

**“The changing role of mariners”  
NAMEPA Focusing on Solutions Maritime Event  
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**1. Mariners as a group are changing**

Last spring, the BIMCO-ICS Maritime Manpower study came out with the general finding that there are fewer and fewer qualified mariners in the world fleet. However, another finding – one that got less press – was that the number of Chinese seafarers now outpaced that from the Philippines. Despite whatever caveats we might offer for the BIMCO-ICS numbers, the findings are deeply significant. For the last generation, Filipino seafarers have been so dominant in seafaring in terms of sheer numbers that it was unexpected that any other group might replace them at the top of the scale. I recommend a close reading of the BIMCO-ISC numbers. While there are nuances to all of the report’s findings, a central point remains: mariners in the world fleet are changing in significant ways.

Yet these changes are more than just the numbers of one nation going down and others going up. Even more strongly than before, we are being confronted by a truism: life and work at sea is changing. My place in understanding this change provides but one perspective among many; I have no expertise in fuel types, ballast water, or environmental compliance, although NAMMA does keep abreast of these developments. Rather my perspective is from working with crews of ships docking in ports around North America in the last 20 years. I was a ship visitor in the Port of Montreal before taking on work with the North American Maritime Ministry Association. Our Association has a presence in about 50 ports around the continent, mostly working to provide transportation, communication services, and a friendly welcome. As a happy adjunct to our everyday work, we end up getting to know seafarers in very specific and meaningful ways, ways that many companies or industry analysts will never know them. Whereas employers understand them in aggregate as “the Human Element,” we know them as Himadri, Sara, Eddie, and José.

On the other hand, when we talk about our “Human Element,” we mean our ship visitors, staff, chaplains, and volunteers. Across those 50 ports, this represents perhaps 1500 to 2000 people. Each one comes to seafarers’ welfare with their own history and for different reasons. Many serve because

they have a family connection to shipping, but a surprising number have virtually no knowledge of modern shipping before they offer to help out.

The North American Maritime Ministry Association has the privilege of helping seafarers' welfare centers understand the changes in the wider maritime industry to help connect them to one another and train their staffs. Today I'd like to share with you a few programs we are currently involved in that are designed to train our "human element" to serve your "human element".

## **2. Training**

Most of our affiliated agencies have been involved in basic training of new staff and volunteers for many years. Yet as you know, traditional in-class training is becoming increasingly expensive and often conflicts with the busy schedules of those that need it most. Our members have reported that they want training that supplements their own initiatives and can be flexible to schedules and reduce costs.

This past year NAMMA was privileged to team up with the UK's Merchant Navy Welfare Board to produce an online version of the Ship Welfare Visitor Course, what was to that point a two-day course taken at a physical site. Many organizations could no longer cover the two-day version because of distance and cost. Our new, online version combines videos, reading, quizzes, and supervised ship visits to engage learners wherever they are and on their own schedules. This course is set up to give staff and ship visitors current information on the maritime industry, on security, and on safety, but also training on how to make ship visiting as effective as it can be. This is all the more important because ship visiting is central to our work.

Our work of advocacy for seafarers in specific situations is well-known. You might be aware of the work of some of our partners, including the SCI Center for Seafarers' Rights, ISWAN's Seafarers Helpline, the Seafarers' Wellness app from Sailors' Society, and other great resources. If you don't know of them, I would strongly suggest checking them out. However, the majority of our work is not in the context of any specific difficulty. Rather our normal, daily work is in ship visiting, providing transportation, and offering recreation to seafarers in ports across the continent and the world.

On one level it is not difficult work: one need only be open to showing kindness to strangers and show a willingness to be present to men and women who are isolated. Yet the seafarers we serve are not random strangers, so special training for our ship visitors is necessary. They work in a unique, and uniquely stressful, environment and experience special pressures of fatigue and social isolation.

### **3. Research**

In addition to basic training for our members, we give more specific, advanced training to ship visitors to improve their work. For instance, in a bid to understand the changing demographics highlighted by the BIMCO-ICS report, NAMMA undertook a project last year to better know the Chinese seafarers that come into ports across North America. With the help of project assistant Dr. Kaimei Zhang, NAMMA sought to understand these men so as to serve them better. Over the course of several months, Dr. Zhang visited ships in various ports, held more than 100 in-depth conversations, and had thousands of other points of contact with seafarers. We will publish soon the detailed results of this project, but I can offer today several points of interest that highlight the changing makeup of seafarers. First, it is remarkable not just that there are so many more Chinese seafarers, but how Chinese seafarers themselves are changing. As China has sought to respond to huge demands for seafarers there has been a significant expansion in the number of training facilities and recruitment from different regions in China, even places with no seafaring traditions. The maritime schools training this influx of seafarers have sought to qualify them technically, but have also struggled to understand the difficulties of life far from family for extended periods of time and in relative social isolation. NAMMA's project is but one among several on the welfare of Chinese seafarers: it will be fascinating to watch as seafarers' welfare providers learn how to better respond to their needs in coming years.

### **4. Seafarers: Health and Welfare - Social Isolation**

Finally, we recognize that our work needs to incorporate the latest research on all fields of seafarers' health and welfare. We focused on social isolation, for example, at our last annual conference and will do so again for a number of panels at meetings in the coming year. We do so with a number of questions in mind: what specific impact does our work of providing transportation, communication tools, and friendly conversation have on combating social isolation among seafarers? We *believe* we are doing something and see many of the general fruits of our labor, but, some might ask, what is that exact something? It is a pleasure to be part of new studies and projects in this regard.

We also have been deeply interested in the studies of Dr. Rafael Lefkowitz of Yale University on seafarers' mental health. We are involved in studies by Dr. Helen Sampson of Cardiff and Dr. Wendy Cadge of Brandeis University on seafarers' welfare and chaplaincy. We follow closely the aforementioned ICS-BIMCO reports; the GEM project on women in the

maritime industry at Southampton Solent University; and the recently released results of Project MARTHA of Intermanager and Warsash Maritime Academy that focuses on seafarer fatigue. All these studies help us focus our energies and continue to provide real service where it is necessary and helpful.

NAMMA has existed since 1932, but many of our members trace their history back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We hope and believe that these two centuries of work in ports around North America will continue to bear fruit. Thank you for your encouragement and support.