

Are We Prepared?

During the “Basic Voice Communications Procedures” class conducted by Radio Relay International, we ask students to engage in a simple exercise: while traveling out of town, check into an ARES® or similar local EmComm net. Transmit your call sign slowly and carefully, using the standard ITU phonetic alphabet. Then wait to see if the NCS [Net Control Station] gets it right!

During 25 years of business travel, I conducted this experiment many times. In 95 percent or more cases, the typical NCS couldn't transcribe my call sign correctly despite two or three attempts. In many cases, the net sounded like a well-oiled machine, with stations checking in and being acknowledged without error - until a strange call sign appeared.

Now imagine that same NCS during an ARES® net operating under the stress of emergency conditions in which important messages are being conveyed on behalf of a served agency. Perhaps a request for medical supplies is being transmitted or someone is reporting the release of a hazardous chemical. If an ARES operator can't copy an unfamiliar call sign, will he or she be able to accurately transcribe and deliver a message containing a term such as “acute subdural hematoma” or “ethylene oxide?”

The example of the volunteer fire company applies well here. When you dial 9-1-1 to report a fire, you have a reasonable expectation that the firefighters arriving on scene have been trained. They should know how to ventilate the structure, attack the fire, operate the apparatus, or extricate victims, even if they are unpaid volunteers. Likewise, when radio amateurs offer their “emergency communications” services to an agency, the agency has a similar expectation that those assisting have been trained in basic communications procedures and protocols.

Learning to convey tactical or record message traffic is an essential skill. It is NOT enough to simply establish connectivity. One must be able to communicate accurately and efficiently, keep a concise radio log, transcribe information without error, and perform the basic administrative functions required of a message center or EOC.

This is why participation in traffic nets is so important. Traffic nets are the only place where one can check into a net any day of the week at your convenience and practice sending and receiving messages using standard prowords, proper ITU phonetic alphabet, and concise procedures. Some dismiss traffic handling because they see the content of routine messages as “unimportant,” but they are missing the point. The real value [of the effort] is in the practice of transmitting variable message content. Every address is different. Network management data varies from message to message. One must transmit the message at a pace that allows transcription by the receiving operator. Likewise, the receiving operator must be able to understand exactly what is being transmitted. These same skills are also essential to an efficient emergency communications process, whether the content being conveyed is tactical in nature or served agency messages intended for delivery to an emergency services official.

Let's be honest! Many EmComm volunteers are not prepared to handle important agency traffic. They have little training in the mechanics of message handling and too few participate in traffic nets. For the first time in many years, we are beginning to see real cooperation between NTS and ARES. This

cooperation isn't just "nice," it's essential. Every EmComm volunteer should practice handling traffic because establishing connectivity is only a small piece of the overall communications process. The time has come to bridge the gap between traffic operations and local EmComm. Let's work together to the benefit of the Amateur Radio Service and our communities.

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