

“A New Ideal for Amateur Radio Emergency Response”

While we are basking in the afterglow of Amateur radios success in response to Hurricane Katrina, there are likely many people who will not understand the need to reconsider the way to prepare Ham radio operators for response to disasters.

Without recurring emergencies and disasters, there are a lot of Ham radio operators that will tell you that they don't feel the need to become involved in disaster preparedness. The further one gets away from those areas that are commonly ravaged by hurricanes, earthquakes, fire and floods, the less likely it is that there will be a comprehensive Amateur radio preparedness program at the State and Local levels. Ham radio operators say that they will gladly volunteer when an emergency or disaster occurs, but because of competing interests and time restrictions, they are not willing to participate in planning, training, drills and exercises, or readiness programs on a regular basis. Few of those non-participants know how to write a message. Fewer know how the National Traffic System works. More importantly, they do not want to know. Maybe its time for emergency coordinators in those areas that do not have robust Ham radio disaster preparedness programs to consider a new ideal for amateur radio emergency response planning.

For many years, it has been said that untrained Ham radio operators are more of a liability than an asset during disasters. If we are to meet the challenges of an ever increasing number of emergencies and disasters nationally, including the newest threat of having to respond to terrorism, we must find a way to turn otherwise ineffective Amateur Radio preparedness programs into a system that works when needed, even when responders are at an untrained level. We must develop efficient deployment and monitoring procedures that will effectively incorporate operators who do not normally participate in preparedness activities, into a system that can provide near instantaneous emergency communications under extreme conditions.

With email, satellite telephones, and Voice over Internet Programs, does the amateur radio really have a role in emergency communications? Absolutely! But we cannot continue to use all of the old ways of thinking to dictate how we respond to 21st

Century conditions.

If we are to meet the increasing needs that are being placed upon our radio service, we must be able to:

1. Coordinate with all user agencies and organizations simultaneously.
2. Effectively and efficiently mobilize untrained licensed Hams.
3. Quickly design systems and band plans based on available personally owned equipment.
- 4. Provide on the scene short term training to meet the immediate needs of the situation or event.**
5. Deploy personnel and equipment.
6. Monitor personnel who are providing effective communications services.
7. Monitor communications systems for functionality.
8. Demobilize when directed to do so by proper authorities, or when commercial systems are returned to normal use and there is no need for continued use of Amateur systems and personnel.

Few volunteers are aware of the federal requirement for user agencies and organizations to adopt the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS). If response agencies and organizations fail to meet the prescribed deadline, they risk losing preparedness funding from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. That means, every governmental agency, and non-governmental organization or private industry that has a direct role in emergency response is required to implement NIMS and the ICS when responding to emergencies.

The NIMS Integration Center, which is part of the Department of Homeland

Security, strongly recommends that volunteers with a direct role in incident management and response take NIMS and ICS training.

Amateur radio organizations, ARES/RACES having an emergency response mission should consider using ICS for day to day operations. Using ICS during meetings for preparedness is an ideal fit. First, adopting ICS for day to day use employs all members; one person cannot effectively run the whole show. RACES organizations that provide government to government communications would especially benefit from the use of ICS. The old model of elected and appointed leaders doing all the planning and administration should be replaced by the ICS, which empowers all members to participate in each of the processes.

The concept of turning qualified Ham radio operators into communication specialists and leaders suggests that every Ham who participates in the readiness process should have a copy of the Standard Operating Procedures that describes plans for response to a local or regional emergency or disaster. They should be prepared to immediately operate as net control stations when the regularly appointed net control stations are not functioning. They should be capable of coordinating activities with served agencies and organizations; alerting licensed Ham radio operators of the need for emergency communications, and monitor communications systems for functionality when elected and appointed leaders are not available.

At a minimum, Ham radio operators should have forms that, when filled out, will identify the served agency, their point of contact and a band plans. Also, there should be some understanding regarding which message format will be used. Health and Welfare messages can easily use the ARRL message format and can be submitted into the National Traffic System through a number of nets that meet daily nationwide.

Governmental messages for inter-agency response and short term recovery tend to be longer than health and welfare messages. Ham radio operators should consider adopting a standard message format that will provide all of the information needed for all governmental agencies, non-government organizations, and private industries that are involved in response operations.

This may be an ideal time for ARES/RACES organizations to reconsider how they provide emergency Communications services. The federal requirement for served agencies to use NIMS and ICS should generate sufficient cause for us as communications providers to start rethinking our strategies and improve procedures and protocols. By including mechanisms that will incorporate the untrained licensed personnel for response to emergencies in our plans and by incorporating ICS in our day to day operations we may be better prepared and ready to meet the emergency response challenges of both today and tomorrow.

Ideally, Cities, Counties, and States will have well trained and exercised Ham Radio operators to respond to emergencies and disasters where effective radio communications can be employed in lieu of commercial systems that have become saturated, damaged, or disrupted.

Nationally, Amateur radio operators are a group of men and women with different needs and competing interests, who are linked together by the magic of a great hobby. But the new Ham's of today are not necessarily interested in operating in the same way as do their older counterparts. The lure of HF radio, CW, and providing emergency radio communications may not be sufficient to overcome the lure of I-Pods, cell phones, computers, electronic games, television, and Voice over Internet Programs. They may not be interested in developing skills in Ham radio's digital modes when other forms of communications are faster and generally more reliable; at least while those systems are properly functioning. More importantly, today's Public Safety Officials and Emergency Managers may not see the need to expend time, effort, and money in developing networks of Ham radio in geographic areas where there are few emergencies and disasters affecting public safety communications.

What we cannot do, and what we must not do, is to remain fixed in methods, procedures and protocols that fail to incorporate new technologies and ideas. We need to prepare for the world as it is today, not as it was in years past, and plan for the world as it will be tomorrow.

Our revised plans need to prescribe methods to get the message out of the affected

area by radio, while simultaneously providing radio operators in unaffected areas. We must stop viewing ourselves exclusively as radio operators and start thinking of ourselves as amateur radio communications specialists. Our philosophy must be, to get the message through by the quickest, most accurate means available.

Do Hams provide communication services?

The answer to this question is not as simple as one would imagine. Obviously, we provide communications when called by our served agencies and organizations during major emergencies and disasters, but we do much more. It would be almost impossible to list all of the services that Ham radio operators provide; however, here are a few.

Through SKYWARN, Ham radio provides weather related information to offices of the National Weather Service when severe weather is imminent so that the National Weather Service personnel can better paint a picture of local and regional weather patterns for the public. This service can sometimes be of great importance, especially in areas where radar is ineffective.

Hams also provide non-emergency public service communications. Ham radio provides communications for events such as parades, bicycle races, fairs and other events where the safety of the public requires additional radio communications.

Ham radio plays a role in every day public safety. They function as extra eyes for public safety agencies. Through the use of mobile and portable ham radio equipment, Hams can get a message to public safety agencies when people are in need of help. Traffic accidents, drunk drivers, structure, forest, and woodland fires, and injuries suffered by people in parks and recreational areas are but a few of the daily volunteer communication operations that Hams provide. These services are particularly important in areas where commercial communications are non-existent, such as in woodland areas.

Nationally, Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the emergency radio capabilities of Ham radio and its volunteer operators. Ham radio operators are at work voluntarily

providing emergency and non-emergency services every day and everywhere in the United States; where Ham radio operators are located, all FREE to the taxpayers.

The Amateur Radio Service is the only group that can provide the many types of emergency communications with reliability, at no cost to taxpayers, nationally and worldwide. The Federal Communication Commission (FCC) which is the licensing and enforcement agency over amateur services cites that one of the principles or purposes of the Amateur Radio Service is the “Recognition and enhancement of the value of the amateur service to the public as a voluntary noncommercial communication service, particularly with respect to providing emergency communications.” Radio amateurs provide emergency communications for the personal satisfaction they get from providing community service in extreme times of need.

However, when we ask why we provide emergency communications, we should also ask, what percentage of the amateur radio community is actually engaged in emergency preparedness activities? The answer is, very few. Roughly, there are only about ten per cent of the Hams in the U.S. that are registered as being ready and willing to provide emergency communications, of which, only about ten percent are actively engaged in preparedness activities.

How do the Amateur Radio Services provide emergency communications?

The answer is as mixed as the make up of the amateur radio population and the types of personally owned radio equipment that Ham's provide for response to an emergency. It's also impacted by the types and individual missions of agencies and organizations that provide outlets for voluntary service to the State, Counties and Cities and the nation through radio communications.

Ideally, State and Local governments will have established, in addition to their public safety commercial radio systems, an ARES/RACES program with which to conduct emergency radio communications. RACES, the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service, are a government to government, emergency communications

program, which is tightly regulated by the FCC. ARES, the Amateur Radio Emergency Service, is a program of the American Radio Relay League which is the national association for Amateur Radio. Unlike RACES, the ARES program has no restrictions about amateur radio participation in public service and non-emergency public safety. Volunteer members of the jurisdiction's emergency radio system should be jointly enrolled in both the Ares and Races programs to cover all potential radio communication needs of the jurisdiction.

State Emergency Operations Centers need to have the capability of communicating with Counties, and sometimes directly with Cities, although the normal protocol is to go through the county to get to an individual city. The State agency maintaining the needs, need to be able to communicate with State agencies that provide Public Safety and other services on behalf of the Office of the Governor. It also has a need to communicate directly with Emergency Management and Public Safety agencies in adjacent States. State and Local governmental agencies do not usually have extra radios for use when normal Public Safety communications have been disrupted. Amateur radio operators, working under the umbrella of both Ares and Races programs can provide the emergency radio communications effectively when agreements have been made in advance, and when those agreements are regularly tested through drills and exercises. Amateur radio also commonly provides emergency radio communication for non-government organizations such as the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army. Some examples of critical infrastructure's use of amateur radio include hospitals during mass casualties and evacuations.

There is an increasing demand for the use of amateur radio resources during emergencies and disasters. Many of the Ham radio operators who provide emergency communications services for State and Local jurisdictions are the same personnel who provide communications for non-government organizations. Should all of the potential user agencies and organizations call for amateur radio assistance at the same time, there will not be sufficient numbers of trained operators available to meet the need. Emergency response planners must develop new methods for effectively employing those Hams who do not normally participate in preparedness activities. That means that those few who do participate, must be retrained to take on new roles; not just the role of a radio operator.

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