Cook County ARES Net
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Training Segment

Training Resources for EmComm and Public Service Message Handling

Accurate message handling continues to be an essential skill in amateur radio emergency and public service communications, whether we're dealing with brief informal messages we generate ourselves (often referred to as "tactical" messages), or formal message traffic we pass at the direction of an official of a served agency.

With the decline of participation in traditional traffic-handling activities, and the advent of e-mail-like messaging transported over various digital-mode channels, some hams believe that the skill of accurate message handling over voice has become passé.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Voice modes--most often 2M FM voice--continue to be the lowest common denominator when we provide amateur radio communications in an emergency or a public service activity. Traditional voice communications nets are easy to establish, require simple equipment, and are easy to understand and troubleshoot, even by hams with limited technical expertise. Even if communications using more advanced digital modes are later established, in the early hours of an emergency, Voice is King.

The time to develop and hone the skills required to handle messages efficiently and accurately is now, before a real emergency.

For tactical messages, an excellent way to become skilled in generating and handling traffic is to participate in public service events, where these skills are routinely exercised and mentoring in a relatively low pressure environment is available.

For formal message traffic, the ARRL has some great training resources. The ARRL Public Service Communications Manual (PSCM) is available free on the web and describes the ARRL's National Traffic System (NTS).

> http://www.arrl.org/public-service-communications-manual [html]

> http://www.ctares.org/files/ARESmanual.pdf [pdf; unofficial source]

Another document--actually, a rarely-attached appendix to the PSCM--the National Traffic System Methods and Practices Guidelines (NTS MPG) explains how to construct messages in NTS Radiogram format and how to pass those messages by CW, Phone, and Digital modes. This document is divided into a number of chapters, which are available from the ARRL web site:

> http://www.arrl.org/appendix-b-nts-methods-and-practices-guidelines

Of particular interest for messages sent by voice modes are:

- Chapter 1, The ARRL Message Format

  http://www.arrl.org/files/file/Public%20Service/MPG104A.pdf

and

- Chapter 2, Sending Messages on Voice

  http://www.arrl.org/files/file/Public%20Service/MPG204A.pdf

In addition to ARRL-style radiograms, hams should be familiar with the ICS-213 general message form, which is the form you are most likely to use when obtaining or delivering a message from or to a government agency.

There also are several excellent resources available on the web for learning how to use the ICS-213 form.

- San Diego ARES Message Handling Tutorial

  http://sdgares.net/pdf/Message_Handling%20handout.pdf

- New York City ARECS-Message Handling Using the ICS 213 Form (PDF)

  http://www.nyc-arecs.org/ICS213%20Usage.pdf

Some advance preparation in the art of accurate message handling will help us rise to the next EmComm challenge.