

AMATEUR RADIO: EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Are you an ASSET OR LIABILITY?

The truth is, those not directly involved in Amateur Radio, and in some cases, those that are, do not fully understand how truly unique Amateur Radio is. From the standpoint of it's potential as an emergency communications asset, unlike the communications systems normally deployed by public safety agencies, Amateur Radio has the ability to adapt and expand to meet the rapidly changing requirements of any communications emergency. This is not the case with any other public safety radio system, no matter how large, well designed or financed it might be. This aspect of the Amateur Radio Service alone is no small way responsible for our very existence, and one of the reasons why nearly every nation on the planet has set aside very valuable radio spectrum for it.

Our many available modes and bands allow us flexibility unmatched by any other communications service. In an emergency, we can simply select additional frequencies to handle the increased traffic load. Our spectrum space is nearly limitless, whereas even the largest public safety agency system has a finite number of frequencies available. Our high frequency capabilities using NVIS and other techniques, allows communications in any terrain, with out the support of fragile

infrastructure, such as repeaters. Even with all of our capabilities, there are some very real, and not so real shortcomings of our service in the minds of some public officials.

To many, the very word amateur is associated with being less than professional, or something less than expert. Amateur, as in 'Amateur Radio' of course reflects the unpaid volunteer nature of our service, but this is an example of why we are sometimes met with some reservation on the part of those charged with the public safety, when it comes to being utilized in their emergency operations plans. This however, is only one example, and one more easily dealt with. There are, unfortunately, other examples that are more difficult to overcome.

There are 'volunteer paramedics' and 'volunteer fire fighters' and we know that this reflects only the fact they are unpaid for their services to the public. This does not mean they are less trained than their paid counterparts, or that they are exempt from meeting certain standards of conduct or education. Perhaps we should move to have the term Amateur Radio Operator changed to Volunteer Radio Operator? I don't think any of us would support this, but I do support becoming more like our volunteer cousins, the paramedics and fire fighters. These folks train and work very hard, and subject themselves to certain demands of conduct, training and experience. Why is it then that many of the Amateur Radio community feel that having an operator's license make them an automatic asset to public safety communications?

Unfortunately, this attitude is held by many amateurs, and is an example of something in need of change.

A Technician or even an Extra Class Amateur License does not make anyone an emergency communications expert, or even an asset to the public safety. Unless one is willing to undergo additional training and experience, and to subject one's self to accepted standards of conduct and discipline, these serve only as minimal requirements. An Emergency Manager or Fire Chief is not going to place anyone at risk, including their personnel and certainly not the public, without making very sure you know what you are doing. In matters pertaining to emergency communications, this means you are expected to know more than how to hook up and use a radio transmitter and antenna. Until a Fire Chief or Emergency Manager is relatively confident you will be more of an asset than a liability, they are not going to utilize you in any meaningful way. Unless you become part of the solution, you are part of the problem. Be willing to view the issue from their perspective, and you will soon realize there is more to it than showing up with a car full of radios, and an orange vest. If you are willing to show up for offered training, and not just when there is an emergency. If you are willing to listen as well as talk. The Fire Chiefs and Emergency Managers might just move you and your ARES MEMBERS into their "ASSET" column and out of the one headed "LIABILITIES".

You might ask, what can be done to improve our preparedness,

and better equip ourselves to render aid in an emergency? In this training session, I hope to present some ideas on personal preparedness and training that will help make the Arkansas ARES/RACES Amateur Radio Operators better prepared to respond to emergencies, and more likely to be considered an asset to their served agencies.

OK, I would like for you to forget all about radios, batteries and antennas for a moment, and to focus on the basic essentials of being human. Basic human needs must be dealt with first. This is true under the best conditions, and even more so under conditions during an emergency. Food and water, shelter from the elements, to name a few, are so basic as to be sometimes taken for granted. Taken for granted under disaster or emergency conditions however, these basics can mean the difference between being an asset, and just being another victim. During deployment in support of an emergency, Amateurs must be able to sustain themselves for at least 72 hours.

Not only must we be prepared to feed ourselves, we must also provide for all our own basic needs. These include water, not only for drinking and cooking, but for personal hygiene as well. Also required are proper clothing for all circumstances likely to be encountered, medications and first aid supplies, safe lighting and heating, sleeping equipment, shelter, personal hygiene and waste disposal supplies and equipment, personal protective gear such as hardhats, eye protection, gloves, boots and dust mask

etc., must be considered long before we start putting together the radios and antennas.

Plan ahead, and be sure to have a family plan. Don't depend on cell phones or local repeaters. Use simplex frequencies, and in the case of non-ham family members, FRS radios. These work well, are small, easy to operate and inexpensive. Whatever equipment and supplies you have, ensure that everyone knows how to use them, and carry them wherever they go. Teach all family members to attempt to contact a family friend or relative out of state, to let them know they are safe. Often times, a local or regional emergency will disable telephones communications between points inside the affected area, yet long distance service to and from those areas will still be available.

Take advantage of preparedness courses being offered. Learn basic land navigation and survival skills, first-aid and CPR. By preparing ourselves now, we are less likely to be among the victims, and more likely to be in a position to assist our ARES/RACES group in an emergency. Only once we prepare our families and ourselves, do we start worrying about the radio gear.

We spend years and years preparing our time in life that we can retire and spend time with our family, the Grandchildren and our friends. Isn't one weekend set aside to prepare your family and yourself worth protecting all of those years you worked?

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