

INSIGHT REPORT · NOVEMBER 2026

REGULATION · CREW HEALTH · SAFETY

# Seafarer Wellbeing Enters the Safety Rulebook

Why new international rules and guidance are making crew health and welfare part of maritime safety

**John Prell**
General Counsel, VIKAND · Former Seagoing Officer

VIKAND



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# 00 Foreword

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One of the most important shifts now underway in maritime safety is not about the ship itself. **It is about the people who keep it moving.**

Maritime regulation rarely changes in one dramatic stroke. It moves through amendments, training standards, reporting rules and flag-state advisories that most people outside the industry will never read. Individually, these changes can look narrow. Collectively, however, they amount to a significant shift, with crew wellbeing becoming part of how safety itself is regulated.

This builds on rules that have existed for years. The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), often described as a bill of rights for seafarers, has set binding minimum standards for accommodation, food, medical care, hours of rest and complaints since 2013. What is changing is how directly crew wellbeing is being incorporated into training, risk management and ship inspection.

There is no single global seafarer-wellbeing law. Obligations still vary with a ship's flag, type and trade, and with the seafarer's employment arrangements. Some of the developments below are binding; others are guidance, work in progress or a flag administration's reading of existing duties. Their legal weight differs, but the common theme is greater regulatory attention to crew wellbeing as part of maritime safety.

> *Collectively, these changes amount to a significant shift, with crew wellbeing becoming part of how safety itself is regulated.*

## THE SITUATION AT A GLANCE

**6.81** /10
Seafarers Happiness Index, Q3 2026, down from 7.18 in Q1 2026

**5.46**
Shore leave, the lowest-scoring category

**5% → 10%**
Cardiovascular cases: share of consultations vs disembarkations

**31 Mar 2027**
UK deadline for the MCA harassment module

**23 Dec 2027**
MLC amendments expected to enter into force

01

# Why the rulebook is changing



The regulatory shift makes more sense when you look at what seafarers themselves are reporting. The Mission to Seafarers' Seafarers Happiness Index fell from 7.18 out of 10 in the first quarter of 2026, when conflict in the Persian Gulf first hit crews, to 6.81 in the third. The decline has outlasted that initial shock. Shore leave remained the lowest-scoring category and fell furthest, from 6.78 to 5.46, while workload management, at 6.38, was barely changed from 6.36.

The survey is voluntary and self-reported, so it should not be treated as a census of the global fleet. But the findings are difficult to dismiss. They describe a workforce reporting strain in several of the same areas now attracting regulatory attention.

**That is what makes the current regulatory movement so significant.**

The rules are not changing in a vacuum. Regulators are looking more closely at crew wellbeing while seafarers themselves are reporting persistent pressure in some of the most basic parts of working life at sea. A shore-leave score of 5.46, down 1.32 points since the start of the year, is not just a welfare statistic when fatigue, isolation and access to shore are increasingly being treated as safety concerns. Workload pressures also remain, with respondents continuing to describe excessive hours and work/rest records that do not always reflect reality. Those figures should make the industry uncomfortable.

SEAFARERS HAPPINESS INDEX 2026

Scores out of 10 · The Mission to Seafarers

Q1 2026

7.18

Q3 2026

6.81

▾ 0.37 since Q1

BY CATEGORY, Q3

| | |
|---|---|
| Overall | 6.81 |
| Workload management | 6.38 |
| Shore leave · lowest | 5.46 |

SHORE LEAVE, Q1 → Q3

| | |
|---|---|
| Q1 2026 | 6.78 |
| Q3 2026 | 5.46 |

A fall of 1.32 points in two quarters, from the start of 2026

*“Those figures should make the industry uncomfortable.”*

Voluntary, self-reported survey, not a census of the global fleet



*“Crew wellbeing is no longer just a question of whether people are satisfied with life on board.”*

01 · WHY THE RULEBOOK IS CHANGING

## The health data point the same way

Health data reinforce the point from another direction. Gard's 2026 Crew Claims Report, based on around 3,000 P&I crew claims from 2025, linked the highest illness claim costs to cardiovascular disease and cancer. Cardiovascular illness also remained the leading cause of crew fatalities in Gard's claims data.

VIKAND's own OneHealth crew-health data for 2024 to 2026 show cardiovascular cases accounting for 5 per cent of consultations but roughly 10 per cent of crew disembarkations. These figures do not demonstrate that cardiovascular emergencies are becoming more common. They reveal that when cardiovascular cases occur, they can have a disproportionate operational impact and greater likelihood of disembarkation.

The same connection is becoming visible during operational crises. In March 2026, a broad coalition of maritime organisations told the IMO Council that conflict-related disruption was affecting seafarers' physical and mental wellbeing and called for measures including family contact, counselling, reliable supplies and facilitated crew changes. The submission is another example of wellbeing being treated as an operational issue, rather than simply a welfare benefit.

Put the pieces together and the regulatory shift becomes much easier to understand. Crew wellbeing is no longer just a question of whether people are satisfied with life on board. It affects fatigue, retention, fitness for duty, medical risk and, ultimately, whether a vessel can operate safely. That is why it is finding its way into the rulebook.

GARD CREW CLAIMS 2026

**~3,000**

P&I crew claims from 2025. Cardiovascular disease and cancer drove the highest illness costs; cardiovascular illness was the leading cause of crew fatalities.

**1 in 20** consultations (5%)



**1 in 10** crew disembarkations (~10%)



Cardiovascular cases, VIKAND OneHealth crew-health data, 2024 to 2026




*“On those vessels, complaints are no longer solely an internal matter.”*

02

# Harassment becomes a matter of competence

One of the clearest examples is training. Since 1 January 2026, the international convention that sets minimum training standards for seafarers, known as STCW, has required basic safety training to cover the prevention of and response to violence and harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and sexual assault. Recognising harmful conduct, responding to it, reporting it and supporting the person affected are now part of the international safety-training requirements for seafarers.

In February 2026, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the UN agency for shipping, left it to each country that is party to the convention to determine how seafarers who already hold certificates are brought up to the new standard. The United Kingdom has set a firm date. Under guidance from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), affected UK-certified seafarers, including those holding UK personal safety and social responsibilities certificates dated before 1 January 2026, must complete an online module arranged by the MCA by 31 March 2027.

For operators, that means identifying who is affected, arranging the training and retaining evidence of completion.

The United States approaches the same issue through reporting and enforcement. Since late 2022, federal law has required the "responsible entity" of a US-documented vessel engaged in commercial service to report covered complaints or incidents of sexual harassment, sexual assault or harassment to the US Coast Guard. The responsible entity may be the vessel's owner, master or managing operator, or the seafarer's employer.

In December 2025, Congress added a statutory definition of harassment based on conduct prohibited by federal anti-discrimination laws. The Coast Guard explained the change in guidance issued in August 2026. Knowingly failing to make a required report can bring a civil penalty of up to $50,000 under the statute, currently $52,962 after inflation adjustment. On those vessels, complaints are no longer solely an internal matter.

GLOBAL · STCW

**1 Jan 2026**

Basic safety training must cover violence and harassment

UNITED KINGDOM · MCA

**31 Mar 2027**

Affected UK-certified seafarers complete the MCA online module

UNITED STATES · USCG

**$52,962**

Maximum civil penalty for knowingly failing to report




# 03

# The workplace itself is being redesigned

**23 Dec 2027** ILO amendments to the MLC expected to enter into force

- Countries prohibit shipboard violence and harassment
- Shipowner policies with safe, confidential reporting
- Protection for victims, witnesses and whistle-blowers
- Shore leave without a visa or special permit
- Repatriation covers medical treatment until fit to travel
- Fair treatment after accidents or detention

The Maritime Labour Convention is taking the issue beyond training and reporting and into the conditions in which seafarers actually live and work. Amendments approved by the ILO in June 2025 are expected to enter into force on 23 December 2027.

They will require countries to prohibit shipboard violence and harassment, and shipowners to adopt policies to prevent and address it, with safe and effective reporting procedures. The changes also strengthen protection for victims, witnesses and whistle-blowers and require complaints to be handled and kept confidential.

The amendments go well beyond misconduct. Public authorities will have to allow shore leave once port formalities are complete unless there are public health, safety, security or public-order grounds for refusal. Seafarers cannot be required to obtain a visa or special permit for shore leave.

Repatriation costs that shipowners must bear will expressly include necessary medical treatment until a seafarer is fit to travel. Countries investigating marine casualties must also take account of the IMO Casualty Investigation Code and international guidelines on the fair treatment of seafarers following accidents or detention in connection with alleged crimes.

The guidance gets more specific still. It recommends that menstrual hygiene products and suitable disposal arrangements be available on board, reiterates the need for properly sized PPE and encourages countries to recognise seafarers as key workers.

**THE GUIDANCE GETS SPECIFIC**

**Menstrual hygiene products on board**

**Seafarers recognised as key workers**

# 04 Wellbeing moves into the safety-management system

Wellbeing is also beginning to appear more directly in safety-management systems. In June 2025, the IMO's Maritime Safety Committee agreed to revise its guidelines on implementing the International Safety Management (ISM) Code by 2028.

The revision is expected to address policies for preventing, reporting and responding to violence and harassment, protection against retaliation, the role of senior management and access to medical and mental-health support for those affected. The guidelines themselves will not be binding, but the safety-management systems they inform are subject to formal oversight and audit.

Liberia, one of the world's largest flag States, made the point unusually plainly. In a May 2026 advisory on preventing suicides and missing-person incidents at sea, it described mental health as a critical safety factor and said the ISM Code requires operators to address all risks to personnel, including mental-health risks. That is a flag administration telling operators directly that mental health forms part of safety compliance rather than sitting outside it.



LIBERIA · MARINE ADVISORY 13/2026

Mental health is “a critical safety factor”, and the ISM Code covers mental-health risks.

# 05 Fatigue and the broader shift

Fatigue is moving the same direction. In February 2026, the IMO began a formal scoping exercise on fatigue and hours of work and rest, examining root causes, including the balance between workload and crewing levels, and how well the current rules work in practice. The exercise is expected to conclude in 2027. No new fatigue rule has emerged from the process yet, but regulators are examining whether a compliant record of hours accurately reflects a rested crew.

Europe is adding another layer. By 6 July 2027, EU Member States must write into national law Directive (EU) 2024/3100. The directive expressly includes social concerns among the deficiencies that must be addressed following a flag-state inspection of EU-flagged ships.

Industry is moving too. In March 2026, the shipping association BIMCO revised its position to link seafarer welfare directly with safety and operational performance, naming fatigue, isolation and challenging working environments as psychosocial risks. The significance is not any one development on its own, but that the same concerns are appearing across regulators, flag States and industry bodies.



TIMELINE · 2013 TO 2028

# The rulebook at a glance

- Binding rule
- Guidance or work in progress
- Flag-state or industry position

| | |
|---|---|
| 2013 | **Maritime Labour Convention** sets binding minimum standards for accommodation, food, medical care, hours of rest and complaints |
| Late 2022 | **US law** requires harassment and sexual misconduct on US-documented commercial vessels to be reported to the Coast Guard |
| June 2025 | **ILO approves MLC amendments** on violence and harassment, shore leave and repatriation |
| June 2025 | **IMO agrees to revise** its ISM Code implementation guidelines by 2028 |
| December 2025 | **US Congress** adds a statutory definition of harassment |
| 1 January 2026 | **STCW** basic safety training must cover violence and harassment |
| February 2026 | **IMO** leaves the transition for existing certificate holders to each party, and opens a scoping exercise on fatigue and hours of rest |
| March 2026 | **Industry coalition** tells the IMO Council conflict is harming crew wellbeing; **BIMCO** links welfare with safety |
| May 2026 | **Liberia** calls mental health a critical safety factor under the ISM Code |
| August 2026 | **US Coast Guard** issues guidance on the new harassment definition |
| **TODAY · NOV 2026** | |
| 31 March 2027 | **UK deadline:** affected UK-certified seafarers complete the MCA online module |
| 6 July 2027 | **EU Directive 2024/3100** must be written into national law |
| During 2027 | **IMO fatigue review** expected to conclude |
| 23 December 2027 | **MLC amendments** expected to enter into force |
| 2028 | **Revised ISM Code guidelines** due, covering harassment, retaliation and mental-health support |

# 06 The question has changed

Taken together, these developments are changing what maritime safety asks of operators. They do not create a universal requirement for a particular wellbeing or preventive-healthcare programme. But they increasingly expect operators to identify risks earlier, establish systems around them and act before a problem becomes a reportable incident, medical emergency or threat to safe operations.

That changes the practical question. It is no longer enough to point to a wellbeing benefit, written policy or medical service that responds once something has already gone wrong. **The question is whether the company's training, reporting channels, safety-management system, crewing decisions and medical pathways can identify problems early enough to prevent escalation.**

The same principle runs through many of the changes discussed above. Harassment training is intended to help people recognise and respond to harmful conduct earlier. Reporting rules are designed to prevent serious complaints from being buried. Fatigue reviews are examining whether recorded compliance reflects a genuinely rested crew.

Safety-management guidance is moving mental health and psychosocial risk into systems that assign responsibility and require follow-up.

Healthcare fits naturally within that shift. High blood pressure, diabetes, poor sleep, anxiety and depression can affect concentration, judgement, fitness for duty and emergency risk long before they produce a crisis.

Preventive healthcare creates opportunities to identify and manage these risks earlier through screening, telehealth, counselling, chronic-disease follow-up and post-incident support. The objective is not simply to provide care once someone becomes ill. It is to reduce the likelihood that a manageable condition becomes an onboard emergency, medical disembarkation or safety event.

Not every operator needs the same programme. A coastal workboat, a cargo ship crossing a high-risk area and a cruise ship carrying thousands of people face different risks. Taken together, the regulatory changes favour systems that identify risk, assign responsibility and intervene earlier. Preventive healthcare fits naturally within that approach.

FROM RESPONSE TO PREVENTION

| Risks that build quietly | Caught early through | Before they become |
|---|---|---|
| High blood pressure | Screening and telehealth | An onboard emergency |
| Diabetes | Counselling | A medical disembarkation |
| Poor sleep | Chronic-disease follow-up | A safety event |
| Anxiety and depression | Post-incident support | |



# 07 When the rules meet reality

The new rules are a floor, not a complete answer. They will not create trust by themselves and cannot compensate for unsafe manning, chronic overwork or a culture that punishes candour. But they are changing what can be inspected, documented, reported and enforced.

## The real test will come at **0300**,

- **when** fatigue contributes to the kind of small mistake that can become a casualty at sea;
- **when** someone wonders whether reporting harassment will end a career;
- **when** a crew member with chest pressure hesitates because the next port is days away;
- **or when** a master needs help that the ship cannot provide alone.

The rules and guidance differ in legal force and reach, but the message is increasingly consistent. **The system around that person needs to be ready.**

> *Shipping has always depended on the people who keep vessels moving.* **Its safety rulebook is finally catching up.**

# Sources


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4 ILO/IMO: Guidelines on fair treatment of seafarers detained in connection with alleged crimes (2025)

5 IMO: Legal Committee, 112th session (March 2025)

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### NATIONAL AND REGIONAL RULES

8 UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency: MGN 718 (M+F), 2026 IMO amendment to PSSR

9 United States Code: 46 U.S.C. § 10104, requirement to report sexual offenses

10 US Coast Guard: Marine Safety Information Bulletin 03-26 (14 August 2026)

11 US Coast Guard civil penalty amounts: 33 CFR 27.3

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13 Liberia Maritime Authority: Marine Advisory 13/2026 (22 May 2026)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## John Prell

General Counsel, VIKAND · Former Seagoing Officer


John Prell serves as General Counsel for VIKAND Medical Solutions, a global leader in maritime healthcare supporting more than 500 vessels worldwide. His unique career spans both maritime operations and the legal profession, bringing firsthand seafaring experience to his legal and regulatory expertise.

A graduate of SUNY Maritime College in New York, John earned a Third Mate Unlimited Tonnage license and completed his cadetship aboard an articulated tug barge (ATB), where he obtained his Tankerman (Barge) PIC endorsement. He subsequently worked as an AB/Deckhand on an ATB before joining the American Maritime Officers Union, sailing as Third Mate aboard the subsea cable-laying vessels CS Reliance and CS Responder. During his time at sea, he also earned his Second Mate license.

John later graduated from the Charleston School of Law and is admitted to practice law in South Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, and Colorado. His combined maritime and legal background provides a practical perspective on the complex challenges facing the global shipping industry.