

Health and Welfare Traffic Management

One of the biggest problems in a disaster is the handling of so-called health and welfare traffic or disaster welfare inquiries. The ARRL-recommended precedence for this type of traffic is W or Welfare, and refers to either an inquiry as to the health and welfare of an individual in the disaster area or an advisory from the disaster area that indicates all is well. The influx of Welfare traffic into the disaster area may be large, and the NTS may be called upon to assist with this overload. The NTS policy with respect to the handling of Welfare traffic is to handle as much of it as possible, but to adhere to its precedence. Higher-precedence traffic must be handled first, then Welfare traffic only when the circuit is free. Routine (R) traffic is not normally handled by an NTS net operating under disaster conditions, because usually they more than have their hands full with higher precedence, but should a disaster circuit be temporarily available, there is no reason why it cannot be handled until the circuit again becomes occupied with higher-precedence traffic.

In a widespread disaster situation, it is seldom possible to handle all the Welfare traffic with

efficiency and dispatch. Sometimes, in fact, it piles up alarmingly, to the extent that much of it is never delivered. There are a number of ways in which this can be controlled, but few of them are consistent with public relations objectives. The best way to handle such situations is to maintain close contact with the Red Cross or the Salvation Army as appropriate, since most inquiries are handled through these organizations. Civil preparedness organizations also can often set up procedures for handling such traffic. In recent years, special Winlink 2000 and packet circuits have been established with great success.

When working with the Red Cross or the Salvation Army handling Welfare traffic, you must submit to their authority on the subject. Respect any moratorium on DWI messages they impose, usually up to the first 72 hours, depending on the scale of the disaster.

The NTS/NTSD policy is to handle as many DWI messages as possible and recently, Winlink, and packet circuits have been established with great success for high volume, high accuracy traffic handling. This speeds traffic to its destination and frees up nets for other duties, bypassing the normal NTS net structure.

Outgoing Advisories Have Precedence:

Place a priority on handling messages coming out of the disaster area. One in-bound inquiry can prevent many out-bound messages from clogging the system.

Never try to force inquiries into a disaster area. They should only be passed when higher precedence traffic and outgoing advisories have been cleared. In-bound messages have a poor chance of being delivered for several reasons. In many cases, there is no mechanism for the delivery of welfare inquires. The addressee may be in any number of shelters or may have left the area completely. Local phone lines may be out and travel difficult or impossible. Be sure that stations in the affected areas are truly able to receive and process inquiries before sending them.

Accepting Local Inquiries

Sometimes a friend or neighbor will ask you to send an inquiry to someone in an affected area. Unless a means for handling these messages are established, it is usually wise not to accept them from the public, or do so only with an understanding that chances of delivery are not very good.

Prohibited Message Content:

If you are accepting a message from its author, certain information should be refused or strongly discouraged. Outgoing advisories or responses to

DWI messages from the disaster area should never include a person's home address. Enterprising thieves have been known to listen to scanners and then loot evacuee's homes.

NEVER handle or deliver a fatality report in any Amateur Radio message. That function is strictly reserved for disaster officials through their own channels.

Other items that should never be sent include financial information, bank or credit card numbers, driver license or Social Security numbers, or any personal details that could lead to identity theft.

In some instances, the served agency may allow you to send certain sensitive information over more discrete modes, such as Winlink, but be sure they fully understand that no Amateur mode can be considered truly secure. The served agency is the ultimate authority on which information can or cannot be sent, and by which modes.