Australian Mariners' Welfare Society

ABN 86 000 008 122

*Founded as Sydney Sailors Home – 1863*

**STATEMENT FROM THE CHAIR OF AUSTRALIAN MARINERS WELFARE SOCIETY**

Everyone one of us is acutely aware of the terrible impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic has had and is having on the lives and welfare of millions of people around the world.

What is not so widely known in our communities is the effect of the pandemic on seafarers. Tens of thousands of seafarers have been marooned on vessels around the world unable to return home and re-join their families because of restrictions on travel and movement. This has resulted in an upsurge of mental health issues among seafarers and in particular there are disturbing reports of an increase in incidents of self-harm among ships crews. At the same time the ability of those charitable organisations that support seafarers to ameliorate these conditions has been compromised by restrictions on access to vessels and the movement of seafarers.

While this is a global problem, it is compounded in Australia by conflicting policies implemented by state and territory governments. This is having an adverse impact on Australian seafarers undertaking crew changes who have to travel across state lines, and international seafarers scheduled to join and leave vessels in Australian ports. The situation has been well described by the relevant industry bodies, Maritime Industry Australia Limited (MIAL) and Shipping Australia limited (SAL).

In a recent submission to a Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into the Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Australia's Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade, MIAL wrote, in part:
*Notwithstanding the fact that the COVID-19 global pandemic has presented circumstances not experienced before, the chaos that has arisen as a result of the state and territory governments acting independently and with little to no communication with industry to implement multiple and ever changing border closures has created immense hardship for employees and maritime businesses. These impacts go well beyond that which are necessary to manage the COVID risks and could have been avoided with a more coordinated and consistent approach that prioritised communication with affected industry.*
*Australia requires a consistent, nation-wide policy on the movement of essential maritime workers between national and state/Territory borders as part of any policy development action to prepare for future events. The policy should be accompanied by protocols for dealing with the many circumstances that arise as a result, such as:*

- *Communication with affected industry*
- *Crew changes*
- *Ensuring access to medical care for injured seafarers (non-COVID)*
- *Dealing with a disease case on board (COVID)*

*Many of these protocols have already been developed internationally, and by the more proactive Australian states, such as Queensland as the crisis has unfolded. The industry is very conservative in their risk management approach.*
*Critical to this is addressing the visa system. Australia's visa system is inflexible and has created many practical issues in relation to the ability of foreign seafarers to legally undertake their required 14 days quarantine upon entering Australia for the purpose of joining a ship. This has created a*

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*significant additional barrier to the ability for Australia, as a signatory to the Maritime Labour Convention, to do our bit and assist in the many urgently required crew changes.*

SAL has gone on the public record on behalf of its members and an extract of one of these statements is set out below:

*There are solid reasons that state and territory governments should allow crew changes to take place in this country.*

*These include:*

- *a compassionate obligation to alleviate human suffering;*
- *a desire to prevent personal injury, maritime accidents and subsequent environmental incidents;*
- *a need to protect the interests of the Australian population and its economy as a whole;*
- *a crucial need to keep international sea freight moving;*
- *simple reasons related to the everyday practicalities of shipping;*
- *Australia living up to its own self-imposed standards to live by the rule of the law and to honour our international legal obligations.*

*Shipping Australia notes and applauds both the Federal Government and Maritime Safety Queensland for acting in Australia's best interests by facilitating crew changes in a safe manner. We also call upon all other Australian governments to adhere to the National Protocols on crew changes as endorsed by the National Cabinet on 9 April.*

AMWS endorses the position adopted by the industry associations and joins everyone concerned about the welfare of seafarers by calling on Governments at all levels to take the necessary steps to prevent this unnecessary hardship and suffering.

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