

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-40](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Merchant mariners operate U.S. commercial ships and support national defense in emergency and war. Coast Guard issues regulations and policies to ensure merchant mariners are credentialed and meet minimum international standards. To incorporate changes made to the international STCW Convention in 2010, Coast Guard issued regulations in December 2013 that training providers must implement by January 1, 2017, to ensure mariners meet the revised requirements. These changes are intended to help reduce the risk of accidents in U.S. and international waters.

GAO was asked to review Coast Guard and training providers' implementation of the revised STCW requirements. This report addresses (1) the extent to which Coast Guard provided sufficient guidance to training providers about the revised STCW requirements; (2) the progress training providers report in implementing the revised STCW requirements; and challenges reported in doing so; and, (3) the extent to which Coast Guard evaluated costs and benefits of the revised STCW requirements, and impacts training providers report about the costs and benefits of implementing the revised requirements. GAO conducted a web-based survey from March 2016 to June 2016 of all 167 Coast Guard-approved STCW training providers. Eighty-one percent responded, although response rates varied for individual questions. GAO also reviewed Coast Guard's guidance and reports and interviewed officials.

GAO is not making recommendations.

View [GAO-17-40](#). For more information, contact Jennifer Grover at (202) 512-7141 or groverj@gao.gov.

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COAST GUARD

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.