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TWIC questions: Marine Exchange is working to save mariners time, money

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JUNEAU - Hundreds of maritime workers throughout Southeast have been saved a trip or two to Juneau, thanks largely to the efforts of the Marine Exchange of Alaska, a nonprofit maritime advocacy group.

When Brett Farrell, Vice President of the Marine Exchange of Alaska, first found out about Transportation Worker Identification Credentials (TWIC) he knew Southeast mariners would need some help.

In 2004, Congress mandated all licensed mariners and waterfront workers with access to secure dock areas obtain a Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC) card.

Obtaining the cards, which cost \$132.50 and are good for five years, requires two visits to an enrollment center.

What is a small bureaucratic hurdle for most of the country can be a costly procedure for workers in remote Alaskan communities. The Transportation Security Authority contracted with Lockheed Martin to establish enrollment centers across the country, but only four were set up in Alaska; in Juneau, Anchorage, Valdez and Nikiski.

"We saw ... that there was a huge disparity between people in the Lower 48... who could just drive down the street and get it, and up here where it at a minimum would require ferry travel ... or a plane trip," Farrell said.

Many employers were overwhelmed when they considered the logistics of getting their employees enrolled.

"It looked immense at the start," said Ken Linder, company security officer for the Alaska Marine Highway System. "On the mariners side it's the majority of people in AMHS. They're spread out all over the place from Texas to the Aleutian chain. Getting all those people from all over the place to be enrolled in the TWIC program? We were staggered."

In all, Linder estimated that around 800 or 900 AMHS employees needed the TWIC card, including everyone working on vessels and all shore side personnel.

Linder made a contact with Lockheed Martin, and he and Farrell established a workgroup on behalf of the maritime community, including representatives from the Coast Guard, TSA and harbormasters. Together, they convinced Lockheed to offer mobile enrollment throughout Alaska

"It's a huge victory that we're able to save millions of dollars so far," Farrell said.

He said one mobile enrollment visit to Dutch Harbor alone enrolled 469 maritime workers and saved them over \$1 million.

Mobile enrollment centers visited communities throughout Alaska, including Ketchikan, Sitka, Petersburg, Wrangell, Cordova and Craig.

"Unfortunately there were some places that didn't make the list," Farrell said. "(For example,) Yakutat has quite a few mariners."

The initial round of mobile enrollments is wrapping up across the state. In Southeast Alaska, Skagway and Haines will be the final communities to host mobile enrollment centers this coming week.

Additional challenges will come with the second round of enrollment center visits, in which the cards are activated and must be picked up in person. Many maritime workers are seasonal and move when the season ends. This could be problematic in towns such as Ketchikan, which will receive its second mobile enrollment center visit in November.

"One of the other problems is you get that late in the year you have seasonal workers (gone) and boats in the shipyard," Linder said. "You have people all over the map and far, far from Ketchikan."

The workgroup is working with Lockheed to see if enrollments began at one site could be sent to other sites statewide.

Alaskans have until February 2009 to obtain the credentials. After that, new workers entering the maritime industry may once again find it difficult to obtain TWIC cards.

Farrell predicts that by the 2009 summer season, many employers are going to make current TWIC cards a prerequisite for hire.

Linder agreed. "With new people coming on for season hire, that's going to be ...quite a cost factor for new hires," he said. "(TWIC) will probably be an operational concern for us when considering new hires."

Marine Exchange of Alaska staff members are working to become certified as trusted agents, so that in they can offer TWIC enrollment during the course of their regular consulting visits throughout the state.

"It hasn't been a total victory, but the battle continues," Farrell said. "The Marine Exchange is not going to be able to maintain TWIC throughout Alaska and prevent everyone from having to travel to a fixed enrollment center, but in our little circle of influence, we can have a pretty good impact."

TWIC mobile enrollment in Skagway and Haines

Enrollment in Skagway will take place at the Skagway Police Department at 79 State Street. The center will be open Aug. 25-26 from 12-4pm and 5-9pm and on Aug. 27 from 8am-12pm and 1pm-5pm.

Enrollment in Haines will take place at the Haines Public Library. The center will be open Aug. 28 from noon - 9 pm and Aug. 29 from 10 am - 6:30pm. Visit <http://twicinformation.tsa.-dhs.gov> for updated information on enrollment locations throughout Alaska.

To learn more about the Marine Exchange of Alaska visit www.mxak.org.