mariner credential applications, consistency of service and improved customer service.

While I commend the Coast Guard's efforts to improve their processes and services to mariners, the changes that have been implemented have produced unintended delays. As a result, mariners have been out of work while their credentials were being produced. This is a huge problem and it's disappointing since mariners livelihoods are being affected by the Coast Guard's inability to process an application in a timely manner. I do understand that when you are creating a new process there will be growing pains, but that offers little comfort to the mariner who is at home trying to figure out how he's going to provide for his family as he waits for his credential to be renewed.

We have Rear Admiral Cook who is the Director of Prevention Policy, and Captain Stalfort, the Commanding Officer of the National Maritime Center, here today to testify on behalf of the Coast Guard. I would like to hear about the goals and processes of the National Maritime Center and how the Coast Guard intends to resolve the backlog of applications quickly so we can get our people back to work. We also have several representatives from industry who will share their insights into the effectiveness of the Coast Guard's centralization. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today and I look forward to your testimony.

Chairman Cummings, I look forward to working with you and Ranking Members Mica and LoBiondo on these issues.