

EMRG Article #2: OARC Groundwave – January 2009

Skills and Equipment Required for Emergency Communications Volunteers

Quite often when I'm talking with an Amateur that I think would be a great asset for EMRG, they point out that they have nothing to offer. After a bit more talking it becomes clear that they do have a great deal to offer, they just misunderstand what is required. The reasons most often given for this perceived lack of value are; a lack of operating experience, not being comfortable in a fast paced radio situation, a lack of equipment, or a lack of technical skills.

To be a useful EMRG volunteer, able to provide an effective emergency communications solution in the community, there are really only 2 requirements; an Amateur radio license, and a willingness to help. All the perceived deficiencies people think about are non issues, while the various everyday skills each person brings are what really make EMRG succeed.

EMRG is a volunteer organization and like all organizations there are many things that need to get done, such as planning, training, membership records, web page updates, building things, organizing events and even taking out the trash. To be an effective and healthy organization requires a lot of people with different skills and interests. The skills you use everyday at work and home are required and useful in EMRG.

Some people just aren't comfortable talking on the radio, at least not when passing messages. EMRG exercises and training can help people gain more confidence and there are jobs to do in an emergency that do not require talking on the radio or at least not very often. The pace of radio communications varies with the location. Net control is a busy position, so someone with the skills and experience is important. Many contesters are familiar with this fast pace. Other locations such as the Red Cross headquarters will be fairly busy, since much of the traffic will be destined for that location. Still other locations such as a shelter only require local traffic, so the pace is much slower.

If you really don't want to talk on a radio in an emergency you can chose not to. There are plenty of ways to put your effort into making sure EMRG is ready when called and let others do the talking. There are people required to manage equipment being handed out from storage, delivery of equipment and planning shift changes, or liaising with incoming volunteers. There are plenty of things to do that don't require a lot of talking on the radio, or lots of messages to handle.

Owning a radio is definitely not an issue. There are three key sites in Ottawa that have radios permanently installed for use in an emergency, so only radio operators are required. In most locations there will be at least 2 people, but only 1 radio is required. EMRG also has a supply of radios which can be packed as kits for taking to a shelter or using in a vehicle, plus there are several EMRG

members who have extra radios they will lend in an emergency. Having equipment is good, but it is not a requirement and should not stop anyone from joining EMRG.

Many Amateurs believe everyone else has strong technical skills and that this is important for Emergency Communications. In fact, there are many Amateurs who do not have strong technical skills and an emergency is not the time to be trying to wire radios together. When EMRG deploys to provide communications support in an emergency, it is with pre planned, pre package and pre tested solutions that EMRG members are familiar with. An emergency is not the time to start wiring things together adhoc in the hopes it will work. While there is some technical work to create these solutions initially and to maintain them, this can be done by a smaller number of people who do have these skills.

Some of the best EMRG members joined with just a license and willingness to help. If you thought you don't have what is required, think about it again, and feel free to ask some questions. I'm sure you have a lot to offer EMRG.

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