

Against the odds - maritime industries work to protect seafarers' health

By A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Australians can be reassured that ocean freight shipping companies are acting to protect the health of waterfront workers at the international, national, company and ship levels.

The most pressing issue right now is the unreasonable intransigence of governments that refuse to help crew changes take place.

Globally, over 400,000 seafarers are either stuck on ships or in port, who are either waiting to go home or to join their ship, according to the International Chamber of Shipping.

"The words 'frustrating' and 'distressing' come to mind when describing the attitude of some governments to allow seafarers to travel to join a ship or to go home on completion of their onboard contracts," said Melwyn Noronha, deputy CEO of Shipping Australia.

International guidance and protocols

It is especially frustrating given the existence of extraordinarily detailed guidelines and protocols to help shipping companies and ship agents carry out crew changes in a COVID-safe way. That guidance has been endorsed and issued by expert global bodies such as the International Maritime Organization.

The IMO document, "Recommended framework of protocols for ensuring safe ship crew changes and travel during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic" contains 61 pages of guidance. There are six main protocols addressing seafarer behaviour and activities at each stage of a crew change journey from home to ship, including being at an ordinary place of residence, being at an airport of departure and being on the aircraft, all the way through to joining the ship. A similar set of six protocols sets out the same journey in reverse for off-signing crew from the ship all the way back to the seafarer's home. Each of the protocols is divided into several sub-protocols.

There are also seven annexes that address a variety of matters as: evidence of seafarer status document(s); crew health self-declarations; daily temperature records; employer letters, and various crew change and travel information sheets.

This is not the only international guidance. There are many more guidance documents issued by a variety of important bodies such as flag states, the International Labour Organization, the International Chamber of Shipping and the World Health Organization, among others. In addition to the crew change, there is guidance on a range of matters including, but not limited to, ensuring a safe interface between ship and shore-personnel, ship sanitation certificates, the protection of health of seafarers, and operational considerations for the management of COVID-cases onboard ships.

These guidelines and protocols have been created by a broad cross-section of global industry associations from across the transport industry. The fact that these guidelines and protocols exist show, at an international level, just how seriously COVID-19 risk management is to the ocean freight industry.

Plans in action

Having guidance and protocols is all very nice but, as anyone with a practical bent will tell you, having good outcomes depends on people and companies actually putting strategies, plans and tactics into action.

Happily, ocean freight shipping companies are very active in setting up and deploying COVID-19 countermeasures.

Shipping Australia canvassed its shipping line members, international ship management companies, and carried out overseas research to find out what the maritime industry is doing to combat the spread of COVID-19.

Shipping companies have been observed to use a variety of COVID-19

countermeasures, such as those outlined below, when carrying out crew changes. Some shipping companies have basically adopted and applied the IMO protocols on crew change. Of course, it should be noted that the exact countermeasures carried out will vary according to local law in each different jurisdiction. They will also vary from company to company.

In practice, shipping companies may require seafarers to undergo COVID-19 swab tests. Testing can be undertaken pre-deployment in the country of the seafarer's ordinary residence. Any symptomatic display, or the reporting of a COVID-19 positive test, would render a seafarer unfit to travel or to join a vessel.

On-signing seafarers may be asked to complete a COVID-19-specific screening questionnaire, health self-declaration, or similar, before going onboard ship. On-signing seafarers may also be required to have their temperature taken and recorded prior to embarkation, and, indeed, continue to have their temperature taken throughout their voyages.

Shipping companies and agents will also have contingency plans ready for when a seafarer is deemed unsuitable to board a ship. Seafarers may be presented with pocket guides as a memory aid to standard infection prevention measures. Seafarers are also given, and do wear, personal protective equipment. The exact personal protective equipment will vary from company to company. Shipping Australia has seen examples of in-transit seafarers wearing personal protective equipment that includes gloves, masks, face shields and full-body disposable coverings together with plastic booties.

Meanwhile, on ships, there are extensive sanitation, cleaning, and access-control protocols to ensure that ships remain largely COVID-19 free.

Seafarer logistics

Arranging the logistics for international personal travel can be difficult. International aviation capacity is greatly



Over 1400 Ports
Covering 31 Countries
More than 100 Offices Worldwide
Shipping to & from Melbourne, Brisbane
Sydney, Fremantle & Adelaide

**LINKING AUSTRALIA
TO THE WORLD AND
THE WORLD TO
AUSTRALIA**

INTRODUCING AIRSHIP A NEW DIMENSION TO OUR SERVICES OFFERING DYNAMIC INTERNATIONAL SOLUTIONS

When seafreight is too slow & airfreight too expensive.
Airship is the key to your continued business success.

Simplified Tariff
Door-to-port service
Substantially reduced transit times
Priority transfer from plane to vessel
Prompt vessel connection in Singapore



THE 2019 DCN AUSTRALIAN
**Shipping &
Maritime**
INDUSTRY AWARDS
HIGHLY COMMENDED

Contact us for your most competitive rates & service

WWW.GLOBELINK.COM.AU

reduced. So seafarers may have to take a rather circular route, hopping flight-by-flight from one country to another to get to an end destination. That is, assuming all the flights go ahead and, if they do go ahead, further assuming that a seafarer doesn't get bumped off any of the flights by an airline en-route. Then there are problems with mandatory quarantine, caps on the numbers of people allowed into a country if the borders are open (flight caps into Australia are a particular problem), getting visas and then generally arranging matters to ensure that ship-seafarer arrival times coincide.

All these problems compound to make crew changeovers more difficult than they would otherwise be, and so shipping companies and agents only arrange travel when and where travel requirements and regulations are known in advance.

Private travel networks

To get around these problems, in certain places around the world, such as Denmark, various parties have been essentially developing privately-run essential worker/seafarer transit networks. Elsewhere, models for so-called "safe corridors" are being proposed. Although there is far more detail than can be provided here and although practices may vary, the basic methodology roughly appears to be the same in the models reported to Shipping Australia. Essentially, seafarers from well-known seafaring nations, such as India or the Philippines, are being flown into, or repatriated from, a crew-change destination country. In the source country, seafarers are asked to go into pre-deployment centres (quarantine-controlled hotels) for 14 days. During that time, seafarers are COVID-19 tested and, if illness-free, they are then flown out of the seafarer source country and into a crew change country. With further tests on arrival (temperature testing, health-screen questionnaires and so on) seafarers are bundled into private land transport (people-carrier type vehicles) and are either sent temporarily to a controlled centre (quarantine-controlled hotels usually) or are sent directly to the ship. A similar process happens, but in reverse, to repatriate a seafarer. During transit to/from the airport or ship, seafarers may be provided with packed lunches to minimise exposure of seafarers to the local population

and vice-versa. Sadly, police escorts may also be needed – there have been instances of vilification of seafarers by local populations.

Of course, there are variations in the model, or in proposed models, around the world. Some plans may involve seafarers being flown into remote international airports and the airport then being subjected to extensive cleaning. Instead of hotels being used for quarantine, remote mining camps may be used. In some variations, instead of quarantine in the source country, there is quarantine in the destination country, and so on.

Managing risk and remembering what ships are for

Protection of the health of maritime crew, onshore workers, and the general public is well considered through thoughtful plans and protocols. Health is also protected by robust shipping industry action.

It is now time for all governments, including all Australian governments, to recognise the risk mitigation measures put in place by industry, to show leadership, and to ease the way for ships to change crew, and seafarers to get to and from ships.

Why? Because no matter who we are and no matter how far away we live from the ocean, we all depend upon the transport of foodstuffs, medicines, medical equipment, medical supplies, and everyday goods from across the sea.

Officials and politicians in every sector and at every level of government should realise that, by operating overly stringent counter-COVID-19 rules, they are swapping the risk of COVID-19 with the risk of stopping ships.

A stoppage of shipping will collapse economies (just think of the value of Australia's coal, iron ore, gas, and grain exports) and could lead to a shortage of vital goods in the pharmacy and in supermarkets.

Given that, only a few months ago, people were physically fighting in the supermarket over a perceived shortage of toilet paper, we can only shudder at the potential for public unrest if medicines and foodstuffs ever actually fall into short supply.

The author J.A. Shedd said it best, perhaps, nearly 100 years ago, when he wrote wise words about risk management.

'A ship in harbor is safe,' he wrote, 'but that is not what ships are built for.'

Key points: Australia's seafarer crew change crisis

- Australian families depend on ocean shipping for the delivery of foodstuffs, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, medical supplies, and everyday goods,
- Ships and ports need to remain fully operational to maintain continuity of Australia's supply chain, so as to enable Australian families to buy vital goods,
- Ships cannot operate properly and safely without fresh crew
- The world fleet needs to changeover hundreds of thousands of crew members,
- Ships and their crews need to be identified and acknowledged as a vital component of Australia's supply chain,
- Fatigue leading to an error in judgment by seafarers could be either a causal or a contributory factor (or both) in a maritime environmental disaster,
- Ships blocking ports, either because of being detained or because of crew leaving vessels, has cost implications for ports, importers, exporters and for the general Australian economy. Ultimately, and in a variety of ways, everyday Australians will pay these costs,
- Governments should not be so blind to the grave risks to which they are exposing Australia by allowing seafarers to suffer,
- A single set of State and Federal policies and protocols for ships to access ports and to promote commercial maritime crew health and welfare should be followed by all governments, and by all government departments and agencies,
- Australia's international reputation is being adversely affected by governmental insistence on neglecting the legitimate humanitarian needs of seafarers and the legitimate logistical needs of the supply chain. Australia's international reputation is also being adversely affected by blatant governmental disregard for international law. ▲



Caring for our Clients and their Cargo

When you combine Newcastle's hugely diverse range of facilities with our levels of service, competence and experience, we believe you will find a genuinely competitive option for all your imports and exports through the Eastern Sea Board.

130 Young Street, Carrington NSW 2294 | PO BOX 190, CARRINGTON NSW 2294
Ph Main: +61 2 4978 7100 | Mobile: +61 412 680 001 | Email: geoff@newcastlestevedores.com.au



A friend in the business. Hamburg Süd.

In business, it helps to have a friend you can turn to for good advice and strong support. Someone who knows your needs and takes the personal care needed to meet them, always working in your best interests. Product excellence and service reliability are indispensable, but what creates that kind of commitment is a spirit of cooperation, continuity, and trust – in other words, friendship. And that's the ship you can count on to carry everything forward.



No matter what.

HAMBURG  SÜD

www.hamburgsud-line.com