



The Canadian Merchant Service Guild

A NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MASTERS - MATES - PILOTS - ENGINEERS AND OTHER MARINE OFFICERS

La Guilde de la Marine Marchande du Canada

ASSOCIATION NATIONALE DES CAPITAINES - OFFICIERS DE PONT - PILOTES - MÉCANICIENS ET AUTRES OFFICIERS MARINS

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INTERNATIONAL MARITIME PILOTS' ASSOCIATION - INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS' FEDERATION - NATIONAL JOINT COUNCIL OF CANADA
ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALE DES PILOTES MARITIMES - FÉDÉRATION INTERNATIONALE DES OUVRIERS DU TRANSPORT - CONSEIL NATIONAL MIXTE DU CANADA

OTTAWA - VANCOUVER - ST. CATHARINES - QUÉBEC - DARTMOUTH - ST. JOHN'S

April 26, 2021

Hon. Patty Hajdu, PC, MP
Minister of Health
Brooke Claxton Building, Tunney's Pasture
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K9

Dear Minister,

The Canadian Merchant Service Guild is a National Association of Ships' Officers, and we represent the vast majority of the thousands of Officers employed on Canada's domestic ships which have operated non-stop during the current pandemic to keep vital cargoes moving and to keep our marine trade routes and waterways safe.

Since the latter part of 2020, the Guild has been engaged in an intensive and ongoing discussion with government regarding the vital importance of COVID-19 vaccination priority for Canadian seafarers including a multitude of meetings with senior officials of all relevant departments and agencies. The Guild has coordinated our outreach with shipowners, employers and other unions to ensure that the importance of our message is understood.

Public Safety Canada has classified maritime transportation workers as "essential" for the continued movement of goods and people. Vessel crew and mariners are specifically identified as crucial to this effort. Public Safety Canada's designation of seafarers as essential workers is consistent with resolutions of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), strongly urging member states to designate seafarers and other marine personnel as key workers.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunizations' comprehensive and evidence-informed guidance on key populations for early COVID-19 immunization, states that priority should be given to essential workers, such as seafarers, once those living and working in senior citizens' residences, adults over 70 years of age, healthcare workers, and adults in Indigenous communities have been immunized.

Notwithstanding IMO's and Public Safety Canada's designation of seafarers as essential workers, and NACI's guidance that essential workers should have priority for vaccination, ships' officers and ships' crews have not been accorded any such priority. This, despite our persistent and numerous representations on behalf of seafarers, and government officials' assurances that the matter would be given prompt and careful attention.

The consequences of this failure to act were made clear earlier this month, when well over half the entire crew of a Canada Steamship Lines-owned vessel sailing on the Great Lakes was infected, with inevitable isolation and likely hospitalizations ensuing.

Living and working in close quarters over long periods of time that are a fact of life for crew onboard these vessels, combined with the emergence of highly contagious COVID-19 variants, is a recipe for disaster.

With some provinces now offering vaccines to everyone 40 years of age and over, many seafarers, at least in certain jurisdictions, can now be vaccinated. But still, not all crew members, and not in all jurisdictions.

The Guild urgently requests that, by 30 April, and in collaboration with your provincial colleagues, you move to have seafarers across Canada given priority access to a vaccine.

We should never have come to this entirely unwarranted and hazardous state of affairs. It is imperative that the process for assigning vaccine priority be reviewed once the pandemic emergency is abated, with the goal of ensuring that high-risk essential workers, such as seafarers, are given the protection they need. Much can be learned from our recent, unfortunate experience in determining access to the COVID-19 vaccine, as well as how early and frequent testing can be deployed in the future to further diminish risk.

Consideration should also be given to a system that more effectively and more quickly makes the vaccine actually available to a workforce that is highly mobile and often shipbound and away from home for weeks at a time. Ships' officers and ships' crews are in most cases not able to leave the vessel for a vaccine appointment and face an added challenge if the ship is alongside in a port that is outside their province of residence (which is frequently the case).

The Guild would welcome an opportunity to participate in a review of this matter, always with the goal of ensuring better practices in the event of future similar health emergencies.

I have copied this letter to Ministers of Health in those provinces most concerned with this issue.

Yours sincerely,



Mark Boucher
National President
Canadian Merchant Service Guild

cc: Honourable Omar Alghabra, Minister of Transport
Honourable Bernadette Jordan, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard
Honourable Filomena Tassi, Minister of Labour
Honourable Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, Government of Ontario
Honourable Christian Dubé, Minister of Health and Social Services, Government of Québec
Honourable Adrian Dix, Minister of Health, Government of British Columbia
Honourable Zach Churchill, Minister of Health and Wellness, Government of Nova Scotia
Honourable Dorothy Shephard, Minister of Health, Government of New Brunswick
Honourable Ernie Hudson, Minister of Health and Wellness, Government of Prince Edward Island
Honourable Dr. John Haggie, Minister of Health and Community Services, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador