SeafarerHelp
The lifeline for seafarers

Annual Review 2012

Incorporating all services provided by the SeafarerHelp team.
The 2012 Annual Review of SeafarerHelp contains some bad news but also some very welcome news of developments during 2012 that promise exciting and positive future progress in the field of seafarers' welfare.

First the bad news. In 2012 SeafarerHelp received even more calls, involving more seafarers facing difficult situations than in 2011 and the figure for that year was in itself a significant increase over 2010. It is tragic and unacceptable, but the predominant causes of distress remain unpaid wages, repatriation issues and unacceptable working and living conditions, just as they have been in most recent years.

On the positive side, 2012 also saw some key changes that will be of very material help in future. Some of these are reported elsewhere in this Review. However, looking to the future, the most important development concerns the merger between ISAN, which has operated the SeafarerHelp service for the past 10 years, and the International Committee on Seafarers Welfare (ICSW) into the new organisation, the International Seafarers Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN). This means that the SeafarerHelp service will continue under the ISWAN banner, as part of an organisation that is stronger and better resourced in every respect than it was before.

Underpinning the good news is the fact that the ILO Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) entered into force on 20 August 2013. The large majority of cases SeafarerHelp deals with are clear breaches of the MLC and many involve ships flying the flags of countries that have ratified that Convention. While we obviously hope that entry into force will reduce the number of such cases in the future, we are determined to help ensure compliance by reminding flag states of their obligations whenever such cases arise.

Finally, I must offer heartfelt thanks to our staff who deal with SeafarerHelp cases on a daily (and nightly!) basis and to the port welfare and trade union staff who follow-up these cases: the service could not function without them. I must also offer heartfelt thanks to the organisations that provide generous funding to support the SeafarerHelp service and to the ISAN board of trustees who over the years have plotted a steady course through the many difficulties of creating a new charity and have now steered us into a safe haven within the merged organisation. And I wish all of the trustees of ISWAN the very best for the future.
The SeafarerHelp Services:

2012 overview

The ISWAN SeafarerHelp helpline has a staff of ten, mostly part-time, operators working from offices in Croydon, near London in the UK. A multi-lingual service is provided and the operators are fluent in eleven different languages including most of the principal languages used by seafarers, such as Filipino, Russian, Mandarin Chinese, Turkish, Spanish, Urdu and Hindi.

The service is free of charge and seafarers and their families can contact the office by telephone, email, text, live chat, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, letter or fax. Most of the contacts that are received are referred to specialist maritime agencies for direct assistance including the ITF and the port welfare providers, such as the Mission to Seafarers, Apostleship of the Sea, Sailors Society, or to national embassies or consulates, harbour authorities or medical service providers. The assistance provided by these organisations is invaluable and is warmly acknowledged.

The decision to merge the International Seafarers Assistance Network with the International Committee on Seafarers Welfare was agreed in principle over two years ago. ISAN and ICSW had similar objectives, many stakeholders in common and shared the same premises. Nevertheless it was inevitable that the many legal, financial and practical issues that needed to be resolved would take time, however, the merger eventually took place on 1 April 2013 and the new charity, the International Seafarers’ Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) was launched to run the SeafarerHelp service as well as the functions previously undertaken by the ICSW.

ISWAN has a stronger voice and better financial and staffing resources than either of its two constituent bodies working separately and will be better able to work to help improve the provision of seafarer’s welfare across the world both at a strategic and operational level. Progress towards the merger was only one of several positive initiatives that were pursued during 2012 and the year also saw some key changes that will be of material help in future.

In November 2012 SeafarerHelp signed a contract with SMART Telecoms of the Philippines which enables seafarers to contact SeafarerHelp using shipboard satellite phones completely free of charge. This eliminates the expense seafarers face in contacting SeafarerHelp while at sea as the charges go direct to a special SeafarerHelp account with SMART.

In July 2012 SeafarerHelp signed a contract to provide a dedicated 24/7 helpline service to the ITF, this was in addition to a similar existing contract with another organisation and discussions are underway with a third potential customer. These arrangements are dealt with through a subsidiary trading company (Seafarers Welfare Assistance Network Ltd) which was set up specifically to handle external contracts. The referrals undertaken for these helplines are included in the overall figures in this document. These arrangements provide alternative sources of funding which enhance the security of the organisation and utilise the core competencies of the SeafarerHelp team more effectively.

As is reported elsewhere in this Review, a disproportionate number of SeafarerHelp cases arise on ships flying particular flags. So it is a pleasure to report that the Marshall Islands Register approached SeafarerHelp in 2012 and invited us to contact them directly so that they could assist with cases arising on their ships. We very much hope that other administrations will show a similar sense of responsibility.

In July 2012 SeafarerHelp entered into an agreement to provide office space to staff from the Maritime Piracy: Humanitarian Response Programme for which SeafarerHelp already provides a 24/7 helpline service in piracy cases. This arrangement makes excellent sense for both parties and will increase the existing synergies between them.

In September 2012 discussions commenced to streamline the procedures used to process and administer applications and payments for the Seafarers Emergency Fund (SEF). The SEF provides quick financial assistance to seafarers in emergency situations where no other sources of funding are available. The management and administration of the scheme and fund transferred to ISAN and ICSW in January 2013 and then to ISWAN in April 2013 when the merger was completed. The SeafarerHelp team is already used to providing a co-ordinating role between the various welfare providers and this new task is an extension of that and is going very well. The SEF is generously financed by donations from the TK Foundation and ITF Seafarers Trust for which we are very grateful.

In order to further develop the skills and abilities of the SeafarerHelp team a comprehensive staff training programme was started in 2012 designed to improve call handling and customer service. In addition, the case handling software, that was installed in 2005 and does not provide the detailed information that is needed, is in the process of being upgraded. This will mean that the information that can be provided in future will be more useful and informative as well as providing the operators with a better case-handling interface.

The SeafarerHelp service is provided with financial support from the ITF Seafarers Trust, The TK Foundation and Seafarers (UK), whose generosity allows this vital service to seafarers and their families to continue.
In 2012 the SeafarerHelp team:

- dealt with problems involving over 4,300 seafarers and their families
- covering seafarers of 76 different nationalities calling from 102 different countries
- involving over 40,000 incoming and outgoing communications by email, telephone, SMS, Live Chat, Skype, and fax
- all provided free of charge, 24 hours per day, 365 days per year and often in the seafarer’s own language

2012 caseload review

2012 at a glance

- On average 2.5 new cases were received by the SeafarerHelp team everyday
- The average number of seafarers involved in each case was 4.7
- There was a 30% increase in the number of new cases handled and an increase of 43% in the number of seafarers assisted over those dealt with in 2011
- In addition to new cases the SeafarerHelp team was working with approximately 250 on-going cases at any given time
- There has been a significant increase in the number of cases coming to the SeafarerHelp helpline for each of the last three years and there is a further increase in cases in the first three months of 2013
- The number of reported ship abandonments showed a significant increase in 2012 from the number reported in 2011
- The most common problems seafarers raised were unpaid wages, problems over repatriation, contractual problems, sub standard conditions onboard and health issues
- Of the 76 different nationalities assisted the largest number were Filipinos, followed by Ukrainians, Indians and Russians
- While the largest group of seafarers contacting SeafarerHelp were from developing world countries, 8% came from European Union and other developed world countries and 14% came from Commonwealth member countries
- We were contacted from 102 different countries
- Although many cases involved more than one referral agency most were initially referred to the ITF Inspectors, followed by the ITF Maritime Operations Section, the Missions to Seafarers and the Apostleship of the Sea
- Initial contact from seafarers to SeafarerHelp usually involved mobile or landline phone calls, but internet communications are increasingly used as the preferred medium for follow-up communication

Number of cases

The number of new cases handled by the SeafarerHelp team in 2012 was 931, involving some 4,388 seafarers. This was a 30% increase in the number of cases and a 43% increase in the number of seafarers handled by the team compared to 2011. And 2011 cases were a 7% increase over the cases dealt with in 2010.

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>2864</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>3065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>4388</td>
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This is a very considerable increase in the number of cases and it is thought that it is due to a number of factors:

1. The SeafarerHelp service has been marketed more effectively and this has increased the number of seafarers and their families contacting us.
2. The world recession continued and deepened in 2012 and started to impact more heavily on the maritime industry. The result is that some of the more marginal companies ceased trading while others have tried to cut costs with the tragic but perhaps inevitable result that it is the seafarer who ends up with a problem.
3. In 2012 the SeafarerHelp team started to provide helpline services for other organisations which has raised our profile amongst seafarers and other maritime organisations.

The number of new cases received each year is not the only measure of the SeafarerHelp team’s workload. Simple requests for information from seafarers can usually be dealt with during the initial contact, whether by phone, SMS text or any of the other means by which they contact the team. Unfortunately most cases are more complicated than that often involving more than one referral agency in more than one port. In some cases, such as abandonment, legal issues can cause delays that result in cases remaining open and active for several months. On average the SeafarerHelp team has 250 active cases ongoing at any one time.
Case study

Early in the year SeafarerHelp was contacted by the crew of a Taiwanese fishing boat who were in a desperate situation. The boat had been hijacked by Somali pirates and held for nine months and, after release the crew had been told by the owner to sail to Sri Lanka where wages would be paid and repatriation arranged. However, on arrival, the crew of eight Kenyans, two Mozambiques and two Chinese found that they had been abandoned with no money or basic necessities such as food and water.

The SeafarerHelp team contacted the local Missions to Seafarers Chaplain and the ITF inspector as well as the Maritime Piracy: Humanitarian Response Programme (MPHRP) for help. Food and water were immediately provided to the crew, who were also allowed ashore from time-to-time for recreation. Since the owner had disappeared the ITF inspector arranged for the fishing boat to be arrested and sold by the local maritime authorities so that the crew could receive their backpay. The MHRP also provided expert support to the seafarers concerning their ordeal at the hands of the pirates.

The SeafarerHelp Mandarin speaker contacted the local Chinese Embassy and eventually the two Chinese crew were repatriated to their home country. However they remained in contact with the SeafarerHelp team to check on progress with the sale of the fishing boat and their wage settlement. The remaining crew members were repatriated once the boat was sold and all crew members eventually received the wages they were due.

This was a remarkable (but not an infrequent) example of how a serious multinational welfare problem can be overcome through cooperation and co-ordination between the various key agencies. The crew had been away from their homes for over two years before they were eventually repatriated.

Seafarer problems

Seafarers problems frequently involve more than one issue — unpaid wages often also involves sub-standard working conditions, breaches of employment contracts and failure to repatriate the seafarers on time. About one third of the cases raised with SeafarerHelp involve multiple issues, however rather than split single issue and multiple issue cases we have amalgamated them so the statistics are more easily understood.

Of all the issues raised with SeafarerHelp in 2012 25% involved unpaid wages, 18% related to problems over repatriation, 15% were requests for various types of information, 9.5% related to problems with seafarers’ contracts and 4.25% related to the ship conditions or living conditions. Other significant problems encountered included health issues, abuse and bullying, piracy, financial issues and various types of welfare issues. Not all of the cases had happy endings.

While the number of abandonment cases showed a significant increase over 2011, other problems remained the same, and in broadly the same proportions. The chart below shows a breakdown of the principle issues that the SeafarerHelp team dealt with during 2012.
Case study

A Ukrainian seafarer’s wife contacted us to ask for help about her missing husband. A few months previously she had been told by her husband’s employer that her husband had disappeared at sea. However she told us that her husband’s employer had refused to give her anymore information. She was clinging to the hope that her husband might still be alive and she and her daughter were struggling to cope with the uncertainty of the situation. She was desperate for information and although she had tried to talk to the Coast Guard service in Australia that was investigating her husband’s disappearance she could not communicate properly because she did not speak English very well. She agreed that one of the SeafarerHelp Russian/English speaking operators could communicate with the Coast Guard and act as an interpreter on her behalf. The SeafarerHelp team made sure that the seafarer’s wife and daughter were supported by identifying a local welfare organisation called the ASSOL Foundation and getting them in contact with her. We then contacted the Coast Guard investigating the seafarer’s disappearance and we also sought the help of our friends at the ITF and the Apostleship of the Sea in the port where the Coast Guard service was based. Unfortunately the outcome of the investigation by the Coast Guard was that the seafarer was lost at sea. The authorities had undertaken a thorough search of the area where the seafarer was last known to be on board, but the conclusion of survival experts was that he could not have survived and so he was presumed dead. This tragic news was communicated to the seafarer’s wife through an official statement by the police working with the Coast Guard. The seafarer’s wife and daughter are currently being supported by the ASSOL Foundation, a local agency that helps seafarers and their families in their country. Inevitably, not all cases have a happy ending.

Seafarer nationalities

In 2012 the SeafarerHelp team worked with seafarers from 76 different countries who required assistance. Seventeen of these countries were members of the Commonwealth and 16 were EU and other developed world countries. While a seafarer’s nationality may seem an easy piece of information to obtain this is not always the case. Sometimes the initial contact is very brief, sometimes the connection fails and sometimes the caller does not know all of the nationalities of the seafarers involved in a case. However callers often do not wish to reveal their nationality for fear of reprisals. The following figures on nationality should therefore be regarded as indicative only.

Approximately 21.5% of those contacting us came from the Philippines, 17% did not want to reveal their nationalities, 14% were Ukrainians, 7% were Russian, 7% Indian and 6% were from Turkey. Although most of those seafarers who were assisted came from the less developed countries of the world, the SeafarerHelp team also assisted seafarers from Australia, France, Greece, Italy, Spain, the USA and the UK. European Union nationals and other developed world countries accounted for some 8% of those assisted while Commonwealth citizens accounted for 14%. The chart below shows the break down.

Calls for help came to SeafarerHelp came 102 different countries of which 23 were Commonwealth countries. In 16% of the cases, the caller either did not reveal where they were calling from or could not be traced e.g. the message was by SMS, 10% of calls were from ships at sea, 7% were from the Philippines and a similar percentage from the UK. A significant number of calls originated from India, Columbia, Italy, Russia, Spain, Russia and Ukraine.
Flag states

As part of its standard information the SeafarerHelp team asks for the country in which the ship is registered, however this is another piece of information that it not always easy to obtain. Where this information was provided it shows that the SeafarerHelp team dealt with seafarers that were from ships that were registered in 68 different countries. The six registries that were most frequently encountered are shown below together with the number of cases that related to them.

It would be somewhat remarkable if Panama did not feature at the top of the SeafarerHelp list as it is the largest flag state, but it is also noticeable that certain flag states feature more often in SeafarerHelp cases than would be expected given their relative positions in the world fleet “league table”. All of the six flag states shown in Chart 4 have ratified the ILO Maritime Labour Convention and that Convention enters into force in August 2013. As most cases SeafarerHelp deals with are potentially clear breaches of that Convention and the MLC contains a mandatory crew complaint procedure, it will be very interesting to monitor the number of cases the SeafarerHelp team receives from ships flying the flags of countries that have ratified the MLC to check whether or not the number of cases declines.

“How we work"

The SeafarerHelp team receive a very wide range of contacts from seafarers and their families, some of which are more complex than others. Where it is a simple request for information, such as the address of the Seafarer Centre in a particular port, or something similar, then the SeafarerHelp team deals with that enquiry themselves. Such requests for information accounted for 15% of all contacts in 2012.

However the majority of cases that are received are much more complex and the team usually refer them to our colleagues in specialist agencies who can provide assistance in the port or country that the seafarer is visiting at the time. Most of the referral agencies that we use specialise in the maritime sector and have shore based personnel in the ports around the world. This enables them to provide direct assistance to the seafarer which can be very reassuring. The agencies that we refer to include the International Transport Workers Federation inspectors and their Maritime Operations Team and various members of the International Christian Maritime Association (ICMA), such as the Missions to Seafarers, the Apostleship of the Sea, Sailors Society and Seamen's Church Institute. In addition, port authorities and, where appropriate, Government agencies such as embassies, consulates or the police or Coast Guard service, as well as organisations such as the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and port medical facilities and to the Maritime Piracy Humanitarian Response Programme (MPHRP) are also contacted by the SeafarerHelp team.

Chart 4

Flag state the case’s ships are registered to

Singapore (6) – 24 cases
Marshall Islands (3) – 35 cases
Antigua and Barbuda (20) – 35 cases
Liberia (2) – 40 cases
Panama (1) – 117 cases
Malta (8) – 56 cases

Case study

The spokesman for forty Filipino crew members on two vessels that had been anchored alongside each other at a port in Malaysia called SeafarerHelp for assistance. He said that the ships had been arrested in the anchorage for more than 2 months, that they had not been paid for many months and were running out of food and water. Rations were limited to rice and egg which the crews supplemented by fishing and with no fuel for air-conditioning they mostly slept out on deck.

The two vessels were owned by the same company which was struggling financially and the company told them they were going to sell the ships. The seafarers hoped this would happen quickly because they wanted their outstanding wages and to go home.

Contact was made with the local ITF representative, the Chaplain of the International Seaman’s Centre run by the Danish Seamen’s Church, the Malaysian Government responsible for seafarers’ affairs and the Embassy of the Philippines in Malaysia. During the three months while these seafarers were held in the anchorage after contacting SeafarerHelp they told us that they were short of fuel and food and that their living conditions were very bad. Most of the time they had no electricity and they had to sleep on deck because their cabins were too hot.

While waiting for the ship to be sold, the SeafarerHelp team maintained regular contact between the various organisations involved and with the seafarers themselves, who often simply just wanted to talk to a sympathetic listener in their own language to help relieve their stress. During this period one of the senior officers suffered a heart attack, the ITF local inspector quickly arranged a hospital transfer where he eventually recovered, and one of the Captains abandoned his ship and crew because he could not cope with the stress anymore.

After three months the ITF and the Malaysian government maritime agency eventually resolved the situation and the seafarers were paid and repatriated. Contact was made with the seafarers’ spokesman when he arrived back home and he thanked the SeafarerHelp team for supporting them and for providing a listening ear during what had been a very difficult time.
It is a central principle of SeafarerHelp operations that a case will only be referred to a particular external agency if the person seeking assistance agrees to the agency concerned. Some seafarers may have fears of possible prejudice to future job opportunities if certain unions are involved, whilst others may only want to be assisted by an agency of a particular faith. The SeafarerHelp team tries to balance these requirements even when it is clear that they can make it more difficult to achieve a successful outcome to the case.

A call to SeafarerHelp will often generate a referral to a welfare organisation, or some other agency, in the port that the seafarer is in or about to enter. However because of difficulties in communication or the complexity of a case it is not always possible to gather enough information at the first contact to enable the case to be referred to another organisation. In such cases it is necessary to talk to the seafarer (or their family) more than once to gather enough information to make a decision on who to refer the case too and such cases are known as “No first referrals”. Although not referred to other organisations immediately after the first contact these cases are usually referred to other organisations following one or more additional contacts. The chart below shows the “number of cases allocated following the first contact” and the “No first referrals”.

The most frequent problem that seafarers report is that they are not paid, often for many months, for the hard work that they have done. And four out of the top five reasons that seafarers contact SeafarerHelp could all be classed as contractual issues. Therefore it is not at all surprising that the team makes a large number of referrals to the ITF inspectors, the ITF Maritime Operations team and national trade unions.

The information below is in two different forms. The first chart overleaf is the method of contact that the seafarer or their family used in their initial contact with the team. It does not show any subsequent or additional contacts.
Chart 6 shows the communication method used in making the first contact with the SeafarerHelp team. Telephone (mobile, landline or satellite) is the most common form of first contact, followed by email, live chat and SMS text.

Chart 7 shows the incoming and outgoing traffic for the SeafarerHelp team including initial and subsequent contacts. As such it gives a more detailed account of the ongoing level of activity that occurs in response to case handling within the ISWAN SeafarerHelp team. Perhaps the main conclusions to be drawn from the current communication methods seafarers use are that email usage and the Live Chat facility continue to increase, as does the use of Skype, while contact by telephone (mobile and landline) continues to decrease.

Conclusion

The global economic recession shows few signs of abating and its impact on the shipping, together with an imbalance between the demand and supply of ships to carry world trade, places a huge burden on the industry. It is tragic and unacceptable that the consequences of this situation fall so heavily on the seafarers of all nationalities who man the world fleet. As the data in this Review demonstrates, this places an increasing demand on those organisations whose task it is to provide support, care and active help to seafarers and their families in need, including SeafarerHelp and its partners in the maritime welfare services worldwide.

However the work undertaken during 2012 within SeafarerHelp and its sister organisation the ICSW, as well as industry developments such the imminent entry into force of the Maritime Labour Convention, ensures that ISWAN is looking to the future with confidence in its ability to meet the welfare challenges and opportunities that are posed.
SeafarerHelp – the lifeline for seafarers
If you would like more information about ISWAN, the Seafarers Emergency Fund (SEF) or the SeafarerHelp service please contact us directly or look at our websites, details below. Similarly if you would like more information about our services, what services we can provide for you, or if you can offer financial or other support please feel free to talk to us using the numbers below.

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