

“The Future of NTS/ARES”

There have been some comments made lately about the ARES/RACES, NTS and NTSD that I find disturbing.

As one who has worked with different NTS, NTSD, ARES and RACES groups sending messages during major disasters, and daily non emergency operations, I can say without equivocation that Amateur Radio has serious deficiencies and some of these may be summarized as follows:

1. Most ARES groups are equipped, trained, only to handle informal tactical communications in which they are the direct recipient of the information or instructions. Many such organizations “fall apart” in net configuration because the majority of members haven’t the least familiarity with proper radio voice or digital net procedures and protocols.
2. Most ARES groups are incapable of utilizing a standard message format for accurately transmitting third party traffic. As such, important service data is often lacking. A message recipient needs to know from whom and where a message was originated, they need to know when it was drafted, but this information is almost never available through ARES.
3. For years the League has offered many recommendations for ARES organizations, but has promulgated few, if any, minimum requirements for member training and basic organizational capabilities. If your local volunteer fire departments were run like many ARES groups, some would have adequate hose, others wouldn’t.

Over the past few year’s, I have seen numerous ARES groups and ARRL Sections bypass the NTS by creating ad-hoc “ARES Nets” to facilitate cross jurisdictional message flow. Sometimes this is necessary to serve a unique, specialized purpose, however, in most cases; these nets serve only to avoid the use of a standard message format because many of our DEC’s, EC’s, AEC’s and ARES/RACES members simply admit they don’t know how.

The simple fact is this, ARES has repeatedly failed in a variety of message handling tasks, so now, many people are blaming the NTS for this problem. It’s being said they aren’t keeping up with the times. I say this is “bull.” If we want to get to the bottom of this problem, I suggest the following, somewhat rhetorical questions: “Did the NTS fail the League, or did the

League fail the NTS, or did the ARES/RACES groups fail both the ARRL and the NTS with lack of training and meaningful messages.

Individuals can blame the NTS all they want, but they should be forewarned; a failure to deal with basic training, preparedness, procedures and protocol issues at the local level will kill Amateur Radio emergency communications just as quickly as a failure to address the NTS issues. Now, let's talk about the use of digital modes and emergency communications use of the Winlink and Packet systems.

I believe that there is no harm integrating the Internet and automated digital protocols into ARES. This is evolution and progress. It needs to be done. However, it should be noted that these are simply additional communications tools.

If NTS were entirely supplanted by WINLINK and Internet message delivery tomorrow, I am willing to bet that the very same problems would exist with training, message accuracy and content.

Here in Arkansas, there has been tens of thousands of dollars spent developing a Packet and PACTOR infrastructure. The result: I have heard some DECs, ECs and Ares/Races members say, "We don't want anything to do with your blank blank digital message handling equipment and procedures." They view any outside requirement as a threat to their power and or control.

So, this begs the question; Whether via WINLINK, packet, CW, SSB or FM, how is a message going to flow between a major Metropolitan Area hospital and our State Public Health Department or State EMA in the absence of commercial/government infrastructure? My bet....it isn't. If it does, it will be incomplete, confusing, and perhaps even garbled.

The continued existence of NTS is not incompatible with the development of additional digital capabilities. It should be kept and encouraged to function. However, it must work with ARES. Therefore, if the DEC, EC, SEC, SM or whoever is placed in charge of message handling capabilities in their area, then he/she should insure that the ARES programs and a cadre of members have minimal familiarity with it.

In my opinion, the Ares/Races organizations have failed the NTS as opposed to the other way around. The current NTS situation is simply a display of

symptoms caused by an underlying disease affecting the Ares/Races community.