



## **Two Vessels, One Mission**

At first glance, a cruise ship cutting through open water and a retired educators' labor organization seem to have nothing in common. One moves across seas, the other across seasons of memory, experience and advocacy. Yet when you look beneath the surface, both are complex vessels—carefully structured, purpose-driven, and sustained by people who understand that coordination, trust, and shared responsibility are what keep any organization afloat.

A cruise ship begins its day before the sun rises. Deep in the engine room, specialists monitor systems most passengers never see, ensuring propulsion, power, and stability. Above them, officers review routes and weather, making decisions that affect thousands of lives on board. Every role is defined, every chain of command clear. From the captain to the newest crew member, structure is not optional—it is survival.

The Maine Education Association Retired operates in much the same way, though its waters are calmer and its dangers less visible. Instead of engines, there are committees. Instead of navigation charts, there are bylaws and pension statutes. Leadership elected by the membership—acts much like a bridge crew, balancing long-term direction with daily concerns. They monitor legislative “weather,” anticipate policy shifts, and adjust course to protect the well-being of those who once worked in our public education institutions and now rely on collective strength in retirement.

On a cruise ship, operations are divided into departments: deck, engineering, hospitality, medical, and entertainment. Each department has autonomy but must work in coordination

with the rest. A delay in one area ripples outward. Dining cannot run without power; safety drills require communication across all levels. The ship succeeds not because everyone does the same job, but because everyone understands how their work connects to the larger whole.

Our associations from national NEA, NEA-Retired to state MEA and MEA-Retired with its 16 local affiliates of unified members mirrors this operational logic. There are advocacy teams at every level and elected delegates to Representative Assembly governance bodies that maintain focus on pensions and healthcare, communication groups that keep members informed, and social or service committees that preserve fellowship and purpose after retirement. Alarms sound and tides threaten both ship and associations, the interdependence on both vessels is just as real. A breakdown in communication can weaken engagement. A lapse in advocacy can cost members benefits earned over decades. Here too, coordination is the engine of success.

Perhaps the most powerful parallel is in culture. A cruise ship crew is famously international, diverse in background but united by shared standards and routines. Training instills not just skills, but values: safety, service, professionalism. Likewise, retired educators' organizations are built on a shared and unified professional identity and purpose. Members may have worked in a variety of settings, in different decades, under different conditions, but they are bound by a common belief in public education, fairness, and mutual support. That culture sustains participation long after paychecks stop.

There is also a shared ethic of care. On a ship, the crew is responsible for the well-being of passengers—often retirees themselves—anticipating needs, responding to emergencies, and creating an environment of comfort and dignity. In a retired educators' labor organization, that care flows peer to peer. Members look out for one another, help navigate healthcare systems, and ensure no one faces aging or policy changes alone. The mission is not profit or pleasure, but protection and respect.

In the end, both the cruise ship and the Maine Education Association Retired exist to carry people safely through a journey. One moves through physical space, the other through the later chapters of life. Both rely on structure, disciplined operations, and shared purpose. And both remind us that the most successful vessels—at sea or in society—are those where everyone knows their role, trusts the crew, and believes the journey is worth making together.

Molly Smith  
President, MEA-Retired

[www.mearetired.org](http://www.mearetired.org)  
Maine Education Association - Retired  
35 Community Drive, Augusta, ME 04330 (207) 622-5866