

What do our volunteers need to know, and why?

One of the issues we run into constantly is the notion that service in ARES shouldn't require any additional training. General radio skills should be enough. In some cases, that's true, but there are many skills that are specific to emergency communications, and even more specific to ARES operations.

It's difficult to convince everyone of this. They don't know what they don't know. Those who have taken ARECC Level 1 and IS100 do finally understand the need for specialized emcomm training, but until you have some direct exposure to it, you just don't know what you're missing.

One of the reasons is that many hams won't make a serious commitment to the program, but want to believe they're doing the "right thing" by being a member, just in case the "big one" happens – if it's convenient and their spouse will allow it. They don't want to feel they "have" to respond, especially for small events. They aren't willing to, or maybe can't, put their personal lives on hold to help others.

This is a problem in every aspect of community life, not just in ham radio. The altruistic feelings that drive some of us to help others aren't universal. In fact, it seems to be true of only about 10-15% of the population, at best. Some folks are willing to help out a little bit just so they don't feel too guilty. Others just can't be bothered and will never offer their help, even if it affects them directly.

If you accept that fact and work with it, rather than fighting something you probably can't change, you'll find your job a great deal less frustrating.

There are a few strategies for dealing with the volunteer training problem:

1. ARRL is talking about requiring some basic emcomm knowledge for the Technician license exam. The greatest value in this approach is that it tells new hams that public service is an important part of our hobby. However, this is a controversial move and is not yet widely supported by the DXers and contesters on the ARRL board.
2. Develop a training program for spontaneous volunteers and "reserve members." We created the two-tiered membership to accommodate those who didn't want to spend time for training, but might want to be there for the "big one." By our definition, Active Members are those who understand the value of the additional knowledge and skills, and are willing to put time in on a regular basis to keep those skills sharp. Reserve members are those who aren't. The only practical difference is that we'll call the Active Members first, and they will be the ones running things. Reserve members will be used in the best way possible under the circumstances, depending on their skills and availability.

3. Let non-members and Reserve members know that the most important way they can help is to monitor local and Section net frequencies during any emergency, regardless of whether they know we are active or not.

One of the greatest values we have as hams is that we live everywhere. There is no greater potential source for immediate disaster intelligence information than hams at home. What is the weather like? Are the streets passable? Do you have power? Is water rising? Do you smell anything unusual in the neighborhood? Does your phone work and can you reach 9-1-1?

The beauty of this approach is multiple. Folks don't have to be afraid of being asked to deploy to a shelter just because they check into a net, and they can still serve with no training and never have to leave home and family.

Just a note on testing 9-1-1, never ask stations to do it unless the request has come from a government official, and make sure that when they call, the ham tells the 9-1-1 operator that the test is being done at the request of said official. We don't want to unnecessarily tie up already overloaded 9-1-1 operators during an emergency, or cause any other problems.

4. Make your training program varied and interesting. Many folks enjoy learning new things, and the camaraderie that comes with working in a group. Ham radio is as much a people hobby as a technical one. Keep your training standards high enough be challenging, but not so much so that folks are scared away.
5. One reason given for not participating is that ARES is often seen as a bunch of "wannabes" even by other hams, and we need to fight that at every step. By increasing the level of professionalism through training, we help counteract that impression. This is also the reason that the very first chapter in the Level 1 course talks about behavior and it affects how we are perceived by others – and ourselves.

Let's talk for a moment about the importance of standardized training. In the ARES world, just as in every other part of the emergency response community, no one group has the ability to be entirely self-sufficient. The fire service is organized on this premise. Every department has one or more "mutual aid" agreements, or belongs to a formal mutual aid district. Even mutual aid districts have mutual aid agreements with each other. It's the same way with ARES.

When you respond to assist folks from another area, it's essential that you all be familiar with and use the same techniques and procedures, speak the same language, and can generally work together almost seamlessly. That's the reason that ARRL created the emcomm course series. Standardized basic training and knowledge.

Those are just the basics, and there are some advanced skills that some members might want to specialize in, such as Winlink, SSTV, ATV, Packet Radio, EOC operations, and so on. Training for those types of skills should be voluntary for Active members, and you ECs might even consider creating specialized teams.