

Making Effective Use of Spontaneous Volunteers

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One of the realities of emergency communication is that the pool of trained operators is almost always smaller than the need. While we would like to see more advance education and preparation, the reality is that a majority of operators offering to help will be under-trained.

As a result, essential and expedient basic training must be done on the spot. Knowing this, the emergency communication management staff needs to plan ahead. The results will not be perfect, but this is largely beyond our control. If your agency is able to utilize unscreened and perhaps untrained volunteers, a good plan can help you put them to the best use.

Intake and Orientation

If the operation is large enough to need one, assign a trained, experienced person at the volunteer intake location to handle new volunteer evaluation, and some quick orientation and training. This person is often called an “intake coordinator.” Based on the evaluation, this person can also make recommendations for potential assignments to the EC or human resources person. For smaller operations, various individuals may share this function on an “as-needed” basis, or a single person may act as a general “resource and intake” coordinator.

Gather Information

You will need some record of this person for the future. Be sure to see a copy of their Amateur Radio license – do not just take their word for it. Here are some other things you should ask for:

- Name
- Address
- Phone number
- Call sign
- Class of license
- Emcomm training certifications
- Driver’s license (Write down any license numbers for future reference.)
- ARES or similar ID.

Make a Decision

Not every spontaneous volunteer will fit your needs. Some may even be an immediate liability. They might lack the necessary knowledge or skills you require, or there might be something about the person that concerns you. Some people, such as those who want to march in and be placed in charge, or who claim to “know everything” and do not have the training credentials to back it up, should be politely turned away.

Turning a volunteer away is difficult, and needs to be handled with care and sensitivity. Sometimes it is better to find them a job where they cannot do much “damage.” People with borderline personalities may become hostile when denied, and could start jamming your nets. Be as honest as you can without insulting them. If you have specific credentialing, training or experience requirements, and are sticking to them with most other

volunteers, use that as your excuse. Never give them a reason that will be obviously false. For instance, do not tell them you have enough help already when you still need volunteers. They will probably figure this out if they listen to your nets and wonder why you lied to them.

Issue Temporary Identification

If a volunteer does not have a valid emcomm ID, police, fire, or National Guard units may not allow them into the operational area. Depending on the event, your served agency may also require all emcomm volunteers to have an official ID. Many groups create a special blank temporary ID card for ECs or their staff to issue on-site. Photo IDs are best, but often difficult to generate during a disaster. A simple method is to use a non-photo emcomm ID along with a driver's license. Simply put the driver's license number on the temporary ID. Under the line for the license number, print the words – "See driver's license for photo identification."

For obvious security reasons, restrict access to blank ID cards to certain emcomm leaders, and put an expiration date or the phrase "Temporary ID good for the following event only: _____" on the card.

State Regulations

Check in advance for local or state emergency regulations dealing with a volunteer driving either their own or another vehicle during an emergency. If there is damage to the vehicle or if the volunteer is hurt in the process, will your local or state government provide coverage? In some jurisdictions, there are provisions for certifying the volunteer as a temporary state emergency worker so that they can be covered by state Worker's Compensation insurance while engaged in the emergency response. If the rules require the volunteer to be a registered member of your organization, consider issuing a temporary membership card on-site.

Expedient Training

Your group should publish a short handout in advance for on-the-spot training, and keep a supply in certain jump kits. Give one to spontaneous volunteers to orient them to your organizational structure and standard procedures. Keep it simple and concise. As appropriate, it might include:

- A short discussion of volunteer "attitudes" and how they affect both operations and agency relationships.
- Blank lines for filling in call sign, agency assignment, name of the agency contact person, and the location to which the person should report.
- General guidelines on Incident Command System (ICS), and the lead agencies involved.
- List of ARES or RACES officials normally in charge.
- Key frequencies and telephone numbers.
- Key operating practices.
- Sample of a tactical message.
- Sample of the ARRL Radiogram message, and handling instructions.
- Short list of dos and don'ts.

Assigning Under-Trained or Inexperienced Volunteers

Spontaneous volunteers without adequate training present both a challenge and an opportunity. We can usually use more radio operators, but unless they can function well within the established structure of your operation, they can become a liability instead. Choose an assignment for each volunteer based on known skills, apparent personality, and available equipment. In general, think about using the new volunteer in less critical assignments to free up better trained operators.

Assignment Ideas

If the situation permits it, have the volunteer operate alongside a more experienced person. Shadowing a trained operator is a good way to orient an inexperienced person to a particular job. After learning the basics they can act as a relief operator or free up a better-trained individual for a more critical task.

If a disaster involves community evacuation, the volunteer can report with his or her family to the nearest community evacuation shelter and either begin operations or act as relief for existing operators.

The volunteer can monitor frequencies for activity, handle logging at high traffic stations, or act as a liaison between nets.

Those who are familiar with the area can provide transportation services while using their radio to maintain contact with a dispatcher and to find key people when arriving at a location.

If all other needs are met, or if the volunteer is not suited for more demanding work, they may be used for general assignments. Their radio would be used primarily to keep in touch with the head of operations. These jobs might include:

- Preparing and replenishing rest areas for the workers.
- Moving, handling and channeling inbound materials and the associated workers.
- Updating status boards and message centers.
- Acting as a message runner.

Recruit Them for the Future

Spontaneous volunteers can often be persuaded to join your group and remain active after the event is over. If you have a recruiting person in your organization, be sure they get the names and contact information afterward.

During the event, make the volunteer feel welcome and needed. If you cannot give them a really interesting job, apologize and explain the circumstances, but point out that the job you are giving them is of great value to the group or its served agency. Offer effusive praise (when appropriate) or a basic “thanks,” just as you would with any of your own members. If possible, send a follow up “thank you” letter after the event is over.