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Homeland Security

United States
Coast Guard



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DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

U. S. COAST GUARD

STATEMENT OF

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ON

THE NATIONAL MARITIME CENTER AND MARINER CREDENTIALING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I am Rear Admiral Kevin Cook, Director of Prevention Policy for Marine Safety, Security, and Stewardship, United States Coast Guard. I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you today to update you and the Subcommittee on the status of operations at the National Maritime Center (NMC) and the Coast Guard's plans for the Mariner Credentialing program.

As I articulated in my previous testimony, the Coast Guard is committed to the success of the Mariner Credentialing Program. We are working diligently to ensure that we issue credentials to the over 216,000 fully qualified mariners in the shortest time possible to meet the needs of individual mariners and to help ensure a safe Marine Transportation System for the American public. Since my testimony in July 2009, the Coast Guard has made significant improvements to the credentialing program and we will continue to make further enhancements into the future. We are listening to our partners' concerns and are committed to ensuring continuous improvements. In my testimony today I will review the actions we have taken, summarize the results from these actions, and present you with our course of action for the future.

Actions Taken

In July, I presented to the Subcommittee an aggressive action plan aimed at reducing the credential processing time and clearing the backlog of applications. Specifically, the plan included:

- Aggressively surging resources to supplement professional qualification evaluations.
- Reaching out to mariners with applications that were stalled due to additional information needs.
- Expediting the processing of applications for mariners at risk of having their current credentials expire.
- Implementing immediate software changes to resolve technical problems with the database used to process credential applications.
- Streamlining the entire Mariner Credentialing Program by building capabilities for electronic submission and processing of credential applications.
- Aggressively communicating our action plans to industry leaders, marine employers, individual mariners and the public.

Improvements

Since the last hearing, we developed a monthly report on the performance of the Mariner Credentialing Program as a means to reach out to the mariner community and share our performance. The report tracks our backlog, through-put, and net processing time, with net processing time being the key driver among mariner credentialing performance measures. We share this report monthly on our website, directly with this Committee's staff members, and with other congressional staff.

During my July testimony, I reported that our backlog was over 6,800 credentials, net processing time was at 55 days, and overall processing time averaged 80 days. Net processing time is the total time the Coast Guard spends processing the application, including weekends. This metric does not include time associated with waiting for additional information from the mariner that the Coast Guard has identified as necessary to complete their application, including examinations. This additional processing time, dependent upon mariner responsiveness, is included in the Overall Processing Time metric.

As reported in July, our net processing goal is 30 days. Due to the aggressive actions and increased productivity at the NMC, I am pleased to report that the entire backlog of 6,800 applications was eliminated by the end of July, and net processing time decreased from 55 days to 26 days by the end of September. More importantly, since July, over 16,000 mariners have received their credentials. Over 60 percent (11,560) of these mariners received their credentials within 15-20 days of submitting an application. To summarize improvements implemented:

- On July 6, a “tiger team” of 15 fully qualified and experienced evaluators from Coast Guard Regional Exam Centers reported to the NMC to help increase daily production of credentials from 300 per day to 500. This action quickly began reducing the backlog of 6,800 applications.
- Recognizing that many mariners were at risk of having their credentials expire, the NMC implemented a process to expedite these at-risk applications. This enabled us to better prioritize daily work and helped reduce the risk of a mariner losing a job due to an expired credential.
- By August, computer experts at the Coast Guard’s Operations System Center resolved all technical problems with the software introduced in April 2009 that were hampering productivity.

To date in 2009, the Coast Guard has received 56,194 applications and has issued 56,437 credentials. Currently, the largest remaining delays in the mariner credentialing process are due to: 1) time awaiting additional information requested from mariners to complete their application; and 2) time waiting for mariners to schedule their examinations.

Additional Improvements

By eliminating the backlog and driving down the processing time, we have been able to better direct resources to address other improvements. The Coast Guard continues to take a methodical approach to all improvements, engaging both industry stakeholders and program users when planning for changes in the program. The application process undergoes continuous review to eliminate bottlenecks in the system and to better predict and prepare for increases in applications due to future regulatory, or other, changes.

In August, we enhanced our Customer Service Center by increasing technical staff to assist mariners through the application process and to answer their questions. We also began calling 25 randomly selected mariners each day to let them know that their credential had been printed and mailed to them, and to seek their feedback on ways we can improve service.

We recently met with members of the Merchant Personal Advisory Committee (MERPAC) and the Towing Safety Advisory Committee (TSAC) during their Fall meeting at the NMC to showcase to industry first-hand the mariner credentialing process improvements we have undertaken. We solicited their comments and recommendations, many of which we are now implementing. Some of the recommendations implemented are as follows:

- MERPAC recommended that the NMC establish a process for prioritization of mariner applications when a delay exists at the NMC, giving active sailing mariners priority to assure they do not have to interrupt current voyages or suffer loss in income.
- MERPAC recommended that the existing policy regarding application of Standards for Training, Certification and Watchkeeping on vessels less than 200 gross tons be reviewed and refined to address small tonnage vessels.
- MERPAC recommended that mariner credential applications due to lost or stolen credentials be expedited and unnecessary background checks and reviews be eliminated.
- MERPAC recommended clarifying language changes to form letters that are sent to mariners when additional information is required.

Future Plans

The Coast Guard recognizes that additional changes to the Mariner Credentialing Program are necessary to even further decrease processing time. Ultimately, successful execution of the Mariner Credentialing Program requires a modern and efficient credentialing process with clear and simple regulations and policies. Because of the complexity of the regulatory requirements, associated policies, and the application process, many applications arrive with missing information, causing unnecessary processing delays. To address this issue and improve the overall program, we plan to take the following actions:

- The Coast Guard is working to develop a mariner credential agent program (trusted agent) to allow organizations (marine employers, training institutions, unions, etc.) to submit complete credential application packages directly to the NMC. This program is the first step towards fully automating the mariner credentialing process and making better use of existing private-sector maritime industry resources. It will allow mariner credential agents to submit the initial input of merchant mariner credential applications into the NMC process. The response from potential participating organizations has been overwhelmingly positive. The next step is to conduct a limited test of the program to validate that it will provide benefits to the mariner. This will include developing and providing training to the credential agents involved in the test. The Coast Guard tentatively plans to have preparations completed and be ready to begin accepting applications from the test agents by the end of this year.

- In the near future, the Coast Guard will release a new Merchant Mariner Credential Medical Evaluation Report for mariners and their physicians to use to improve the medical evaluation process and facilitate fitness for duty determinations by the Coast Guard. This is necessary since the current Medical Evaluation form is not consistent with the Medical Navigation and Vessel Inspection Circular, resulting in a significant number of incomplete applications.
- In addition to improving the Merchant Mariner Credential Medical Evaluation Report, we will more clearly explain the medical evaluation process. We plan to reach out to industry to promote understanding of the process and allay mariners' fears that the process will unfairly deny credentialing. For example in 2009, only 158 mariners have been denied credentials due to medical reasons. This is less than 0.2 percent of the 56,000 mariners who have been evaluated in 2009.
- We intend to use the Physicians Comparability Allowance (PCA) plan in order to attract and retain the best physicians to work at the NMC. PCA is used by agencies to help to alleviate recruitment and retention problems that result from pay disparities with the private sector.
- We are expediting work to revise and simplify the mariner credentialing regulations and policies to make the program more effective and efficient and reviewing related forms to reduce the likelihood of applicant errors and omissions.
- The NMC will be assessed by third-party experts to identify ways to streamline the current paper-based system, while looking to future development of an electronic processing system for applications. This assessment will begin this month.

The completion of these long-term technology, regulatory, and policy changes will further help decrease processing time and improve service to the mariner.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard is fully committed to ensuring an effective and efficient Mariner Credentialing Program. While we've made significant progress, we remain focused on continuous improvements.

The Coast Guard continues to work diligently to resolve the immediate challenges impacting the Mariner Credentialing Program as well as to plan for future operations through ongoing process improvements, technological advances, training, and adjustments to staffing. We have taken measures to provide open lines of communication with mariners and industry, and the NMC will continue to improve communications and outreach. Our goal is to issue credentials to qualified mariners in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Coast Guard's Mariner Credentialing Program. I am pleased to answer any questions you may have.