

# Natural Disaster Guide for Amateur Radio Operators

## Training & Practice

**Practice basic logistical skills and coordination by participating in local events, such as charity runs, fairs or concerts.** Partner with charity organizations in the community to offer services during events – it helps the public understand what your organization does, and also gives you a chance to train new members and stay up-to-date on best practices.

**Take basic disaster response training courses.** Ensure you know what's expected during an emergency, basic response skills and strategies. Make sure your family has an understanding of your responsibilities and is prepared for you to go into service -- especially for a longer-term event.

**Make sure you train to meet the needs of the organizations you'll partner with during and after an incident.** If you'll be working with the American Red Cross (ARC) for example, take their shelter management course and first aid training.

**Amateur radio organizations should hold at least one full-blown emergency practice exercise per year, and several smaller-scale ones periodically.** Participate in the national American Radio Relay League's annual Simulated Emergency Test (SET), and also organize local simulations for perils most likely to hit your region.

**Know your operators.** "You need to be able to trust who you are putting on the radio in an emergency," Haible says. "Know their skills, their background, experience and training before a disaster."

## Plan & Be Prepared

**Be prepared to provide support on an individual basis, if needed.** If cell service goes down during a natural disaster, or at any time, post a sign outside your home notifying the community that you can communicate. You can help neighbors call for emergency medical services, report damage and communicate with loved ones.

**Know what legal restrictions will come into play during an emergency.** Legal dilemmas can and do arise in emergency situations – such as what you can and not say to the media, or performing a task that will make you money. Be well-versed in the legal restrictions so you don't have to think twice about them under stress while assisting in a natural disaster.

**Be prepared to assist with a wide range of tasks.** You never know where or when communications issues will come into play during a natural disaster; be flexible and assist to the extent your skills will allow. For example, cell service can become an issue during mealtimes at shelters when there's a surge in community members in a confined space that can disrupt cell service. You could also be asked to assist with reporting disaster damage to the state if power is out after the event recedes.

## **Coordinate with Local Emergency Management**

**Reach out to local emergency management agencies, explain how you can help.** “You’ve got to sell the hobby,” says Haible. “Just pick up the phone and reach out – organizations can’t put us to work if they don’t know we exist.”

**Coordinate with emergency management agencies to ensure radio equipment is installed properly in the emergency operations center (EOC) in your jurisdiction.** Emergency management may not have a working knowledge of amateur radio; ensure that equipment, such as antennae, is in working order and ready to go when disaster hits.

**Have multiple routes mapped for how you will get to the EOC in an emergency.** Identify key roads and bridges used to get to the EOC, and have alternative routes prepared in case they become impassable. Write directions down or print out a map, and store the EOC address in your cell phone – stress from the event can make it difficult to remember even the most routine tasks.

## **Be Professional, even though *Amateur* is in your Name**

**Encourage your fellow operators and organization members to put on a professional front whenever they are providing amateur radio services.** Make every effort to demonstrate the professional level of service you can provide; breakdown the stigma that “amateur” means untrained, unprofessional volunteers.

**Create a presence in the community; engage them in your work.** Attend community fairs and events with your amateur radio organization to show the community what ham operators do and how they can help during a natural disaster. Hold your own hands-on events that give residents an opportunity to practice operating a radio and demonstrate the importance of radio communications.

- “We held a practice where people tried to see how many different frequencies they could find on their radio,” explains Haible. “We set that up across the community, and there was a prize at the end so participation was higher.”

*Tips provided courtesy of Janelle Haible, public information officer for the St. Louis Metro Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES). For more tips and advice from the St. Louis Metro ARES, view their ["Emergency Communicators Notebook."](#)*