

Ham radios come to the rescue when cell towers, internet fail

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When Helene swept across the Southeast on Sept. 27, including Western North Carolina, cell phones and internet-based communication became unusable.

People still needed a way to talk — to check on friends and family or receive updates on the storm's aftermath — especially as roads and bridges were washed away, isolating communities.

But there's a way to communicate without cell signals or internet, and about 750,000 people across the country know how to use it: **amateur radio**.

Also known as **ham radio**, this old-school method of technology allows people separated by large distances to stay in touch.

"People might think that cell phones have made amateur radio obsolete," said Chuck Till, the vice president of the **Raleigh Amateur Radio Society**. "As you can see, that's far from the truth."

RARS, which has more than 450 members, is a nonprofit organization and one of many radio clubs across the country. While the club offers many services, helping the public during times of emergency is among its goals.

"It's a tireless activity, and these hams are so dedicated to it," said Fin Gold, the president of RARS. "And people don't realize that they're out there, and they're there to help."

HOW HAMS HELP DURING DISASTERS

Across North Carolina, amateur radio operators have helped with **search and rescue efforts** and **condition reports**, Gold said.

Many of the **repeaters**, which are **automated relay stations** that have broad coverage, were offline because of Helene. But one repeater on Mount Mitchell, the highest peak in North Carolina, was still operational, and the hams on the mountain were able to help check on people and pass along radio messages, Gold said.

There's a program called **AUXCOMM**, developed by the Department of Homeland Security, in which certain hams work with government agencies including North Carolina Emergency Management, Till said. Other hams may assist with health and welfare messaging.

"The more people that join us, the more we can help," Gold said.

HOW TO FIND A HAM

- Search for amateur radio operators in a given area on the Federal Communications Commission's website.
- Search online for a local radio club.
- Some operators may have a special license plate with their radio call sign.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED WITH HAM RADIO

There are many reasons

why people are drawn to radio, Till said. They may want to socialize, compete in contests, perform a public service or experiment with building the technology.

Anyone in Raleigh who is interested in becoming an amateur radio operator can **contact RARS**.

Hams are **licensed by the Federal Communications Commission** and must pass an exam to become licensed, said Till, who earned his first license in 1970. RARS and other radio clubs offer classes to prepare for exams, and people may also purchase study materials online.

Equipment costs vary depending on what a person wants to do with the radio.

"You can get into it for as little as \$50," Till said. "I know people who have spent tens of thousands of dollars on their station, but you don't have to do that."

OTHER WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITHOUT CELL SIGNAL

Satellites such as Starlink systems can be used for communication. In Western North Carolina, counties reported that the systems allowed emergency responders to receive calls and members of the public to check on family, The News & Observer reported.

Satellite phones may also be used when there's no cell service.

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