

collection techniques or other forms of information technology.

To receive a copy of any of the forms listed above, call the SSA Reports Clearance Officer on (410) 965-4145 or write to him at the above address.

Dated: January 1, 1999.

Frederick W. Brickenkamp,

Reports Clearance Officer, Social Security Administration.

[FR Doc. 99-521 Filed 1-8-99; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4910-29-U

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Coast Guard

[USCG-1998-4448]

Mariner Licensing and Documentation

AGENCY: Coast Guard, DOT.

ACTION: Extension of comment period.

SUMMARY: The Coast Guard's National Maritime Center (NMC) is extending the comment period on the issue of Mariner Licensing and Documentation. The original public notice, published September 21, 1998, requested comments on the feasibility of privatizing examinations for mariner licenses and merchant mariner documents in the Coast Guard's Mariner Licensing and Documentation (MLD) program. We are extending the comment period to allow the public more opportunity to comment on this subject.

DATES: Comments must reach the Docket Management Facility on or before March 1, 1999.

ADDRESSES: You may mail comments to the Docket Management Facility (USCG-1998-4448), U.S. Department of Transportation, room PL-401, 400 Seventh Street SW., Washington, DC 20590-0001, or deliver them to room PL-401, located on the Plaza Level of the Nassif Building at the same address between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, except Federal holidays. The telephone number is 202-366-9329.

The Docket Management Facility maintains the public docket for this notice. Comments will become part of this docket and will be available for inspection or copying at room PL-401, located on the Plaza Level of the Nassif Building at the same address between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, except Federal holidays. You may also access this docket on the Internet at <http://dms.dot.gov>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: For questions on this notice, contact Mr. Albert G. Kirchner, Jr., National Maritime Center, U.S. Coast Guard, 4200

Wilson Boulevard, Suite 510, Arlington, VA 22203-1804, telephone 703-235-1950. For questions on viewing or submitting material to the docket, contact Dorothy Walker, Chief, Dockets, Department of Transportation, telephone 202-366-9329.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Request for Comments

The Coast Guard received several requests to extend the comment period at the public meeting held in New Orleans in order to allow the public and the testing industry more opportunity to examine the issues. The Coast Guard encourages you to participate in this request by submitting written data, views, or arguments. If you submit comments, you should include your name and address, identify this notice (USCG-1998-4448) and the specific section or question in this document to which your comments apply, and give the reason for each comment. Please submit all comments and attachments in an unbound format, no larger than 8½ by 11 inches, suitable for copying and electronic filing to the DOT Docket Management Facility at the address under **ADDRESSES**. If you want acknowledgment of receipt of your comments, you should enclose a stamped, self-addressed postcard or envelope.

The Coast Guard will consider all comments received during the comment period.

Although the Coast Guard has not scheduled another public meeting concerning this subject, you may request another public meeting by submitting a request to the address under **ADDRESSES**. The request should include the reasons why another meeting would be beneficial. If we determine that another public meeting should be held, we will hold the meeting at a time and place announced by a later notice in the **Federal Register**.

Background and Purpose

In November 1993, we produced a focus group report, "Licensing 2000 and Beyond." This report recommended adopting new methods of verifying the competency of mariners in our Mariner Licensing and Documentation (MLD) program. The report also recommended that we consider employing commercial service providers that specialize in examination administration and testing using advanced technology. A copy of this report is available for inspection in the docket at the address listed under **ADDRESSES**.

As a result of this focus group report, we published a final rule (61 FR 47060) on September 6, 1996, enabling us to

implement alternative examination and evaluation systems, and to modernize our examination methods. As part of our considerations about developing any alternative examination and evaluation system, we held a public meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, on October 22 and 23, 1998 which was announced in the **Federal Register** on September 21, 1998 (63 FR 50439). The goal of this public meeting was to help us research business issues and opportunities associated with employing commercial service providers to administer our MLD examinations (outsourcing). A summary of these issues is available in the docket at the address listed under **ADDRESSES**. The issues discussed at the public meeting are as follows:

1. Feasibility of MLD outsourcing;
2. Service possibilities and cost implications to the mariner;
3. System integrity and privacy of records;
4. Elements and sequencing considerations of MLD outsourcing;
5. Options and arrangements for outsourced service delivery;
6. Resource and oversight requirements;
7. Experience of other agencies and professional organizations; and
8. Valuable lessons of others.

Definitions

The following definitions should help you review this notice and provide comments.

Fourth Party means someone, other than the Coast Guard or designated Third Party, who administers an examination or makes an objective judgement about the competency of mariners.

Outsourcing means using the private sector to deliver certain services or functions for the government, with some degree of government involvement.

Privatization means a complete transfer of a government service or function to the private sector without further involvement of the government.

Third Party means someone, other than the Coast Guard, who trains or teaches mariners.

Since the publication of the original notice requesting comments on using commercial service providers to administer MLD examinations, the direction of this type of examination process has evolved. The process we now envision is more accurately termed "outsourcing." The original MLD notice and the supporting documents located in the docket use the term "privatization." Since we plan maintaining the examination database and developing and implementing an oversight mechanism to ensure the

integrity of the examination system and private records, this and any future publications on this topic will use the term "outsourcing" instead of "privatization."

Issues and Questions

We are seeking information that will help us consider whether outsourcing examinations in our MLD program is feasible and what other alternatives are available. Any comments, concerns, issues, and written data should address the business aspects of outsourced examination systems. We encourage you to review the supporting documents and past written comments to help you in submitting comments. The documents and comments are located in the docket at the address listed under **ADDRESSES**.

Please submit any comments, information, or data to the docket at the address under **ADDRESSES**.

The Coast Guard needs feedback on the following issues:

1. *Feasibility of MLD outsourcing.* Before we can decide whether or not to implement an outsourced examination system, we need to determine its feasibility and if it's in the best interest of both the Coast Guard and mariners. The core business information we presented at the public meeting in New Orleans is available for review in the docket and will help commercial service providers to determine whether the administration of MLD examinations is a potentially attractive business opportunity. We are seeking information from commercial service providers in the training industry about the levels of automation they would employ for such a system, and their ability to provide quality services to mariners that are affordable, yet profitable.

- Is outsourcing mariner licensing and documentation examinations feasible and profitable for commercial service providers?
- What is the most efficient way to transition from the current system to an outsourced system?

2. *Service possibilities and cost implications to the mariner.* We are seeking information and cost estimates from the commercial training and examination industry.

- How could better, more responsive examinations systems be delivered to mariners?

- How are the costs for outsourcing examination systems determined?

- What are the three greatest factors affecting cost?

- What are the "break even" points associated with these cost estimates?

3. *System integrity and privacy of records.* One of our primary concerns

about outsourcing our MLD examinations is the potential for compromising the integrity of our current system. Another significant concern is maintaining the highest level of protection of private information and records.

- What capabilities do commercial service providers have to ensure the integrity of the examination system and private records?

- How do you address similar concerns with your current clientele?

4. *Elements and sequencing considerations of MLD outsourcing.* Since the core MLD activity we would outsource is the conducting of the actual licensing and documentation examinations, we are seeking information about the timing and sequence for implementing an outsourced examination system.

- How do commercial providers implement an outsourced examination system?

- How long would the transition take?

- What staff training is required?

- What site preparations are necessary?

- How would the new examination system interface with our random examination generating capability?

5. *Options and arrangements for outsourced service delivery.* There are a number of possible ways we can structure our outsourced MLD examination system. These possibilities, each with their own advantages and disadvantages, are as follows:

- Awarding competitive no-cost contracts to a single, nation-wide provider;

- Awarding a competitive no-cost contract to an unlimited number of "qualified" service providers;

- Allowing the current Regional Examination Centers (RECs) to operate as Government-owned, Contractor-operated (GO-CO) facilities, or to convert entirely to Contractor-owned, Contractor-operated (CO-CO) facilities; or

- Expanding our present training course instead of examination program until mariners can obtain every Coast Guard license and document through this program. For more information regarding this program please see 46 CFR part 10.

We are seeking information about range of options and arrangements available for outsourced examination systems.

6. *Resource and oversight requirements.* Before we decide if outsourcing our MLD examinations

adds value to our program, we must weigh the costs against the benefits. Outsourcing the MLD examinations would shift many of our current costs to the commercial service provider(s), causing us to reconfigure our remaining costs. One of our remaining costs would come from developing and maintaining an active and effective oversight mechanism to ensure the integrity and security of the examination system and private records. We need to learn more about how commercial service providers determine the resources we would need to conduct oversight of an outsourced examinations system.

- What considerations should we take into account in developing an oversight mechanism for an outsourced examination system?

- What resources would we need to implement an oversight mechanism?

7. *Experience of other agencies and professional organizations.* We are seeking views and information from other agencies that currently outsource an examination system for critical professional examinations. We are also interested in learning information from those who have helped others successfully put these types of systems in place.

8. *Valuable lessons of others.* Finally, we would like to hear from anyone who is willing to share "lessons learned" in making the decision whether or not to outsource a professional qualifications or competency system similar to our MLD licensing and documentation examinations.

- What is the most effective way to make cost calculations and comparisons of outsourced examinations systems?

- What contractual provisions and specifications should we consider if we decide to outsource the MLD examinations?

- What information should we consider in developing and implementing audit and oversight mechanisms?

- What type of quality control techniques and performance metrics have proven most reliable in an outsourced examination system?

Dated: January 4, 1999.

Joseph J. Angelo,

Director of Standards, Acting Assistant Commandant for Marine Safety and Environmental Protection.

[FR Doc. 99-537 Filed 1-8-99; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4910-15-U