

# Welfare to well-being – a changing emphasis in service to seafarers



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My seafarers' welfare journey started more than 20 years ago as a ship visitor at the seafarers' centre in Montreal, Canada. Like most centres around the world, we provided transportation, communication services, a friendly space to relax, and a wide range of religious and social services on request. It was – and is – really enjoyable work. You never know what kinds of special requests or questions you might get as you approach a new ship. Having the time and resources to help respond in special circumstances is always a pleasure.

Since starting, I have had the opportunity to be involved in multiple seafarers' centres in different countries, supervise a number of interns and new employees, work with colleagues in professional associations like the North American Maritime Ministry Association (NAMMA) and the International Christian Maritime Association (ICMA), and also collaborate on a number of projects with ISWAN. In many ways the work remains the same as when I began, albeit with trends in the industry having continued. Visitors still board ships, and seafarers still need transportation into the city and places to get away from work, even if they have less time to do it all.



Photo: Avinash Chetram

Yet, on a deeper level, there has been a significant change in how we talk and think about seafarers. For the port-based seafarers' welfare sector, *why* we do what we do is critically important. What are the needs that we are trying to address? Why do seafarers need our support? These questions arise every time a local voluntary organization needs to raise support, find new volunteers or staff, or partner with other organizations. It is the core of what they put on their websites and the kinds of stories they put on social media.

And here is the change: when speaking about our service to seafarers, the emphasis in the last generation has moved from a focus on seafarers' *welfare* to *wellness* and *well-being*. It is not as if wellness or well-being were not part of the discussion a generation ago, but they have taken centre stage in the overall discussions.

Perhaps this is good news – no doubt the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, and other international instruments and partnerships are having a positive effect. Issues of abandonment, non-payment of wages, piracy, and unsafe working conditions seem to be restricted to certain geographical locations. They are still real issues in many ports and regions, but seem not to be as generalized globally as they were in other decades.

There may be larger trends at work as well. On a parallel track – and I am a layman talking of these things – I suspect experts on the history of psychology or social work might see parallels in conversations about human wellbeing in general. In the domain of psychology there is definitely less focus on “mental illness” and an increasing focus on positive psychology, focusing on the “good life” and the positive aspects of the human experience that make life worth living. Perhaps what we are seeing in seafarers' welfare is a reflection of that general trend in society and scholarship to focus less

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on the acute problems and to focus more on building what is good.

In any case, whether due to actual decreases in welfare issues or the influence of positive psychology, there has no doubt been an increasing awareness that protecting seafarers is not just about physical health or safety – as important as these are – but also mental health. This has become a really hot topic in research and the maritime world. Companies, countries, unions, P&I clubs, think tanks, and seafarers' welfare charities around the world have come up with specific programs to do something. Just a few examples: ISWAN's many different publications and research programs, Sailors' Society *Wellness at Sea* program, and The Mission to Seafarers' *Seafarers' Happiness Index* and *WeCare* programs. There is funding for research at Yale University from the ITF Seafarers' Trust, Sailors' Society, Seamen's Church Institute and others.<sup>1</sup> In the past months, a major new report from Cardiff University Seafarers' International Research Centre came out on seafarers' mental health.<sup>2</sup> The study, funded by the UK Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH), urges cargo shipping companies to provide greater support for workers to help prevent conditions such as anxiety and depression. This includes the provision of on-board amenities such as internet access, improved accommodation, and recreational activities. When questioned in an interview about suffering mental ill-health, one seafarer in this study said: "Between pressure, workload, no days off and you are a gazillion miles away from home with limited communication, what do you think is going to happen?"

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.seafarerstrust.org/seafarer-mental-health-study-2019/>

Internet provision provides a great example of how the pendulum from welfare to wellness has moved. Providing Internet or WiFi to seafarers with limited or no connectivity has been a top priority for seafarers' welfare charities for the last 20 years. Yet, as more seafarers have access to the Internet while on board, conversations in international meetings have begun about how to understand that access to guard against the potentially anti-social effects of modern technology. Conversations at these gatherings often note how seafarers go back to their cabins alone and find out things about family life that they can do nothing to solve – a *wellness* issue.



Photo: Albert Garayev

Those discussions can easily become near-sighted. A significant percentage of seafarers still have limited or no Internet access while on board – it is good to have the Internet usage discussions, but not if it means the remaining 30% to 50% of seafarers are penalized and never get a decent Internet connection. Further, I would contend discussions of seafarers' Internet access need to be framed in a much wider lens. Internet for seafarers can easily be compared to that in many remote parts of the world, but also the effects of usage are most likely very similar to other land-based demographics. My hypothesis is that a 20-year

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/1717094-loneliness-of-seafarers-highlighted-in-report>

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old *seafarer* from a certain country might experience the Internet in very similar ways to a 20-year old working at a *land-based job* from the same country, just with less access. These are societal issues, not seafarer-specific issues, I think.

But where does this leave us? How do we speak about the challenges? Even our language changes. When presenting my work, I might emphasize less that I work for a seafarers' *welfare* charity, but rather a seafarers' *wellness* or *well-being* charity. But is it *only* a change of *language*? Does this have a practical effect on the work of those in my sector?

No doubt, the general call for acute care for welfare issues is less generalized around the world – those welfare challenges are often restricted to certain hotspots or ports. Abandonment used to be fairly common in ports around the world several decades ago. It still happens too often, but typically in a few hotspots.<sup>3</sup> We definitely still need to talk about those hot-button issues and help support in the places they are happening, but they are less generalized.

So, if the *welfare* cases are less prevalent in my network, *why* are we doing what we are doing?

Here the language of seafarers' wellness and mental health has become very important for our discussions. We can presume that in a not-so-distant future all seafarers will have the Internet on board, for example. New kinds of satellites or other solutions created by big tech will allow relatively inexpensive Internet in the remotest corners of the earth. Will we still have a reason to do our work? I believe so, even increasingly so.

I think these conversations about seafarers' mental health can help us focus on the

appropriateness of the resources we have in place in the changing landscape of seafarers' needs; this especially for resources like seafarers' centres, transportation, and ship visits. The reason we have these services is our focus on serving seafarers. But there is something more happening than just giving a ride, selling a SIM card, or watching television in the seamen's club. It is this 'something more' that helps us focus those resources when the needs change. To keep the focus where it needs to be, I argue, it is *human contact* that is so important.

When it comes to mental wellness, it is the bus driver, not the bus, the ship visitor, not their bag of goods, the staff person, not the club space, that are the key resources of any seafarers' welfare charity. If the focus of seafarers' conversation has turned from the ship to the "human element" – to the seafarer him- or herself, I suggest this same focus needs to happen for seafarers' welfare providers. A focus on people.



Photo: Gerardo Rojas

If there is an increased focus on seafarers' mental health, I suggest part of the response – and this is true for us all – is regular contact with other human beings. Seafarers are not all *lonely*, though studies suggest that some are. Loneliness is a subjective feeling that may or

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<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/seafarers/seafarersbrowse.list>

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may not be part of their lives.<sup>4</sup> Yet, seafarers are by the nature of their job objectively *socially isolated* from their families, friends, and other humans. It is very good for seafarers – indeed, for all of us – to have contact with each other. I think we are social beings, made for regular contact with each other. No doubt, I believe this religiously – that we were created to be in communion with each other. I suppose others might agree with me from their own religious or worldview perspective. But I think there is enough objective evidence as well to undergird the fact that our social bonds are a critical part of our mental wellness and wellbeing.



*Photo: Johannes Bargmann*

From whatever perspective, when your social group is reduced, but especially when we can't see the people we love and trust on a regular basis, it has an effect on us. In my world, even if it is in a small way, the ship visits and visits to a seafarers' centre help mitigate that social isolation and bring more social contact into the lives of seafarers. I know this human contact has a significant positive impact on the lives of the individual seafarers we meet, but also a wider impact than we might know on the health of the maritime industry.

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<https://www.seafarerswelfare.org/assets/documents/resources/Social-Isolation-Article-PDF.pdf>