

Section 1: The Framework: How You Fit In

Topic 2

Amateurs Presenting a Professional Image

Objectives

Welcome to Topic 2.

This topic will help you appreciate the critical and delicate relationship between radio amateurs and the partners they serve.

Student preparation required:

None.

What Your Attitude Has to Do with Communications

In a word, everything! It is even more important than your radio skills. Historically, the attitude of some Amateur Radio volunteers has been our weakest point.

In situations when a professional and helpful attitude is maintained, partner agencies point with pride to ham radio operators' efforts and accomplishments. The opposite is clearly illustrated in the words of one emergency management official who said, "Working with ham radio operators is like herding cats — get them the heck out of here!" This man was clearly frustrated with the attitude of his volunteers.

The use of the word "amateur" in our designation means simply that we are not paid for our efforts. It need not imply that our efforts or demeanor will be anything less than professional. "Professionalism" means the job is done with a high degree of competence and skill.

No matter which partner agency you serve — emergency management, National Weather Service (NWS), or the American Red Cross (ARC), it is helpful to remember that public service communications volunteers are like unpaid employees. If you maintain the attitude that you are an employee of the partner you are serving, with all that that employee status implies, there is little chance for you to go astray. You are there to add communications capacity and, in so doing, help the agency or organization accomplish its mission.

Who Works for Whom

The relationship between the volunteer communicator and partner agencies will vary somewhat from situation to situation, but the fact is that *you* work for *them*. It doesn't matter whether you are part of a

separate radio group like the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES®), or part of the partner's regular volunteer force. You still work for them.

Your job is to meet the communication needs of the partners — period. It is not to show off your fancy equipment, or to impress anyone with your knowledge of radio and electronics. A “know-it-all” or “I will show you how good I am and how inadequate you are” attitude will end your — and our — relationship with the partners in a hurry.

It is often said that volunteers don't have to take orders. However, when you volunteer your services to an organization, you implicitly agree to accept and comply with reasonable orders and requests from your “employer.” If you do not feel comfortable doing this, do not volunteer.

There may be times when you find yourself unwilling or unable to comply with a partner's demands. The reasons may be personal or related to safety or health, or it may be that you do not consider yourself qualified or capable of meeting a particular demand. On rare occasions, it may be that you are asked to do something not permitted by Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules. Regardless of the reason, respectfully explain the situation, and work with the partner or your superiors in the communication group to come up with an alternative solution. If the discussion with the partners becomes difficult or uncomfortable, you can always politely pass the discussion up to your immediate emergency communications superiors so that they can handle it instead.



Performing Non-Communication Roles

It has been said many times that our job should be strictly limited to communication. But is this a hard and fast rule? When you work as a SKYWARN weather spotter, or collect and relay damage reports for the Red Cross, is this not going beyond your role as a communicator?

Well, yes and no. The old model of the public service communicator was one in which a written message would be generated by the partner and handed to the radio operator. The radio operator would format and transmit the message to another station, whose operator would then transcribe it out and deliver it to the addressee. In this role, ham radio operators were strictly communicators, and due to the radio technology of the times, that was appropriate. Except for rare occasions and situations, those days are gone forever.

Today, message ownership is expected to stay with the person that composes the message to be sent or the reply. Some emergency communications groups may still enforce a “communication only” policy, and in some agencies the old model may still be appropriate but discuss this with your Emergency Coordinator or appropriate supervisor to be sure.

In today’s fast-paced emergency responses, there is often no time for this sort of system. Events are happening too quickly, and the partner’s communications must move at the same speed. The job description will more likely be “any function that also *includes* communication,” as defined by the partners. For this reason, emergency communication groups should engage in preplanning with the partners to ensure that these jobs are clearly defined, and that any additional job-specific training required is obtained in advance.

In general, emergency communications groups should be prepared to perform jobs for their partners that include the need to communicate. Here are a few of the many possible job descriptions:

- Radio operator, using amateur or partners’ radio systems
- Dispatcher, organizing the flow of personnel, vehicles, and supplies
- Resource coordinator, organizing the assignments of disaster relief volunteers
- Field observer, watching and reporting weather or other conditions
- Damage assessor, evaluating and reporting damage conditions
- Van driver, moving people or supplies from location to location
- Searcher, also providing communication for a search and rescue team
- Technical assistance, assist in setting up computer networks, charging stations, or generator power

To perform these jobs, you may need to complete task-specific training courses and take part in exercises and drills in addition to those required for emergency communication even beyond traditional Amateur Radio. In the ever-changing world of emergency response, this flexibility will become increasingly important if we are to continue our contribution to public safety as Amateur Radio operators.

Just as important as being prepared to embrace roles that involve an expanded understanding of “communication” is respecting the limits of your role to provide communication externally, specifically to the press. Avoid giving any information to the press until you understand both the partner’s and your own emergency communications group’s policies on speaking to the press. Most groups will want all information to come from a central official source, such as a “public information officer.” The role of a Public Information Officer (PIO) will be covered in more detail in a later topic.

Specific Partner Relationships

The relationship between the volunteer communicator and the partners can be quite different from partner to partner, and even between different offices of the same partner. While ARRL and other national communication groups have existing “Memoranda of Understanding” (MOU), sometimes individually called a “Statement of Understanding” (SOU) or “Statement of Affiliation” (SOA), in place with many served agencies that define our general relationships, the actual working relationship is more precisely defined at the local level. Different people have different ideas and management styles. Agencies in one area can have different needs from those in other areas, and these can affect the working relationship between the partner and its emergency communications volunteers. Emergency communications groups

often have their own written agreements with the partner's local office.

ARES and Local MOUs: While having an MOU is a good thing and can help clarify roles before problems actually happen, groups operating within the ARES program need to remember that they are making promises for the whole ARES organization. As such, these local MOUs and agreements must be reviewed before they are signed. Talk to your DEC or SEC when considering making a local MOU. They can help you do it correctly.

Here are some examples of relationships:

Department of Homeland Security (DHS): In June 2003, ARRL and DHS signed a Statement of Affiliation, making ARES an affiliate member of DHS's Citizen Corps community readiness program. The agreement provides for training and an accreditation of ARES members, raising public awareness of Amateur Radio's role in emergency communications, and coordination of shared activities.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA): In most cases, Amateur Radio operators will have little direct contact with FEMA and other federal agencies, except within the Military Auxiliary Radio System (MARS) and at the national level with ARRL.

American Red Cross chapters may have their own communication teams that include amateurs, or they may have an SOU with a local ARES group or radio club. Typical assignments include linking shelters and chapter houses, performing damage assessment, handling supply and personnel logistics, and handling health and welfare messages.

The Salvation Army maintains its own internal Amateur Radio communication support group, known as the Salvation Army Team Emergency Radio Network (SATERN). In some areas, ARES or other groups provide local communication support. Assignments are similar to the Red Cross'.

State and Local Emergency Management: Some state and local emergency management agencies include Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES) teams as part of their own emergency communication plan. In a growing trend around the country, ARES members are also RACES and vice versa. Communication assignments may be similar to the Red Cross' and Salvation Army's, but they may also include government command and control, and inter-partner communications.

SKYWARN[®] is a self-contained program sponsored by the National Weather Service, and not all members are Amateur Radio operators. Many use other radio systems or telephone, fax, or email to send in weather observations. SKYWARN volunteers collect on-the-spot weather observations that will allow forecasters to create forecasts that are more accurate and issue timely warnings.

Volunteering Where You Are Not Known

In some cases, an emergency occurs in a neighboring area where you are not a member of the responding communication group. For whatever reason, you might like to offer your services. Make your offer through formal leadership channels before making any significant preparations or leaving home. Most ARES and other response groups will have protocols for bringing in volunteers from outside of their area if they are needed. Work with them. Trying to short-circuit their processes will just add an unnecessary obstacle to the workload of the local group(s).

It is possible that your offer might be welcomed, but it is equally possible that it will be refused. There are

good reasons for this, particularly in places where the partners have specific requirements, such as specialized training, official IDs, and time-consuming background checks.

Most communications managers prefer to work only with operators whose abilities and limitations they know. They may also have more volunteers than they need or may feel that your skills or equipment are not suited to their mission. If you are turned away, please accept the situation gracefully.

On the other hand, if your offer of assistance is accepted, the situation you find may vary quite a bit. In a well-organized effort, there will be someone to help orient you to the response effort, provide any required information and answer your questions. Your assignment will be clear, a relief person will be sent along at the end of a predefined shift, and you will know of any arrangements for food, sanitation, and sleep. If the effort is not well-organized, little if any of the above scenario could be true. You might be given an assignment, but with little additional information or support. In this case, you will need to improvise and fend for yourself, and you should be prepared to do so. This is one good reason for making your offer of assistance in advance. Learn as much as you can about the response before preparing to leave home.

In any event, the best time to offer your services to an emergency communications group is well before any emergency occurs. This will allow you to obtain the proper training and credentials, and to become known to the group's managers. When the time comes to serve, you will be ready for your job, and a job will be ready for you.

Workers' Compensation Coverage and Legal Protections

In some states, Workers' Compensation insurance coverage can be extended to volunteers working on behalf of a government or nonprofit partner. However, Workers' Compensation law is a rather complex matter, regulated by each state's laws. In many cases, it may not be possible for volunteers who are not also paid employees of a partner to be covered by Workers' Compensation. Emergency communications managers should investigate their state's laws on this subject rather than assume that the partner's Workers' Compensation coverage will automatically apply.

Volunteers providing services to government agencies or to private organizations exempt from income taxes under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (IRC) are provided immunity from liability by federal law through the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997, 42 U.S.C. Section 14501. This law generally limits liability if the volunteer was acting at the time within the scope of official duties under a volunteer program. There are exceptions; the law does not cover volunteers who cause harm while operating motor vehicles, or if the volunteer is grossly negligent or engages in criminal acts. The statute, however, provides broad liability protection for amateurs in most contexts, and especially where amateurs volunteer under ARES to provide emergency communications to served agencies.

Reference Links

American Red Cross

<http://www.redcross.org>

ARRL — Served Agencies and MOUs (SOUs)

<http://www.arrl.org/served-agencies-and-partners>

Federal Emergency Management Partner
www.fema.gov

Military Auxiliary Radio Service (Air Force)
<https://afmars-msn.org/>

Military Auxiliary Radio Service (Army)
<http://www.usarmymars.org>

The Salvation Army
www.salvationarmy.org

SKYWARN
www.skywarn.org

Review

The relationship between Amateur Radio operators and a partner is a critical one. Emergency communications volunteers should maintain a professional attitude at all times and remember that their relationship to the partner is much like that of an employee — without the paycheck. Partner relationships will vary with the partner, region, and the needs and style of local management.

Avoid giving any information to the press until you understand both the partner's and your own emergency communications group's policies on speaking to the press. Most groups will want all information to come from a central official source, such as a public information officer.

When volunteering in a place where you are not known, do not be surprised if your offer is refused. Response organizations often have requirements for training, localized protocols, and skills that cannot be mastered during an actual emergency.