

EMRG Article #6: OARC Groundwave – June 2009

In April we had our annual Ottawa District ARES Mutual Aid Meeting. The Ottawa District covers most of Eastern Ontario and each year members from all the Amateur radio groups that provide emergency communications get together to discuss common issues and improve plans for Mutual Aid. This year was the 5th meeting and things have progressed well from a time when we didn't know each other, through development of a contact list for all group leaders, to a mutual aid plan and this year a tabletop exercise to test out Mutual Aid planning.

One of the first things that we all realized when we started these meetings was that we have the same challenges, and the biggest challenge is lack of people. Mutual Aid was developed out of necessity as we all recognized that no group could function for more than a day, and maybe not that long, without outside help. The tabletop exercise helped us understand just how much we depend on neighbouring groups for help and the continued level of organization required, to make sure we will be effective when called.

There are still Amateurs who like to believe that in an emergency a bunch of local hams will bring a bunch of equipment and good things will happen. Unfortunately if we want to be recognized, respected and complimented for our service, we need to make commitments to our clients. Commitment means we need to make sure we can meet their requirements, which means we need to be organized and practice.

The table top exercise was written with percentages of people impacted, rather than total numbers, so that each group could apply it to their area. For rural areas, the number of people displaced is not as high as Ottawa, but they are spread out more, so the challenge is about equal in terms of providing enough people for all the shelter locations.

In the scenario, 10% of the population had to leave home, with 5% going to friends and family, while 5% had to be housed in shelters. With a population of 800,000 in Ottawa, 5% is 40,000 people, spread out across 8 shelters with 5000 people in each shelter.

One of the first things we learned from the exercise was that if we go with the theoretical 2 people per location for 8 hour shifts, we won't have enough people. We required the following positions and people for this exercise;

- Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) = 2 people [1 Team Leader + 1 Radio Operator]
- Communications Centre/Net Control = 6 people [1 Ops Manager + 3 Radio Operators (2 nets) + 1 Resource Manager + 1 Liaison (calling mutual aid)]
- Red Cross Headquarters = 2 people [2 Radio Operators]
- Community Services = 2 people [2 Radio Operators]

- 8 shelters = 16 people [2 Radio Operators per site]

This adds up to a total of 28 people per shift, for 3 shifts = 84 people per day. In our EMRG membership we have 50 people, so even if we got a 50% response (considered a miracle), we only have 25 people. If we assume we can double up EMRG members with non trained local amateurs, we have 50 people, so we are still short 34 people.

By changing our plans and going to 12 hour shifts, the total number of Amateurs drops to 56 for a day, still more than we have. By expecting the shelter staff to do some of their own operating on voice or data, we can drop some of the shelter operators to 1 person per site and with Mutual Aid, we can fill in the remaining numbers, so that we can function for a few days.

At this point, we are only providing communications for shelters. There is no communications for the Hospitals or any other organization. There are about 11 sites that would be added if we supported all the Hospital sites, so even at 1 person per site for 12 hour shifts, this adds another 22 amateurs to our requirements, bringing the total to $56 + 22 = 78$ Amateurs per day.

One of the problems is that we can only absorb a limited number of off the street Amateur volunteers. Some sites require skills and understanding that only come from participation in training and exercises, while other sites are sensitive, so we need to be careful who we send. There is also the issue of Amateurs understanding who is in charge. If you have a problem in a shelter, there is a shelter manager that runs the shelter and an Operations Manager at Net Control who manages the radio operators.

The important message is that there is a lot of organization required both locally and Mutual Aid, for Amateur radio to be an effective emergency communications service. We have the clients who want our services and they are willing to support us. The greatest challenge is the number of Amateurs willing to participate by getting involved, trained and practiced in providing that service.

Next time I will talk about some of the positions listed above, what they do and how this ties into a thing called IMS (Incident Management System). Have a great summer!

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Two Names – One Group – One Purpose