



CASE STUDY

Connecting Seafarers in the Port of Mobile

A First Look at a Newborn, 7,000 Miles From Home

Two commercial mariners, each on separate ships docked at the Port of Mobile, Alabama, had something in common: three-month-old babies waiting for them at home, across the ocean. Neither seafarer had laid eyes on his baby. Commercial ships don't grant family leave, and a call can't show a father his baby's face.

A Mobile Beacon hotspot carried aboard by a Stella Maris volunteer gave each of these seafarers the opportunity to make video calls home at no cost. "It gives them a chance to see more than a picture of the baby," says John Archer, administrator of the Stella Maris seafarer ministry at the Port of Mobile. "That's one of the biggest, most impactful things we can offer."

Ships Go Fast. Connectivity Lags Behind.

Stella Maris has supported seafarers at the Port of Mobile for more than 80 years, dating back to when American merchant crews needed assistance during World War II. Its mandate has always been simple: meet the ship, meet the need.

But the ministry's onshore seafarers' center closed after 9/11, when enhanced port security ended walk-in visits. And while commercial ships increasingly offer some level of satellite communications, crew access often has a cap on free data, after which seafarers must pay for that

access. Acquiring and paying for SIM cards for a brief visit can be challenging for crew members with little or no shore leave.

Vessels' time in port also adds complexity. Container ships can turn around in 12 hours, leaving less than a day to say hi. Bulk carriers hauling steel, coal, lumber, paper, etc., can sit in port for two to four days, long enough for a crew to feel homesick if they don't have something to bridge that gap.



A crew member with the waterproof, ruggedized hotspot case delivered by the volunteers at Stella Maris.

A Hotspot, a Gangway, a Wellness Check

Stella Maris volunteers carry Mobile Beacon hotspots aboard each ship they visit, prioritizing bulk carriers first because their longer port calls give crews time to use them. Every visit is the same: climb the gangway, introduce yourself, and ask how the crew is doing. A wellness check first, connectivity second.

If the ship will be in port longer than a day, the crew hosts the hotspot overnight. Each unit supports eight to 10 simultaneous connections, allowing about half the crew to go online at once. Every hotspot is carried in a waterproof box marked with the network name, password, and Stella Maris contact information. The waterproof box is built robustly enough to be lowered to the dock via a rope as a ship departs or survive an accidental dunking in the waters of Port Mobile.

The program started small. "I was pretty hesitant at first," Archer admits about his first one or two units. Daniel, a retired merchant seaman who has become the ministry's right hand, built a reporting process using pilot schedules to identify which ships are arriving and departing, turning a chase the-gangway operation into an eight-unit rotation.

Creating Pathways, Knocking Down Barriers

Stella Maris volunteers have transported more than 900 seafarers to and from visiting ships this year alone and have dropped off a Mobile Beacon hotspot 300 times. With up to 20 crew members sharing one unit, a single drop-off can connect an entire watch back home.

It crosses language and circumstance barriers. When Russia and Ukraine went to war, Archer's team began offering hotspots to Ukrainian crews first, only to have Russian sailors aboard nearby vessels request the same. "What it did was knock down the barriers," Archer reflects, "because they realized we're not charging for it; we're just there to bring it."



Stella Maris Ministry volunteers Rick Gable and Daniel Stover delivering a Mobile Beacon hotspot kit to the crew of a commercial ship.

It creates pathways that didn't exist before. "It's kind of like you might not always be welcome, but it's a foot in the door on the ship," says Daniel, the retired merchant seaman who helps run the program. "As soon as you say free Wi-Fi, it's like bringing three dozen donuts. They're not going to turn it down 99% of the time."

Departing seafarers tell Archer the same thing over and over: "Thank you. You don't know how much this means to us."

About the Partnership

Stella Maris is the global ministry of the Catholic Church to mariners and all the people of the sea. In the Port of Mobile, the ministry, under the guidance and support of the Archdiocese of Mobile, has served seafarers for over 80 years.

Mobile Beacon provides Stella Maris with mobile hotspots with unlimited data and connectivity carried via T-Mobile's wireless network, giving seafarers a free, reliable way to connect with their families during the brief windows when their ships are in port.

Mobile Beacon partners with nonprofits, schools, libraries, and healthcare organizations across the country to close connectivity gaps like this one. Learn more at mobilebeacon.org.