

Good evening and thank you for joining us.

One of the greatest challenges during a disaster is efficiently moving large volumes of health and welfare messages, or as the Red Cross calls them Welfare Information. They used to be called DWI but I think everyone sees the problem with that...

Their official precedence will be "W" and this category of message deals with either information coming from the disaster area about a persons well being or information going into a disaster area inquiring about the welfare or status of a person.

The American Red Cross was chartered to provide disaster relief services in the United States and its possessions. The Salvation Army and state and local agencies may and do assist, but the job of welfare information falls primarily to the Red Cross.

Expect there to be a moratorium on inbound messages for the first several hours of the event. In other words, they will not be taking messages headed into the disaster area. This is because things really aren't settled enough to be able to track people that have been displaced by the event. It gives the agencies time to setup and organize.

Notice however that there is usually not a restriction on the outbound welfare information. This is because the receiving party is probably not displaced so should be easier to find and one single outbound "I'm o.k." message could save a number of inbound inquiries.

The Red Cross and Department of Homeland Security offer the following advice for people:

It might be easier to call long distance than close by, so make sure you have a prearranged out of area contact point as part of your preparedness plan.

Be sure every member of your family knows the phone number and has a prepaid phone card or enough coins to make the call.

Be patient, it may be tough to get through or impossible due to damage to the telephone system.

The Red Cross will first attempt to handle these messages through their own internal communications systems. However, if the volume exceeds their ability or their system is disrupted, the National Traffic System may be called upon to assist with the overload.

Follow the instructions given by your Net Manager if you are a Net Control Station or the Net Control Stations advisories if you are a net participant. Each situation will be a little different but generally follow the Red Cross's guidelines as they have ultimate responsibility for disaster welfare messages of all kinds.

Always check the ARRL web site or bulletins if possible for information about the expected frequencies or moratoriums on messages or general net information.

Do not bring welfare messages to a tactical net. If you have questions about your message and where you should be passing it and only know the tactical frequency, wait for an advisory from Net Control. In the situations I have been involved in, part of the 10 minute NCS script included directions for welfare traffic handling. There will likely be a liaison station present to assist you in passing your traffic.

Additionally there may be hotline digital mode circuits in place to assist in the handling of high volume or long haul traffic. The agency may use something like Winlink, AMTOR, RTTY, or even PSK31. So it will help to understand these modes as well.

Always place the priority on outbound welfare status reports. Never try to force inquiries into a disaster area. Inbound inquiries should only be brought when all other traffic out of the disaster area is handled. The ARRL bulletins and Red Cross offer excellent guidance on this issue as the disaster progresses.

Sometimes a friend or neighbor will ask you to send an inquiry. Unless means for handling this traffic are available you should advise the party that the chances of this message getting through are very poor. You may consider taking it but passing through the NTS rather than the Welfare net.

There are some things that should never be passed over amateur radio. If you are accepting a message from its author and it contains any of the following pieces of information you should refuse the message and or offer a rewrite to eliminate the compromising information.

Never handle or deliver a fatality report in any message. This should be left to the officials.

Never compromise driver license #, bank or credit card information, social security numbers or any personal information that could lead to identity theft.

An agency may ask you to send information over a more secure method but you should advise them that no mode that we operate in allows for discrete communication and you should encourage them to use their agency facilities if possible. Ultimately however, the agency is in charge of which information is sent or not sent and the mode it is delivered.

Before we close this evening I have a question for you. Let's say you are working at a shelter and a person asks you to send a message to his family asking that they contact his doctor and have another prescription sent to a nearby pharmacy. What would you do?