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Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia & South Jersey

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Keeping port secure with less strain on crews

Since 9/11, many seafarers had been confined to their ships months at a time. New procedures try to relieve the stress.

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Since 9/11, worries about security have kept seafarers confined to their ships for months at a time, causing stress and management problems on the high seas.

Now the Coast Guard, an ecumenical religious agency, Sunoco Inc., and others are implementing a plan to deal with the problem. It will, they say, improve safety and security. Their work will also benefit local businesses that have encountered costly delays while tending to the needs of ships docked on the Delaware River.

The work started nearly two years ago when Capt. Jonathan Sarubbi, who recently retired as commander of the Coast Guard station here, named an Episcopal priest, the Rev. James D. Von Dreele, to the port security committee and to be chairman of its subcommittee on docks and terminals.

Von Dreele, chaplain of the port and executive director of the 162-year-old Seamen's Church

Institute, had a working relationship with all the people involved and "was very passionate about solving the problem," Sarubbi said.

It was a complex task. Procedures had to be negotiated for getting seafarers and local businesses to and from ships without violating a host of security and safety regulations that govern ships, refineries, and work around hazardous materials and equipment.

By all accounts, it took priestly skill to calm the waters. Von Dreele guided the groups to an agreement through "some pretty heated discussions," said Don Zoladkiewicz, manager of plant protection and public affairs for Sunoco, which averages one ship a day at its Delaware River refineries.

For years, people were able to come and go at will from most marine terminals. After the terrorist attacks of 2001, strict security measures were imposed.

More than two years ago, sea captains started warning of

serious safety issues caused by confining their crews to ships for months at a time.

Capt. Anders H.G. Borgstrom, while confined to his ship in Philadelphia, said in a 2003 interview that "moods can turn around from being cheerful to depression, and people are not interested in their work any more... . They need their time ashore. Imagine how you would feel if you were confined to your office for weeks or months at a time."

His comments moved Sarubbi to see this issue as a lack of compassion and a threat to safety.

"Being on a ship can be very stressful" and time on land is essential, Sarubbi said in a phone interview from his retirement home in Annapolis, Md. Under the new plan, the clergy and staff at the Seamen's Church Institute will undergo background checks and drug testing before being allowed to escort seafarers.

Since 9/11, ships entering U.S. waters have been required to give the Coast Guard, now a unit of the

Department of Homeland Security, 96 hours notice of arrival. That notification includes a crew roster and cargo inventory. That information is shared with the Central Intelligence Agency, U.S. Customs and other agencies.

Only seafarers with U.S. visas are allowed to leave a ship.

George C. Murphy, Sunoco's marine quality manager, said the problem had to be solved, for safety reasons. "Time ashore is precious. It affects the whole mental state of the crew and how safely they can do their jobs," Murphy said.

On modern oceangoing ships, there is so much automation that crews are small, Murphy said. The largest tankers are staffed by only 27, and many spend their working hours in isolated areas.

The new program will put increased pressure on the Seamen's Church Institute, which tries to visit every ship that docks at the 28 terminals between Marcus Hook, Delaware County, and Fairless Hills in Bucks

County with its fleet of four vans. Most seafarers are away from their ship for only a few hours. Some are taken shopping, others to the Seamen's Church Institute, a former furniture warehouse at 475 N. Fifth St. There they can use the Internet, telephone home, and shoot pool or play half-court basketball.

For those lacking visas, Von Dreele's staff, aided by volunteers from local churches, conducts worship services aboard ships, in 20 languages, and provides cell phones for calls home.

American-flagged vessels provide e-mail access at sea for the entire crew. But that kindness is a rarity on foreign ships, Von Dreele said.

While the security plans were being worked out, many repair and supply firms had been banned from driving to ships docked at refineries. They were forced to make deliveries with boats.

This is expensive for the ship operators - \$300 to \$500 for a small launch and \$3,000 to \$6,000 if a tugboat and barge are

required. With vessels costing as much as \$125,000 a day to own and operate, delays are costly, steamship agents say.

Businesses can avoid some post-9/11 problems if their employees participate in the new program - and submit to training as well as background and drug tests.

Sarubbi said the new program is an important step. "We can make the port so secure a ship cannot dock," he said. But if fear slows commerce, the terrorists win, he said, adding: "We have to allow crews to come ashore. We have to allow ships to do business, get repairs, supplies and fuel."

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