

# The American Red Cross

*"Just one of the many agencies we often serve"*

Let's take a look at the American Red Cross. Disaster relief is only one of the many facets of this nation-wide organization, but it is the most likely event type, in which we will be called on.

## **AMERICAN RED CROSS HISTORY AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

The American Red Cross (ARC) was founded in 1881 by Clara Barton and was first Chartered by Congress in 1900. A second charter, which is still in force, was granted in 1905. Under it, the American Red Cross is required to function as a go-between for members of the armed forces and their families; to maintain a system of national and international relief to relieve the suffering caused by earthquake, flood, fire, and other disasters. The American Red Cross organization is directed by a board of governors consisting of 50 people, of whom 30 are elected by the local chapters, 12 are chosen by the board, and 8 are appointed by the President of the United States, who designates the chairperson.

The disaster services program develops disaster preparedness plans and, when a disaster occurs, responds with emergency care for disaster victims and rehabilitation assistance to render aid to individuals and families. The blood services program is the largest blood donor service in the world. Blood given by volunteers, is collected, processed, and made available to doctors and hospitals.

The American Red Cross has over 1.5 million volunteers participating in activities that are supported mainly by voluntary contributions through local American Red Cross Chapter campaigns.

## **"Considerations and Options"**

There are many parallels between the disaster operations of the ARC, those of ARES and other disaster and emergency response organizations. Like the rest of us, initial size up of the local situation is in the hands of the affected unit staff. One of the first things for any communications related personnel to do in an emergency situation after assuring safety of self, is to do an assessment of WHAT WORKS and WHAT DOES NOT. Are landline telephones, cellular and pager communications working? Are local Public Service bands operating, as they should be? Are amateur radio repeaters functional?

The affected communications team at the direction of their leadership should try to get word out about their needs and capabilities as soon as possible to their respective state levels of emergency management, and disaster relief agencies and organizations.

If the affected local team does not have sufficient resources to handle the needs of the situation then state level once informed as to the situation should then have an idea of where to begin to coordinate the movement of additional outside resources to the affected area. Likewise, state staff should pass the word up the ladder to the national level about the situation and report conditions and resource shortfalls.

The American Red Cross has several avenues of communications options open to them. Some are good for regular day to day use, while others are mutual aid type arrangements for back up communications. Other resources are available through their national headquarters though these, because they are not in close proximity, take time to arrange or acquire. To put it more directly... If it's not a "national" disaster...that is, one where the "national" volunteer coordination system (called DSHR) for [Disaster Services Human Resources](#) is engaged, you will not likely be getting help from National HQ itself.

Under ordinary conditions the ARC's communications are conducted in the same manner as everyone else's, telephones, pagers, fax, and Internet connections for e-mail etc. When needed, they also have a licensed frequency and radio equipment in most Emergency Response Vehicles for FM 2 way radio communications that gives them a typical range of 10 -20 miles. The FCC for their use has granted seven HF frequencies as well, however most units will not have HF gear and is not normally a staple, in the average local ARC Chapter's inventory.

Also, these HF frequencies are a part of the SHARES system; a set of federal government frequencies that can be accessed by FEMA, Red Cross, and other national-level entities. Unless you are explicitly instructed to use this system, you don't.

Amateur radio is likely the best alternative for their use, as a back up communications medium and this is where we come in. Local ARES groups can be invaluable to the staff of a local ARC Chapter during a local disaster response. Coordination and planning well before a disaster will make things run more smoothly.

Local agreements should include a statement regarding the confidentiality of some disaster-related conversations and communications. Again, pre-planning efforts between these two organizations can pay off BIG when an actual response occurs. Once your group 'connects' with a local ARC unit it is very likely you will be encouraged to take Red Cross training (first aid/CPR) and disaster training (Damage Assessment, etc.). This helps you, help them, more effectively and adds to your personal knowledge and preparedness as well. Go ahead, knock on that door, make those contacts and train and exercise NOW before disaster strikes.