



Support key worker status for our seafarers

On this [Day of the Seafarer]([Published 02 September 2024](http://www.imo.org/en/About/Events/dayoftheseafarer/Pages/Day-of-the-Seafarer-2020.aspx#:~:text=%E2%80%8BThis%20year%2C%20the%20annual,th%20anniversary%20on%2025%20June), we stand with the IMO to call for universal designation of seafarers as key workers to enable crew rotation. Seafarers deserve respect and dignity for the essential work they do. Their physical and mental wellbeing is essential to safe vessel operations and they need to be able to sign-off ships to be repatriated to their home countries in the usual course of their employment.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

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Crew rotation – then and now

The preparations would start as soon the manning office announced the name of the reliever and date of “sign off”. The packing of the bags, the reverse count down of the days left, the constant thoughts of loved ones and the eagerness to return to home life are all those things that made the whole process of signing off so exciting. The anticipation for the seafarer is second to none. The last day on board is another story – new clothes, cash advance (for the duty free shopping), the physical “signing off” on all the documents, the hand-over notes and all those thoughts of the journey back home. Only seafarers will be able to relate to the feeling of transition from a normal work life to a normal home life with both “normals” being diametrically opposite.

Such were the days when crew repatriation was routine with over 200,000 seafarers exchanged every month. Signing off has now become highly complex and nearly impossible with most of the port states around the world keeping their borders closed to crew repatriation due to COVID-19 restrictions. Unable to leave the vessels, seafarers have had to stay aboard for many more months than their original contracts required leaving them frustrated, stressed, and fatigued. And it is not just crew rotation – COVID-19 restrictions have also made it difficult if not impossible to get seafarers needed medical treatment ashore. All the while shipping companies and crewing agencies, local agents and P&I correspondents, industry and labour organizations and many more have scrambled to find a way through the bureaucracy.

While the recent events expose the vulnerability of our entire supply chain related to the crew care and repatriation, there are some lessons learned. When we discuss the crew issue with those who have been working in the background, the most common theme is that this pandemic has brought the key industry players together for a common cause. There have been some successes on a case by case, port by port basis but the shipping industry is global, and solutions should ideally be uniform.

The way forward – seafarers are essential workers and must be recognized universally as key workers

As a member of the UN's Sustainable Ocean Business Action Platform, Gard was asked to join a UN COVID-19 Task Force. We joined about 40 participants in the Task Force, including UN agencies like IMO and WHO, and industry representatives in the shipping, the oil and gas, the ports, and the food and agriculture sectors. We all shared details of the immediate challenges and ways of overcoming them. In Gard, we were seeing first-hand the hardship caused by crew being forced to stay on board and without access to doctors, even when urgent.

The supply chain is global, it was being affected by a global pandemic, and although some countries had by that stage already designated crew as key workers, the Task Force realised that individual, national responses, were not going to be enough to tackle a global problem affecting a global supply chain. We concluded that a global approach was necessary, so the Task Force recommended the uniform application of key worker status.

The recommendations were sent to G7 and G20 leaders, through the UN, and the President of the General Assembly. Many other agencies and industry bodies and labour organizations worked on the problem in parallel, and made similar recommendations, so there has been a big push across the industry to get political leaders to implement key worker status uniformly.

Today is the IMO's Day of the Seafarer. The IMO focus this year is to push for universal key work status for seafarers who are on the front lines in moving the world's goods including medical equipment and supplies so necessary for fighting the pandemic. Gard echoes the IMO in encouraging all to treat seafarers with the respect and dignity they deserve. Not just today – but every day.

About our authors

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