EME-121
EMERGENCY OPERATIONS DEPLOYMENT
Modified from original Waller County ARES training article.

We will discuss the steps necessary to set up, begin, and end operations in temporary locations, such as shelters in schools or churches, or temporary command centers at any location.

Responding After The Activation
If you already have your assignment, confirm that by monitoring and checking into the local activation net. If you do not have a standing assignment, you should check into an activation net and request an assignment. It might be a "resource" logistics net if one is active, or the general "tactical" command activation net.

After you have gathered your equipment and are ready to respond, you may need to do several things, depending on local plans and the nature of the emergency. You may be asked to check in to a specific net to let them know you are en route, and then periodically to report your progress, particularly if travel is hazardous.

In some cases, you may be asked to proceed to a "staging" area to wait for an assignment. This could take some time, especially if the situation is very confused. Often, the development of the response to the emergency is unclear and it will take some time to develop a uniform response plan for that incident. You should expect the situation to be fluid as each incident is unique and to respond accordingly. Be prepared to wait patiently for a determination to be made and an assignment to be given.

In other cases, such as the immediate aftermath of a tornado or earthquake, you may be forced to make arrangements as you go. Travel may be difficult or impossible, so you may need to do what you can, where you can. NET's may be established using whatever means available.

Who is in charge?
At each station, the EC or other emergency communications manager should appoint one member of the emergency communications group to take a leadership role as "station manager," with full responsibility for all operations at that site. This person serves as a point person for contact, information and decisions for the team, with the incident commander and with other groups aiding in the response. This helps avoid confusion and arguments.

When you accept a position as an emergency communications volunteer, you do so knowing that you will often need to follow the directions of another person. Cooperation and good teamwork are key elements that result in an efficient and effective emergency communications operation. As the situation arises, you may have to step into a role of a leader to keep the operation moving forward. These are key principles behind the success of the Incident Command System (ICS). ICS is a structured and scalable means of absorbing and organizing people from diverse agencies into a cohesive team of responders. [Expect to work with others. Expect that there are times you are the follower. Expect that other times, you may be the leader.]

Arriving at the Site

If you are assigned to a facility operated by the served agency, such as a shelter, introduce yourself to the person in charge as an "emergency communicator" assigned to serve that location. They will be busy, so get right to the point:

1. Identify yourself and explain that you have been assigned to set up a communication station for that location, and by whom.
2. Inform them that you would like to set up your equipment and get on the air. Ask if another communicator has already arrived.
3. Ask if they have a preference for the station's location.
4. If you are the first communicator to arrive, be prepared to suggest an appropriate location, one that can serve as both an operating and message desk, has feedline access to a suitable antenna location, access to power and telephone, and is just isolated enough from the command center to avoid disturbing each other.
5. Ask if there are any hazards or considerations in the immediate area that you should be aware of, or cause you to relocate later.

If no building or other suitable shelter is available, you may need to set up your own tent, or work from your car. Choose a location that provides shelter from wind, precipitation and other hazards, and is close enough to the served agency's operations to be convenient, but not in their way.

Being a Good Guest

In many cases, you will be occupying a space that is normally used by someone else for another purpose. Respect and protect their belongings and equipment in every possible way. For instance, if you are in a school and will be using a teacher's desk, find a way to remove all the items from its surface to a safe place for the duration of operations. A cardboard box, sealed and placed under the desk usually works well. Do not use their office supplies or equipment, or enter desk drawers or other storage areas without specific permission from a representative of the building's owners. Some served agencies will seal all filing cabinets, drawers, and doors to certain rooms with tamper-evident tape upon arrival to protect the host's property and records.

When installing antennas, equipment, and cables, take care not to damage anything. For instance, avoid using "duct" tape to fasten cables to walls, since its removal will usually damage the surface. If any damage is caused, make note of it in your log and report it to the appropriate person as soon as possible.

Initial Set Up and Information Gathering

In most cases, your first priority will be to set up a basic station to establish contact with the net. Pack that equipment in your vehicle last so that you can get to it first. If you arrive as a team of two or more, station setup can begin while others carry in the remaining equipment.

Set up and test the antenna for proper SWR, and then check into the net. Test to find the lowest power setting that produces reliable communication, especially if you are operating with battery or generator power, to conserve power for extended operations. High power should also be avoided whenever possible to prevent interference with other radio systems, telephones, and electronic equipment.

Once your basic station is on the air, you can begin to work on other needs, such as:
1. Check for working telephones, faxes, internet and other means of communications
2. Learning about the served agency's operations and immediate needs at that site
3. Installing additional stations or support equipment
4. Making a list of stations within simplex range
5. Identifying possible alternative message paths
6. Finding sanitary facilities
7. Determining water and food sources, eating arrangements
8. Reviewing overall conditions at the site, and how they will affect your operations
9. Finding a place to get some occasional rest

As soon as possible, ask a member of the served agency's staff to spend a few moments to discuss the agency's operational needs.
1. What are the most critical needs?
2. Whom do they need to communicate with, and what sort of information will need to be transmitted?
3. Will messages be short and tactical in nature, or consist of long lists?
4. Will any messages be too confidential for radio?
5. Are phones and fax still working?
6. What will traffic needs be at different times of day?
7. How long is the site anticipated to be open?
8. Will there be periodic changes in key agency staff?

You may also need to provide agency staff with some basic information on how to create a message, show them how to use message forms, and instruct them on basic procedures to follow. Be sure to let them know that their communications will not be private and "secure" if sent by Amateur Radio, and discuss possible alternatives.

Ending Operations
Emergency communications operations may end all at once, or be phased out over time. Several factors may affect which operations end, and when, such as:
1. Damaged communication systems are restored and returned to service
2. Traffic loads are reduced and can be handled with normal systems
3. Shelters and other locations are closed

How you are notified to end operations will depend on the policies of your emergency communication group and served agency, and the specific situation. For instance, even though a shelter manager has been told to shut down by the served agency, your orders may normally come from a different person who may not be immediately aware of the shelter's closing. In this case, you might need to check with the appropriate emergency communications manager before closing your station. Once the decision to close your station has been received and verified, be sure that the person in charge of the location is aware that you are doing so, and if necessary, why.

File and package all messages, logs, and other paperwork for travel. Return any borrowed equipment or materials. Carefully remove all antennas and equipment, taking care to package and store it correctly and safely. Avoid the temptation to toss everything into a box with the intention to sort it out later, unless you are under pressure to leave in a hurry. In the event you are re-deployed quickly, this will save time in the end.

Departure

Several actions may be necessary when leaving. First, be sure to leave the space you used in as good a condition as possible. Clean up any messes, remove trash, and put any furniture or equipment back where it was when you arrived. If you sealed desktop items in a box for safekeeping, simply place the box on the cleaned desk. Do not unpack the items and attempt to replace them on the desk. This will provide proof to the desk's owner that you took steps to protect their belongings, and helps keep them secure until their owner takes possession again. Do not remove tamper evident tape or similar seals placed by others unless told to do so by the appropriate person, or in accordance with the agency's policy.

Thank all those who worked with you. Even a simple verbal "thanks" goes a long way, compared to not saying anything. Do not forget the building's owners or staff, the served agency staff or others you worked with, and any other emergency communications personnel. This is also the time for any apologies. If things did not always go well, or if any damage was caused, do your best to repair the relationship before departing. These simple efforts can go a long way toward protecting relationships between all groups and individuals involved.

The Debriefing

After each operation, your emergency communications group, and perhaps even the served agency, will probably want to hold a meeting to review the effectiveness of the operation. There may be issues that occur during operations that you will want to discuss at this meeting. Events may have occurred within the served agency that involved communications you handled. If you try to rely entirely on your memory or logbooks, you will probably forget key details or even forget certain events altogether.

To prevent this from happening, keep a separate "de-briefing" diary, specifically for use during this meeting. Some entries might only refer briefly to specific times and dates in the station operating log, or they may contain details of an issue that are not appropriate in the station log. If you will be required to turn over your station logs immediately at the end of operations, your de-briefing diary will need to contain full details of all events and issues for discussion.
Such information might include:
1. What was accomplished?
2. Is anything still pending? Note unfinished items for follow-up.
3. What worked well? Keep track of things that worked in your favor.
4. What needed improvement?
5. Ideas to solve known problems in the future.
6. Key events
7. Conflicts and resolutions

During the de-briefing, organize the session into (a) what worked well, and (b) what could be improved for the next operation. Change criticisms and judgment statements into a constructive manner by saying, "This method might have worked better if…," rather than "This method was stupid." Also, avoid personal attacks and finger pointing. In most cases, interpersonal issues are dealt with most effectively away from the group meeting.