Most Training Providers Expect to Implement Revised International Maritime Standards by the Deadline Despite Challenges

What GAO Found

Most training providers (80 percent) who responded to GAO’s survey reported that they were satisfied with guidance the U.S. Coast Guard (Coast Guard) provided to assist them in implementing the revised International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) requirements. However, 58 percent of respondents, including state maritime academies, private for-profit colleges, and others, reported that the lack of timely Coast Guard guidance for developing a quality assurance process—Quality Standards System (QSS)—affected their ability to implement the revised STCW requirements. A QSS is intended to ensure that training providers have a documented quality system in place to monitor training activities. Coast Guard officials said the agency plans to meet with industry stakeholders in March 2017 to discuss whether additional QSS guidance is necessary.

Most of the training providers (81 percent) who responded to GAO’s survey reported that they plan to meet the January 1, 2017, deadline to implement the revised STCW requirements, but also reported some challenges in doing so. For example, over half of the respondents (54 percent) reported that interpreting the revised STCW requirements was a challenge. To address this issue, Coast Guard has ongoing outreach efforts to obtain feedback from training providers, help them interpret Coast Guard’s regulations, and determine what additional guidance is needed. Almost half of the respondents (46 percent) reported that recruiting qualified course instructors was a challenge. However, Coast Guard stated that the revised requirements related to instructor’s qualifications have not changed substantially; therefore, the challenge experienced with recruiting instructors may be related to specific training providers, rather than to the revised STCW requirements. Training providers not expecting to meet the deadline for implementing the revised STCW requirements (19 percent) provided various reasons, such as a lack of funding to address the requirements, needing additional Coast Guard guidance, or lacking the time to complete the required documentation.

Coast Guard evaluated the costs and benefits of the revised STCW requirements, and training providers who responded to GAO’s survey reported related impacts of implementing the revised requirements. For example, Coast Guard evaluated the average costs to training providers for developing a QSS and the costs for conducting STCW audits. About half of the surveyed training providers expected their costs would be similar to Coast Guard’s estimates. About one third anticipated incurring costs higher than the Coast Guard’s average estimate due to needing more time for administrative tasks than Coast Guard allowed or purchasing additional training equipment. Coast Guard officials said they estimated average costs, and therefore did not consider specific items that particular training providers may need. Over half of training providers agreed with Coast Guard’s assessment of potential benefits from the revised STCW requirements, such as increased vessel safety, with most of the remaining providers expecting no effect from the STCW changes.