



STELLA MARIS

**STELLA MARIS AUSTRALIA
NATIONAL OFFICE**

GPO Box 368, Canberra ACT 2601

M: 0481 910 245

www.stellamarisaustralia.org

aosnational@catholic.org.au

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FUND WELFARE SERVICES FOR SEAFARERS, GOVERNMENT URGED

Groups that provide spiritual, pastoral and practical support to seafarers are urging the Australian Government to follow New Zealand's lead in funding welfare services for those working on the seas.

New Zealand recently amended legislation passed in 1994, with the changes now allowing revenue raised from maritime levies to fund "the facilitation of, or support for, seafarer welfare services".

Stella Maris Australia, part of an international network of Catholic groups that supports seafarers, has echoed the call of the Anglican Mission to Seafarers group in advocating for Australia to follow New Zealand's lead.

New Zealand's decision has been attributed, at least in part, to the Maritime Labour Convention, which calls on governments to "ensure that seafarers on ships visiting its ports have access to welfare services necessary for their health and well-being, promote the development of welfare facilities, and encourage the development of welfare boards".

Bishop Bosco Puthur, Bishop Promoter of Stella Maris Australia, said given Australia is a signatory of that document, the Commonwealth should pursue similar policies that ensure the welfare of seafarers is a priority and is funded.

"As a country at the ends of the earth and hugely reliant on goods arriving by sea, it is incumbent on Australia to support the health and wellbeing of those who deliver those goods," he said.

Bishop Puthur said groups like Stella Maris and Mission to Seafarers are funded almost exclusively through donations, which have been harder to secure during COVID-19.

"The pandemic hasn't eased demand on international cargo, but it has increased the challenges many seafarers face," he said.

"An approach like that taken in New Zealand can help address some of the challenges those who arrive in Australian ports are facing."

Bishop Puthur said there is a spirit of cooperation within the maritime industry, including within welfare support agencies. Those groups are keen to work with governments and port authorities to develop a policy that will help preserve the future of care to those who work and live on the seas.

Although most Stella Maris centres are not currently open because COVID-19 prevents visits from seafarers, chaplains and volunteers continue to provide support however they can, including by offering pastoral care and practical support via digital means and in the form of care packages.

"Many seafarers have been unable to disembark for months on end and while our support for them has had to evolve, our efforts still manage to bring a smile to weary and homesick faces," Bishop Puthur said.

"We call on the Australian Government to help ensure that continues."