

SEAFARER WELFARE



*By David Parmeter, Chair
of the Australian Mariners'
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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic globally has been profound with an enormous toll in lives lost and human suffering. While we in Australia have fortunately not been as severely affected as other

parts of the world, the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the welfare of seafarers and their families. Stringent limitations on international travel have made crew changes extremely difficult. As a result seafarers have had to endure excessive periods at sea and away from families, or have been unable to join their vessels and earn a living. While this is a global problem, the crisis has been compounded in Australia by different states imposing their own rules.

At the same time, restrictions on shore leave for crews and access to vessels means the vital work of the seafarer welfare organisations has been impeded. Despite this all concerned have risen to the challenge magnificently and are doing everything possible to assist seafarers. A wonderful example of this occurred with the extended stay of the cruise vessel "Ruby Princess" in Port Kembla twelve months ago. Concerned citizens from the Illawarra community, led by the local Mission to Seafarers, rallied around the crew and provided those on board with some very welcome practical support and human kindness.

The Australian Mariners' Welfare Society (AMWS) recognises the critical role played by the various seafarer welfare organisations in supporting seafarers at this time.

AMWS is a charitable organisation providing financial support to the Missions to Seafarers and Apostleship

of the Sea (Stella Maris) at 39 centres around Australia as well as offering maritime scholarships and tall ship training experiences, providing subsidised home unit accommodation for Australian ex-seafarers of modest means, giving donations to causes helping seafarers and their families or recognising their contributions to society through representation on relevant Councils and Committees. The Society is managed by a Council of volunteers with a paid secretary. The financial basis of the AMWS is a foundation established as a result, primarily from the sale of property.

The AMWS is the successor organisation to the Sydney Sailors' Home (SSH) which started life in 1863 and officially opened in 1865 in the Historic Rocks area of Port Jackson. In its first year the home provided accommodation for over 1100 seafarers.

In the 1970's, the NSW Government Compulsorily resumed the property and it was vacated in 1979. The Council of the SSH continued with its mission of support of seafarers and in 1987 a site was purchased in Woolloomooloo to build a Mariners' Court to provide accommodation for ex-seafarers but it was not entirely successful and was sold in accordance with a Supreme Court ruling in 1998. To accommodate the three ex-seafarers still at Mariners' Court, home units were bought in Hornsby and two remain to this day. Importantly, the Court agreed to the broadening of the scope of charitable activities beyond providing accommodation and to remove the restriction on supporting projects outside New South Wales. In 2002 the Sydney Sailors' Home changed its name to the Australian Mariners' Welfare Society.

A scholarship scheme for young people planning a career at sea was established in 1999. In accordance with the Constitution of the AMWS, these scholarships are offered to students of Maritime Training institutions recognised by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority.



The successful applicants must be children of ex-seafarers being from the Navy, Merchant Marine or Deep -Sea Fishermen and of low or less than moderate financial means. Currently, the scholarships are valued at \$3000 each biannually and students can apply for support over more than one semester.

Scholarships have been provided to students at the Australian Maritime College in Launceston and to students at TAFE's in Western Australia, Newcastle and Northern Queensland. The cash support programme can assist with course fees, travel costs and living expenses.

Financial support is also provided to young people aged 15 to 19 to undertake voyages on sail training vessels such as the "Young Endeavour" in Sydney, the "One & All" in Port Adelaide, the "Windward Bound" in Hobart and the "Leeuwin" in Fremantle. Selection for this program is based on needs and the benefit the young person will gain from the experience. AMWS conducts due diligence safety audits on the vessels.

AMWS operates an extensive financial grants programme including annual grants to the Missions to Seafarers and the Apostleship of the Sea (Stella Maris) in recognition of the incredibly significant contribution they make in assisting seafarers arriving at Australian ports including offering a home away from home in more normal times. In addition, financial support is offered to assist with the

upkeep of the centres, contribution towards buying buses, tyre replacement and registration, the provision of IT services including at the berth face and so on.

Financial support has also been provided for the international Maritime Humanitarian Response programme that assists victims of piracy and their families. Furthermore, AMWS is a member of the Australian Seafarers' Welfare Committee whose role is to ensure the provision of appropriate welfare services for all seafarers visiting Australian ports in accordance with the provision of the 2006 International Labour Convention mentioned above. The Society is also represented on the Sydney Port Welfare Committee.

It is notable that in 2015, the 150th annual general meeting of the SSH/AMWS was held in the SSH building and there would not be many companies with continuous corporate registration spanning a century and a half. While we are proud of our history, the Council is focussed on meeting the challenges of the future and changing the operations and structure of the Society as necessary to remain relevant to catering for the welfare of all seafarers.

All individuals, companies and organisations that are concerned about seafarer welfare are encouraged to join AMWS and support our activities. For further information readers are referred to the AMWS website www.marinerswelfare.com