

Seamen's Center at the Port of Wilmington, Delaware



Joan Lyons, the Director of the Seamen's Center, along with a host of volunteers, is the connection between the crews of commercial vessels and the terra firma at the port. The Seaman's Center, at the Wilmington port opened in 1990, because of the crews' myriad needs when their vessels are in Delaware: contacting a

Doctor for serious illnesses or injuries, clothing needs, internet with Skype, a lounge with a guitar and keyboard and international reading material, telephone access with phone cards, and access to an in-house store that provides anything from tooth paste to Band-Aids, many of the comforts of home.

If the weather is inclement, the usual 48 hour turn-around may expand into 5 days in port. Joan's ingenuity kicks in when this happens. The crew members will be accommodated. The size of the crews vary from 28/30 to 7 or 8. A few times, there have been crew members as young as 16 years and as old as 60 years. The men usually sign on for a 9-month contract, so homesickness can be an issue. Joan and her volunteers are friendly faces and listening ears to seamen a long way from home. When crewmen work for the same shipping company for many consecutive years, they visit Delaware many times. They develop friendships with Director Joan and the many volunteers at the Seaman's Center.

As Director of the Seamen's Center, Joan has mediated conflicts that arise on shipboard. She is an advocate for crew members when ships arrive with no heat and out of food. Nine months away from home is a long time! The Center's purpose is to offer respite from the dangers of the sea and to provide a home away. Over the years, the Center has been dubbed, "The Little Yellow House". The volunteers become a lifeline between land and sea.

If a vessel originated in the Philippines and arrived in Delaware on a snowy day, the crew would likely be wearing flip-flops and a T-shirt with shorts. After traveling the high seas in winter, a ship may arrive in port covered in ice. Because of the ice, it could take days, rather than the usual 48 hour turn-around to unload the cargo. The Center provides donated clothes more suited to the winter weather to the men.

The Center has Church Services three times each week. It is a welcome comfort for seamen when the ships are in Port. "Christmas at Sea" is a celebration that has become a great tradition. Volunteer churches and community groups pack shoe boxes with a variety of useful travel items. Every box is topped with a handmade knit hat and scarf. Episcopal Church of the Ascension has been a standout supporter of Seamen's Center. Their goal is to extend a warm welcome and offer a respite from the loneliness and isolation of life at sea.

Dole and Chiquita are the firms contracted to serve our 3 ports. Their vessels bring 10,000 seafarers to the Ports in Delaware: Port of Wilmington, Delaware City and Claymont. Delaware's ports are among the busiest in the Nation.

Interesting trivia: 1,000 – 5,000 pregnant Holstein cows are shipped to the Middle East and Russia each year. A veterinarian is always on board in the event of early deliveries! Bananas and fruit juices come to us from Honduras. We export GM and military items. The U.S imports scrap steel. We receive clementines from Morocco. These are just a few of the items involved in the nation's import/export businesses. Seamen's Center serves approximately 500 ships a year, representing over 80 countries. **Women sometimes serve as cooks and stewards.

If you'd like to volunteer, have a community group offer support or make a donation to the Seamen's Center, please call 302-575-1300. Formerly used items of clothing are always welcome.

Emily White, LWNCC President