

Crew jobs at Walmart: How the US is taking the lead on seafarer vaccination

Ship managers and owners are routinely lining up crew for jobs during US port calls as 25 states offer to vaccinate crew against Covid-19.

The rapid development of inoculation services for non-US seafarers has its roots in Florida's decision earlier this year to vaccinate cruiseship workers as part of the state's "Restart" programme.

Some states have also been including foreign visitors and workers within their own vaccination programmes, which has naturally spread to seafarers.

"This has developed organically, there has been no central government action, it has just been state by state," said Jason Zuidema, who has been involved in developing seafarer access to vaccines in his role as executive director of the North American Maritime Ministry Association (NAMMA).

He said his phone has been ringing off the hook with calls from shipowners and managers asking to access vaccines.

"The key context is that states had enough vaccine supply to open the door to this," he said.

Zuidema added that states have realised the important role crew play in keeping the US economy moving.

"This is a humanitarian effort but it also makes business sense," he said.

The crew of Load Line Marine's 34,168-dwt bulker Charlie (built 2011) were the first to get vaccinated in Houston.

"We are grateful to USA and in particular to the Port Authority of Houston, that have identified the necessity for the seafarers to be vaccinated," chief executive George Souravlas said on LinkedIn.

"We are delighted that MV Charlie was the first vessel to be vaccinated in Houston, upon our request."

Increasingly, seafarer centres are now getting involved in making vaccines available at port and on board ships.

But arrangements can also be made for crew to be vaccinated at high street stores, such as CVS, Walgreens, Walmart, Publix and Rite Aid.

Oakland, Tampa, Miami, Portland in Maine, Newark, Galveston, Houston, Port Arthur, Seattle and Norfolk are among the key cities where vaccines are available to seafarers.

However, many seafarers working on cruiseships that make frequent return calls to the US have opted to use two-shot vaccines, such as Pfizer's and Moderna's.

Appointments can be made by local agents or managers and, in some cases, walk-ins are available.

Seafarers will often be required to present identification. They will receive a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) card verifying they have been vaccinated.

“Near many ports in the United States, pharmacies have been ready to welcome foreign seafarers, though there are differences on what ID is required and whether appointments are needed,” NAMMA said in a note informing ship managers of how to get crew vaccinated. “Shipping companies or agents might wish to find out more in their local setting.”

The US development promises to speed up attempts to vaccinate seafarers and ease the crew crisis, which has prevented more than 200,000 seafarers returning home because of travel restrictions.

The travel restrictions on crew have increased since a recent surge in infections in India.

By Adam Corbett, Published in Tradewinds, 19 May 2021 13:31 GMT