

Operating in Emergency nets

Operation in an emergency net is little different from operation in any other net, requires preparation and training. This includes training in handling of written messages--that is, what is generally known as "traffic handling." Handling traffic is covered in detail in the ARRL *Operating Manual*. This is required reading for all ARES members--in fact, for all amateurs aspiring to participate in disaster communications.

The specifications of an effective communication service depend on the nature of the information which must be communicated. Pre-disaster plans and arrangements for disaster communications include:

- Identification of clients who will need Amateur Radio communication services.
- Discussion with these clients to learn the nature of the information which they will need to communicate, and the people they will need to communicate with.
- Specification, development and testing of pertinent services.

While much amateur-to-amateur communicating in an emergency is of a procedural or tactical nature, the real meat of communicating is formal written traffic for the record. Formal written traffic is important for:

- A record of what has happened--frequent status review, critique and evaluation. Completeness which minimizes omission of vital information.
- Conciseness, which when used correctly actually takes less time than passing informal traffic.
- Easier copy--receiving operators know the sequence of the information, resulting in fewer errors and repeats.

When relays are likely to be involved, standard ARRL message format should be used. The record should show, wherever possible:

1. A message number for reference purposes.
2. A precedence indicating the importance of the message.
3. A station of origin so any reply or handling inquiries can be referred to that station.
4. A check (count of the number of words in the message text) so receiving stations will know whether any words were missed.
5. A place of origin, so the recipient will know where the message came from (not necessarily the location of the station of origin).
6. Filing time, ordinarily optional but of great importance in an emergency message.
7. Date of origin.

The address should be complete and include a telephone number if known. The text should be short and to the point, and the signature should contain not only the name of the person sending the message but his title or connection also, if any.

Point-to-point services for direct delivery of emergency and priority traffic do not involve relays. Indeed, the full ARRL format is often not needed to record written traffic. Shortened forms should be used to save time and effort. For example, the call sign of the originating station

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usually identifies the place of origin. Also, the addressee is usually known and close by at the receiving station, so full address and telephone number are often superfluous. In many cases, message blanks can be designed so that only key words, letters or numbers have to be filled in and communicated. In some cases, the message form also serves as a log of the operation. Not a net goes by that you don't hear an ARL Fifty or an ARL Sixty One. Unfortunately, "greetings by Amateur Radio" does not apply well during disaster situations. You may hear an ARL text being used for health and welfare traffic, but rarely during or after the actual disaster. Currently, no ARL text describes the wind speed and barometric pressure of a hurricane, medical terminology in a mass casualty incident or potassium iodide in a nuclear power plant drill. While no one is suggesting that an ARL text be developed for each and every situation, there is no reason why amateurs can't work with the local emergency management organizations and assist them with more efficient communications.

Amateurs are often trained and skilled communicators. The emergency management community recognizes these two key words when talking about the Amateur Radio Service. Amateurs must use their skills to help the agencies provide the information that needs to be passed, while at the same time showing their talents as trained communicators who know how to pass information quickly and efficiently. We are expected to pass the information accurately, even if we do not understand the terminology.

Traffic handlers and ARES members are resourceful individuals. Some have developed other forms or charts for passing information. Some hams involved with the SKYWARN program, for instance, go down a list and fill in the blanks, while others use grid squares to define a region. Regardless of the agency that we are working with, we must use our traffic-handling skills to the utmost advantage. Sure, ARL messages are beneficial when we are passing health and welfare traffic. But are they ready to be implemented in times of need in your community? The traffic handler, working through the local ARES organizations, must develop a working relationship with those organizations who handle health and welfare inquiries. Prior planning and personal contact are the keys to allowing an existing National Traffic System to be put to its best use. If we don't interface with the agencies we serve, the resources of the Amateur Radio Service will go untapped.

Regardless of the format used, the appropriate procedures cannot be picked up solely by reading or studying. There is no substitute for actual practice. Your emergency net should practice regularly--much more often than it operates in a real or simulated emergency. Avoid complacency, the feeling that you will know how to operate when the time comes. You won't, unless you do it frequently, with other operators whose style of operating you get to know.