

Learning Unit 2 (C)

Amateurs as Professionals -- The Served Agency Relationship

ARECC Part one of two

Objective:

This training session and the one that I will present next week will help you to understand the critical and delicate relationship between Ares/Races emergency communicators and the agencies we serve.

Information:

What has my "attitude" got to do with this?

In a word, everything! It is even more important than your radio skills. Historically speaking, the attitude of some Amateur Radio volunteers has been our weakest point.

In situations where a professional and helpful attitude is maintained, served agencies point with pride to ham's efforts and accomplishments. The opposite situation is clearly illustrated in the words of one emergency management official who said, "Working with ham radio operators is like herding cats -- get them the heck out of here!" This man was clearly frustrated with the attitude of his volunteers.

Although our name says that we are "Amateurs," its real reference is to the fact that we are not paid for our efforts. It need not imply that our efforts or demeanor will be anything less than professional. "Professionalism" means getting the job done efficiently -- with a minimum of fuss.

No matter which agency we serve -- emergency management, the Red Cross, or others, it is helpful to remember that Ares/Races volunteers are like unpaid employees. If you maintain the attitude that you are an employee of the agency you are serving, with all that employee status implies, there is little chance for you to go astray. You are there to help solve their communication problems. Do whatever you can, within reason, to accomplish that goal, and avoid becoming part of the problem.

Who Works For Whom

The relationship between the volunteer communicator and served agency will vary somewhat from situation to situation, but the fact is that **you work for them**. It doesn't matter whether you are part of a separate radio group like the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES), or part of the agency's regular volunteer force. *You still work for them.*

Your job is to meet the communication needs of the served agency, **Period**. It is not to show off your fancy equipment, nor to impress anyone with your knowledge of radio and electronics. *A "know-it-all" or "I will show you how good I am, and how inadequate you are" attitude will end your -- and our -- relationship with the served agency in a hurry.*

It is often said that volunteers don't have to take orders. This is true -- we do not. However, when you volunteer your services to an organization, you implicitly agree to accept and comply with reasonable orders and requests from your "employer." If you do not feel comfortable doing this, do not volunteer.

There may be times that you find yourself unwilling or unable to comply with a served agency's demands. The reasons may be personal, or related to safety or health, or it may be that you do not consider yourself qualified or capable of meeting a particular demand. On rare occasions, it may be that they ask you to do something not permitted by FCC rules. Regardless of the reason, respectfully explain the situation, and work with the served agency or your leadership in the communication group to come up with an alternative solution. If the discussion with the served agency becomes difficult or uncomfortable, you can always politely pass the discussion up to your immediate Ares/Races leadership so that they can handle it instead.

How Professional Emergency Responders Often View Volunteers

Unless a positive and long established relationship exists between professionals and volunteers, professionals who do not work regularly with competent volunteers are likely to look at them as "less than useful." There are several reasons for this. Fire departments have a long history of competitive relationships between professional and volunteer firefighters, and this attitude may carry over to volunteers in general. Police agencies are often distrustful of outsiders -- often for legitimate information security concerns. Professionals in any field put a great deal of time and effort into their skills and training, and take considerable pride in their professional

standing. As a result, they may view themselves as able to handle all possible situations without outside assistance.

Volunteers, on the other hand, are often viewed as "part timers" whose skill level and dedication to the job vary widely. Many agencies and organizations have learned that some volunteers cannot be depended on when they are needed most. Do not be offended if this attitude is obvious, and remember that you cannot change it overnight. It takes time for you to prove yourselves, and for a positive working relationship to develop and mature.

The middle of an on-going incident is not the time to try to change a "we do not need you" attitude. If your offer of assistance is refused, do not press the issue. The incident commander is busy with more pressing needs, and if he changes his mind about your offer, he will probably contact you. Remember: the served agency's authority should never be challenged -- They are in charge, and you are not.

Performing Non-Communication Roles

It has been said many times that our job should be strictly limited to communication. But is this a hard and fast rule? When you work as a SKYWARN weather spotter, or collect and relay damage reports for the Red Cross, is this not going beyond your role as a communicator?

Well, yes and no. The old model of the emergency communicator was one where a written message would be generated by the served agency and handed to the radio operator. They would format and transmit the message to another station, whose operator would then write it out and then deliver it to the addressee. In this role, hams were strictly communicators, and due to the radio technology of the times, it was appropriate. Those days are gone forever.

In today's fast paced emergency responses, there is often no time for this sort of system. Events are happening too quickly, and the agency's communications must move at the same speed. The job description will more likely be "any function that also *includes* communication," as defined by the served agency. For this reason, emergency communication groups should engage in pre-planning with the served agency to ensure that these jobs are clearly defined, and any additional job-specific training required is obtained in advance.

In general, Ares/Races emergency communications groups should be prepared to perform jobs for their served agency that include the need to communicate. Here are a few of the many possible job descriptions:

- Radio operator, using Amateur or served agency radio systems.
- Dispatcher, organizing the flow of personnel, vehicles, and supplies.
- Resource coordinator, organizing the assignments of disaster relief volunteers.
- Field observer, watching and reporting weather or other conditions.
- Damage assessor, evaluating and reporting damage conditions.
- Van driver, moving people or supplies from location to location.
- Searcher, also providing communication for a search and rescue team.

To perform these jobs, you may need to complete task-specific training courses, and take part in exercises and drills in addition to those required for emergency communication even beyond traditional Amateur Radio. In the ever-changing world of emergency response, this flexibility will become increasingly important if we are to continue our contribution to public safety as Amateur Radio operators.

Note:

Some Ares/Races groups may still enforce a "communication only" policy, and in some agencies, the old model may still be appropriate. Discuss this with your Emergency Coordinator.

End part one

ARECC lesson 2, part two

Specific Agency Relationships

The relationship between the volunteer communicator and the served agency can be quite different from agency to agency, and even between different offices of the same agency. While the ARRL and other national communication groups have existing “Memorandums of Understanding” (MOU), sometimes called a “Statement of Understanding” (SOU) or

“Statement of Affiliation” (SOA), in place with many served agencies that define our general relationships, the actual working relationship is more precisely defined at the local level. Different people have different ideas and management styles, agencies in one area can have different needs from others, and these can affect the working relationship between the agency and its emergency communications volunteers. Ares/Races groups often have their own written agreements with the agency’s local office.

Here are some examples of relationships:

- *Department of Homeland Security (DHS)*: In June 2003, ARRL and DHS signed a Statement of Affiliation, making ARES an affiliate member of DHS’s Citizen’s Corp community readiness program. The agreement provides for training and a accreditation of ARES members, raising public awareness of Amateur Radio’s role in emergency communications, and coordination of shared activities.
- *Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)*: In most cases Amateur Radio operators will have little direct contact with FEMA and other federal agencies, except within the Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) and at the national level with ARRL.
- *American Red Cross* chapters may have their own communication teams that include Amateurs, or they may have a SOU with a local ARES group or radio club. Typical assignments include linking shelters and chapter houses, performing damage assessment, handling supply and personnel logistics, and handling health and welfare messages.
- *The Salvation Army* maintains its own internal Amateur Radio communication support group, known as the Salvation Army Team Emergency Radio Network (SATERN). In some areas, ARES or other groups provide local communication support. Assignments are similar to the Red Cross.
- *State and Local Emergency Management*: Some state and local emergency management agencies include Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES) teams as part of their own emergency communication plan. Others use “outside” groups such as the ARES. In a growing trend around the country, all ARES members are also RACES registered operators and vice versa. Communication assignments may be similar to the Red Cross and Salvation Army, but may also include government command and control, and inter-agency communications.

- *SKYWARN* is a self-contained program sponsored by the National Weather Service, and not all members are Amateur Radio operators. Many use other radio systems or telephone, fax or email to send in weather observations. *SKYWARN* volunteers collect on the spot weather observations that will allow forecasters to create forecasts that are more accurate, and issue timely warnings.

Talking to The Press

In any emergency situation, the press will be hunting for any tidbit of information they can get, and they may not care where they get it. One place they should ***never*** get information regarding the served agency or its efforts is from *you*. Politely refer all such inquiries to the served agency's public spokesperson. If you offer such information "just to be helpful," because you enjoy "being in the spotlight," or to get some publicity for yourself or your group, the served agency would be well within its rights to ask you to leave.

Some Ares/Races organizations also have their own spokesperson. In ARES this person is called the "Public Information Officer" (PIO) – other organizations may use a different job title. Their job is to handle press inquiries so that radio operators can do their jobs without interruption. In most all cases, they would only answer questions about the Amateur Radio group's efforts, and not those of the served agency.

If a reporter just will not leave you alone, you might feel obliged to say something so they will go away. In this case, the only thing you should discuss is your part of the emergency communication effort, but only if you are part of a separate group such as ARES, and ***only if that organization's policy permits it***. If they are impeding your ability to do your job, briefly explain this to the reporter and politely but firmly direct them to the PIO or a management person.

Regardless of the situation, it is always a good policy to know in advance how your organization or served agency would like you to deal with press inquiries. If your organization does not have a "press" policy, you might suggest that one be developed. This will help prevent misunderstandings and hard feelings later.

Volunteering Where You Are Not Known

In some cases, an emergency occurs in a neighboring area where you are not a member of the responding communication group. For whatever reason, you might feel obligated to offer your services. If at all feasible, it is best to make your offer before making any significant preparations, or leaving home.

It is possible that your offer might be welcomed, but it is equally possible that it will be refused. There are good reasons for this, particularly where the served agency has specific requirements, such as specialized training, official IDs, and time consuming background checks. Most emergency communications managers prefer to work only with operators whose abilities and limitations they know. They may also have more volunteers than they need, or may feel that your skills or equipment are not suited to their mission. If you are turned away, please accept the situation gracefully.

On the other hand, if your offer of assistance is accepted, the situation you find may vary quite a bit. In a well-organized effort, there will be someone to help orient you to the response effort, provide any required information, and answer your questions. Your assignment will be clear, a relief person will be sent along at the end of a pre-defined shift, and you will know of any arrangements for food, sanitation, and sleep.

If the effort is not well organized, little, if any, of the above scenario could be true. You might be given an assignment, but with little additional information or support. In this case, you will need to improvise and fend for yourself, and you should be prepared to do so. This is one good reason for making your offer of assistance in advance. Learn as much as you can about the response before preparing to leave home.

In any event, the best time to offer your services is well before any emergency occurs. This will allow you to obtain the proper training and credentials, and to become known to the group's managers. When the time comes to serve, you will be ready for your job, and a job will be ready for you.

Worker's Compensation Coverage and Legal Protections

In some states, Worker's Compensation insurance coverage can be extended to volunteers working on behalf of a government or non-profit agency. However, Worker's Compensation law is a rather complex matter regulated by individual state's laws. In many cases, it may not be possible for

volunteers who are not also paid employees of a served agency to be covered by Worker's Compensation. Ares/Races leadership should investigate their state's laws on this subject rather than assume that the agency's Worker's Compensation coverage will automatically apply.

Volunteers providing services to government agencies or Section 501(c)(3) tax-exempt private organizations are provided immunity from liability by Federal law through the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997, 42 U.S.C. Section 14501. This generally limits liability if the volunteer was acting at the time within the scope of official duties under a volunteer program. There are exceptions: the law does not cover volunteers who cause harm while operating motor vehicles, or if the volunteer is grossly negligent, or engages in criminal acts. The statute, however, provides broad liability protection for Amateurs in most contexts, and especially where Amateurs volunteer under ARES to provide emergency communications to served agencies.

The relationship between Amateur Radio operators **Review:**

and a served agency is a critical one. Ares/Races volunteers should maintain a professional attitude at all times and remember that their relationship to the served agency is much like that of an employee – without the paycheck. Agency relationships will vary with the agency, region, and the needs and style of local management.

Avoid giving any information to the press until you understand both the served agency's and your own group's policies on speaking to the press. Most groups will want all information to come from a central official source, such as a "public information officer."

When volunteering where you are not known, do not be surprised if your offer is refused.

End part two