Objectives

Welcome to Topic 18.

This topic outlines some of the methods used to activate an emergency communications group when an emergency occurs. After reading the material, you will be able to use the methods outlined as you work in an emergency activation setting.

Student preparation required:

None.

How You Will Know

The actual method by which emergency communications volunteers are notified of activation will be determined locally, but this lesson outlines some of the most popular methods. To begin with, you must be registered with a local emergency communications group in advance in order to be on its notification list. “Last-minute” volunteers are extremely difficult to integrate into an already confusing emergency response. Join the group well in advance of any emergency, get any training it offers, and be ready when a call comes.

Every emergency communications group should have developed a formal written plan with its

partners to activate their members when needed. The plan should be developed in detail and then reduced to a simple "checklist" that both the partners' officials and emergency communications managers can keep nearby at all times. It should detail the circumstances under which emergency communications activation might occur, who will call whom, and the various methods that can be used to contact them. The checklist can also list the actual telephone numbers and other contact information for each individual listed in the order that it is to be used. This information should be verified and updated on a regular schedule. Each member should know the plan and follow it closely.

Initial Notification by the Partners

In most cases, three or more members serve as "activation liaisons" to the partners. When the emergency communications volunteers are needed, one of these members is called first. *Never rely on a single point of contact.* If that person is unavailable for any reason, the partners should have one or more alternatives to try. They may be called by phone at work or at home, however with the evolution of smart phone technology, most partners actually use email or other notification software for this activation process.

Group Alerting Systems

Once a liaison has been notified, a number of group alerting methods may be used. The most common ones are described below. No one method should be relied upon exclusively, since emergency conditions may render it useless. Commercial paging systems and ham repeaters might be off the air, phone lines down, and internet service disrupted. Again, a written plan and checklist should be developed well in advance and updated periodically.

Text Messaging: Even when voice cell phone systems are overloaded, there may be text messaging capabilities. Depending on your cell phone, it may be possible to create lists of contacts and quickly send text messages to each person on the list. Recognize, however, that text messages sent over cellular phone systems can be delayed for several hours or more in times of heavy use. Consider utilizing apps such as GroupMe or WhatsApp to create notification groups; many text message apps can use the cellular network or Wi-Fi connection to send messages.

Telephone Tree: In this system, the liaison calls two members, each of whom call two other members and so on until the entire group has been notified. If any one person cannot be reached, the person calling must then call the members that person would have called had they been reached. This method ensures that the "tree" is not broken. Messages should always be left on all answering machines and voice mailboxes. This should be considered a last resort method as it is time consuming and not the most efficient.

Amateur Radio Paging: A low-cost method of "paging" a group using an amateur repeater uses a specific Continuous Tone Coded Squelch System (CTCSS) tone. Members leave their radios turned on in the "CTCSS decode" mode when they are not actively listening to the repeater. When the correct CTCSS tone is turned on for emergency communications activation, everyone can hear the transmissions.

Since many newer radios include CTCSS decoding as a standard feature or low-cost option, this method is generally simple to implement. The tones may need to be generated by the repeater itself, since many repeaters will not "pass through" received tones. If the repeater is not operating, a mobile operating simplex on the repeater's output frequency from a high or central location can often work quite well.

E-mail: With the evolution of the smart phone, email can be an effective notification methodology as it is now quickly available on the phone. E-mail should be used in conjunction with SMS text whenever possible. Many people have full-time high-speed internet connections at home and the office, and most people check their e-mail frequently. Someone who has otherwise been unreachable may check their e-mail even several hours later, just as they might check an answering machine or voice mailbox.

Self-Activation: *Self-activation is never approved or encouraged, however, there are some circumstances when you will know that you need to start taking steps to be ready for deployment.* Self-activation has caused issues and friction between the amateur radio operators and public safety professionals which placed amateur radio in a bad light. If you become aware of an incident or situation that might require the activation of your ARES group, you should take immediate steps to make yourself available. Depending on your group's activation plan, this might mean monitoring the assigned net or partner's

frequencies or making contact with one or more appropriate persons in the group or partners. SKYWARN® members might also monitor National Weather Radio (NWR). Remember, if you are not specifically authorized to directly contact a partner's personnel or travel to an incident location, do not do it. Know your plan and follow it.

After You Have Been Notified

Your group's activation plan should tell each member what steps to take immediately after learning of emergency communications activation. In most cases, the first step should be to check in on a specific frequency or repeater. If a repeater is used as the primary gathering point for members, a backup simplex frequency (the repeater's output frequency works well) should be specified in the event that the repeater is no longer operating. In other cases, some members may also have specific assignments. These might include making contact with the partners, going directly to a specific location such as an EOC, or making certain preparations. These members should quickly check into the "activation" net to let emergency communications managers know that they have been reached and are responding.

One of the liaison stations should be available on the net to provide additional information from the partners and directions to members as they check in. If a member is preassigned to act as Net Control Station (NCS) for the "activation" net, that person should take over the task as soon as possible to free up the liaison to work with the partners or take other action. Some groups simply have the first person signing on act as a temporary NCS until an assigned NCS checks in. Again, it is important to have more than one person assigned to take on the NCS duties in the event that anyone is unavailable.

Prior to deploying to your assignment, obtain the following information if available:

1) Point of Contact (POC) for your assigned location
    A) Name of person you will report to. This will most likely not be the incident commander
    B) POC phone number
2) Mission / Tasking Number (if deployed in an ICS environment)
3) Entry procedure for assigned area if required
3) Estimated length of deployment (12 hours or 3 days)
4) Lodging (if required)
5) Meals (if required)
6) Specific equipment requirements (if known)

En Route

While you are headed home to pick up your go kit or other gear, or while you are on your way to your assigned location, there are several things you may need to do. Check into and continue to

monitor the activation net for further information or instructions. Fill your vehicle with fuel and pick up any supplies you may need, including alkaline batteries for radios and lights, food, water, and other supplies on your checklist. Contact your spouse, children, or other family members to let them know what is happening and where you will be. Give them any instructions they will need to be safe. Tell them when you will next try to contact them and how to contact you if necessary. Knowing that everyone is okay can let you do your job without needless worry, and, of course, the same is true for them.

When deploying in an ICS environment, personnel accountability is a critical element. As you leave your home for deployment, ensure that you notify the POC of the following:

1. That you are en-route
2. Estimated Time of Arrival (ETA)
3. Arrival time

Review

The "emergency communications activation liaisons" are several people who can be contacted by the partners to activate the emergency communications group. Notification systems that can be used are telephone trees, commercial or amateur paging systems, e-mail, or simple CTCSS receiver activation. Regardless of which primary notification method your group uses, there should be several backup methods as well. Each member should know where to go, what frequencies to monitor, and what nets to check into immediately after notification.

Remember that in an ICS environment, personnel accountability is part of that structure. Notification of your departure, ETA and arrival at your assignment is critical.

Recommended Activities

1. List the strengths and weaknesses of the telephone tree as an alerting system.

2. List the strengths and weaknesses of paging as an alerting system.

3. List the strengths and weaknesses of self-activation as an alerting system.

4. Design an emergency communications activation system for a seven-member team. Be sure to include backup methods.