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Proposal on the Guidance for dealing with stress and trauma in VTS operations

# Summary

Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) operations require a high degree of vigilance, prediction, and decision-making. Such demanding duties can generate considerable mental stress and trauma, and these burdens, if not properly managed, may result in severe consequences for maritime safety, potentially causing loss of life and damage to property. Since the 56th VTS Committee, discussions have recognized the necessity of addressing stress and trauma in a systematic manner. Accordingly, guidance documents are being prepared. This paper, based on Korean research papers and related studies, proposes the drafting direction and measures to ensure effectiveness of such guidance.

## Purpose of the document

The purpose of this document is to propose a comprehensive framework for the mental health management of Vessel Traffic Service Operators (VTSOs), ensuring that VTS authorities implement structured measures to prevent, monitor, and effectively respond to psychological burdens such as stress, trauma, burnout, and other related conditions.

## Related documents

* IALA Recommendation V-103 on Standards for Training and Certification of VTS Personnel
* IALA Guideline 1101 on Auditing and Assessing a VTS

# Background

## Relevant Research and Training in Republic of Korea

The reviewed Korean studies highlight that VTSOs experience stress levels comparable to, or even greater than, those of other safety-critical professions such as air traffic controllers. Key findings indicate that:

* Mental health challenges primarily arise from heavy workloads, continuous monitoring responsibilities, and incident-related trauma.
* Insufficient recovery periods and inadequately designed shift systems contribute to chronic fatigue and burnout.
* Supportive organizational culture, effective communication, and access to counseling services play a crucial role in mitigating stress.
* Systematic monitoring and regular assessments are essential for the early detection of psychological issues.

To address such challenges, the seafaring sector has developed similar approaches. The APEC Seafarer Education Network (SEN) **Seafarers’ Mental Health Care Programmes** demonstrate that structured **training resources for both seafarers and facilitators** can enhance awareness, provide practical coping strategies, and strengthen resilience among maritime professionals. Their value lies in integrating stress management into training curricula, thereby illustrating how a guideline can be effectively operationalized beyond purely clinical interventions.

# Discussion

## Proposal to Title the Guideline “VTSO Mental Health Management”

To reflect the full scope of psychological challenges faced by VTSOs, it is proposed that the guideline be titled “VTSO Mental Health Management.” This title emphasizes that mental health is not limited to stress and trauma but also encompasses conditions such as burnout and boreout, thereby addressing the wider spectrum of issues relevant to VTS duties.

It is therefore proposed that the guideline frame mental health as an integral part of professional well-being—rather than as a purely medical or exceptional condition—so that authorities and organizations may recognize it as a fundamental dimension of operational safety.

## Clarification of Primary Audience

It is proposed that the principal audience of this guideline be VTS authorities. The document is not intended to serve as a manual for individual counseling or specialized medical treatment; rather, its purpose is to assist competent authorities in establishing systems, frameworks, and institutional measures that support the mental health of VTSOs.

In this context, it is further proposed that diagnostic, monitoring, and training programmes for VTSOs be incorporated into structured education and model courses, thereby ensuring consistency, sustainability, and effective implementation.

**3.3 Enhancing the Effectiveness of Mental Health Management Systems**

Findings from Korean research indicate that effective mental health management for VTSOs requires a set of institutional measures, including:

* Implementation of stress monitoring, measurement, and regular evaluation mechanisms
* Organizational-level stress management programmes, counseling, and support systems
* Workforce allocation that reflects task-specific workload and responsibility
* Improvement of shift systems and working environments through automation and ergonomic design

These measures underscore the strong link between the organizational attitudes of VTS authorities and the psychological well-being of VTSOs. Institutional interventions are therefore essential to ensure both safety and efficiency in VTS operations.

It is further proposed that Annex A (Checklist) of IALA Guideline G1101 – Auditing and Assessing a VTS incorporate the verification of VTSO mental health management systems. Such inclusion would provide recognition, universality, and accountability, ensuring that mental health is treated as an integral component of safety management within VTS operations.

# References

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3. Kim, K.I., & Kim, J.S. (2019). *The effect of job stress of vessel traffic services operator on turnover intention and job satisfaction*. *Journal of the Korean Maritime Police Science*, 9(3), 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.30887/jkmps.2019.9.3.027>
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5. APEC SEN training manual on seafarer health management

# Action requested of the Committee

The Committee is invited to consider:

1. The analysis and recommendations contained in this paper, including the proposed title, primary audience, and system-level measures for VTSO mental health management.
2. The inclusion of VTSO mental health management system verification within Annex A (Checklist) of Guideline G1101.

1. Input document number, to be assigned by the Committee Secretary [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Leave open if uncertain [↑](#footnote-ref-3)