



TRAINING for Net Participation and Associated Emergency Operations

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The purpose of this document is to provide some basic rules that apply to ALL "Declared " or "Directed" voice or "phone"nets. Some of these rules, (1, 2, &3) will apply to any net; in any mode. Mixed in with the nuts and bolts of net activity, you will find some basic rules of conduct with which you must be familiar. They are every bit as important, if not more so, than your ability to run your radio. If your conduct is out of line, you can absolutely destroy hard-won relationships that have taken years to build with our served agencies.

A "declared" net is defined as any net that begins with a statement from an operator that a net is being started for a particular purpose, and that someone is assuming duties as Net Control Station, (NCS.)

Declared nets can take many different formats and styles.

OPEN NET FORMAT: This type of declared net can be nearly invisible. A group has declared a net to be active, but not much is happening. The repeater or frequency is being used normally. The net is transparent and running in the background. A typical use for this type net is during the early stages of weather watches. Operators are occasionally reporting some weather condition to an informal NCS. Other than that, the rag chewing is proceeding normally.

DIRECTED NET FORMAT: There are two basic types of directed nets: Formal and Informal. Informal Directed Nets are your normal Tuesday night club net, Elmer's Net, CW practice net, ARES teaching net, Public Service Events, etc. Formal Directed Nets include ACTIVATION of ARES/RACES personnel for Fire Nets, Skywarn, earthquake, or other Emergency Activations. In either case, the NCS declares the net to be active and actively controls the frequency. A specific topic, conditions, and/or set of instructions for check-in may be given. Normal usage of the frequency is stopped.

Net Control Stations can quickly become overwhelmed by rapidly accumulating administrative and logistical requirements. As the scope of an operation grows, the Main (Command) NCS may activate one or more supporting sub-nets to handle these duties. This reduces the traffic flow to, and maintains the efficiency of, the main net. These sub-nets operate independent of the main net and have their own NCS. They report and respond to the main net. Some typical names for these sub-nets are: Resource (personnel, standby, relief, scheduling), Logistics (supply, transportation), Health & Welfare, Search & Rescue, Damage Assessment, ARESMAT, and Security.

GENERAL RULES OF OPERATION:

1. The Net Control Station has ABSOLUTE CONTROL of the frequency until the net is closed.
2. All communications must pass through the authority of the NCS for the duration of the net. If you wish to speak with another station involved in the net, ask NCS for permission to "go direct." Make sure it is important and relevant to the net activity. Personal transmissions are inappropriate.
3. During any net, but of particular importance in Emergency Nets, the NCS may give check-in instructions, requesting information he/she wants as part of your check-in to the net. If no special instructions are given for an emergency net, give NCS the following: Call sign (ALWAYS PHONETICALLY), Name, Mobile or Base?, RACES qualified?, Available for how long?, band/equipment availability and condition of your radio power source.

4. If the NCS announces that all operators should check-in to a "Resource" net, you should follow those instructions. If this occurs, you will know that the NCS is in a Tactical or Command Operations mode and is very busy. Do not attempt to check-in with that NCS. Go to the requested frequency and check-in with the NCS there. Stay on the Resource net frequency. A Resource Net is a holding area where you will stay until given an assignment. When you receive your assignment from the Resource NCS, follow his instructions exactly. Listen carefully. The instructions may have a direct bearing on your personal safety and they may change during the course of the net.
5. Once you have "checked in" (joined the net), you should NEVER leave the assigned frequency or your transmitter without telling the NCS unless you are in immediate danger.
6. If the net is called for any emergency or semi-emergency purpose, you may be issued a tactical call sign by the NCS. Normally, only KEY stations, with a special function, will be assigned a tactical call sign. If you are assigned a tactical call sign, use it as much as possible. You are still obligated to use your FCC issued call sign to ID every 10 minutes. If the NCS senses that there is going to be a lull in the action, he/she may call for all operators to ID. In emergency nets, don't interrupt the flow of emergency traffic just to ID. Just fit it into your next transmission. Example:
"Net, . . . KA8AAA as Fire One. . . . "
7. In emergency nets, keep all your transmissions short and to-the-point. Think about what you are going to say before you transmit. Rule: Think it, Say it, Get off the key!! Don't rag chew . . . even a little bit.
8. LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN - Pay attention to everything that is going on!! Failure to do so could endanger your life!! If a situation escalates, you may be asked to assume a larger role . . . maybe take over a sub-net? If you haven't been keeping track of the situation, you won't be very effective.
9. If the NCS requests that you join a sub-net on another frequency, report and check-in to that net as quickly as possible and STAY on the sub-net frequency!! DON'T switch back and forth between nets!!! It may not be as "exciting" on a sub-net, but there is a very definite reason why you were asked to go to work there . . . they are going to need your help!!!
10. Reporters will be everywhere that there might be a tidbit of unique information about any incident or event. This is especially true if you are working a front-line disaster field site. NEVER MAKE ANY COMMENT TO A MEMBER OF THE MEDIA!!! That is the job of the Public Information Officer.

"I CAN'T ANSWER THAT QUESTION." is always a good answer. Refer them to the PIO.

Media personnel are trained to be very convincing and are very clever at getting you to say something. What they will always be looking for will be information regarding injuries, deaths, addresses of the most severe damage, license numbers of vehicles, rail car numbers, and possible reported causes which might lead them to a "trail-of-responsibility/blame." This type information is confidential and is to be passed only by more secure means, ie . . . packet or courier, which they cannot access by scanner. If you don't recognize a person as someone you absolutely know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, to be part of the authorized on-site operations team, don't discuss the situation with them!!

11. Should you ever find yourself in a situation where you have found a dead body, or body parts, DO NOT report this to the NCS. Request only that the NCS send the appropriate authorities and help to your location on a priority basis. If the NCS should happen to ask for more details, refuse to give them and repeat your request. A smart and trained NCS operator will catch on quickly. In the case of a discovered injury or body entrapment, notify the NCS immediately, but NEVER TRANSMIT THE NAME OF AN INJURED, TRAPPED OR DECEASED SUBJECT.

12. NEVER leave your post or the person you have been assigned to "Shadow" without notifying the NCS. If the authorities ask you to move, do so immediately and without comment; but notify the NCS of your change in status as soon as you can.

13. Remember: We are communicators. We do not make decisions about anything for the authorities. They are in charge, not us. It is not your call to decide that more fire engines are needed, or that an emergency generator is needed somewhere. Your only job is to communicate, when asked to do so, what the authorities want communicated. They do not HAVE to use you at all; and many times they won't. Do not insist that they do. You are there to provide them with an extra way for them to pass information when their communications systems either fail or become overloaded. Tell them you are available for service when needed and back off . . . speak only when spoken to, stay visible and pay attention. Nothing can be more embarrassing than to "lose" the person you are supposed to shadow.

14. It may be quicker and more efficient to hand your microphone to the person who wishes to pass a message than to try and relay it yourself. Don't be afraid to let the authorities operate as third parties. Just hand them the mic and tell them they can't use foul language or conduct commercial business. Relays often become incorrectly "translated" by the relay operator, especially if there is a high percentage of special agency terminology, technical terms or jargon that you do not really understand.

15. If an on-scene authority requests that you shut your radio off, or that you not transmit, please do what they ask without question. Normally, they will tell you why, but they don't have to. This is one circumstance where you do not notify the NCS of a change in your status. This deserves a little explanation. This would normally occur only if there is a presence of explosives or explosive chemicals or vapors, and there is the possibility that a spark producing electronic device is present like blasting caps, smoke detectors, receivers, telephones, etc., which might be triggered by an RF Signal.

16. In Emergency Nets you will, on rare occasions, hear a station break in with the words, "Priority" or "Emergency". When either of these words is heard, everything Stops! NCS is obligated to stop everything and answer these calls immediately! It is important that you clearly understand when these words are to be used.

PRIORITY - means that your message concerns an immediate SAFETY ISSUE regarding Human Life or Injury or an immediate SAFETY ISSUE regarding impending property damage.

EMERGENCY is the highest priority message possible. It must involve, and is reserved for, ONLY those messages which contain information that someone IS ABSOLUTELY in DANGER OF DEATH or SERIOUS INJURY IF YOUR MESSAGE ISN'T HEARD IMMEDIATELY.

Here is an example: If you observe that a damaged brick wall is in danger of falling into the street . . . that is a safety issue, and should rank as a Priority call. If the wall just fell on two people in the street, that is a "danger of death" issue and would definitely qualify as an Emergency call.

17. Whenever you join a net, . . . any net, try to turn your emotional sensitivity down a couple of notches. To operate with continuing professionalism, you have to become as objective as possible. Don't lose sight of what you are trying to accomplish. Develop as unemotional an attitude as possible to what is happening, how you are spoken to, how you speak, how you react to someone else's inexperience, how you react to what sounded like a drill sergeant's direct order, etc.

On the air, there is never a proper time or place for emotional outbursts or criticism of any kind.

Be patient with the NCS. An NCS operator is under high stress. His questions and requests should be clear and crisp; but as he/she begins to tire, there may be a tendency to become rather terse. You may be tired, wet, hungry and bored. It's a volatile mix. Be aware of it. Typically, there is a whole lot going on in an NCS that the field operators never know about. This stress level increases dramatically if the field operators are not well trained. The higher the training levels for field operators and NCS operators, the smoother everything will go.

18. One other very important rule of thumb: If you should hear on your scanner or by other means, that there is an emergency in progress somewhere, DO NOT rush in and volunteer your services or demand that you be used for communications. Nothing is more unwelcome and distasteful to the authorities than an uninvited, eager-beaver, demanding ham. There is no room for ambulance and fire truck chasing in the Amateur Radio Service. If you have not been given a specific assignment by a Net Control Station, don't go to a disaster or incident site. If they need us, they will call us out by contacting ARES/RACES leaders.

GENERAL NET STUFF

A common question from new hams is: "Who can start a net?" The answer is that any licensed amateur radio operator can start a net. If you happen upon a situation that will require assistance beyond your personal capabilities, don't be afraid to start a net to get that assistance. A net doesn't have to be a massive event. Many times, only 3 or 4 stations are required to service a situation. If you are not comfortable running a net, ask that someone else take the duties as NCS.

This leads us to another question: Who should be a NCS?. One of the more important, and often overlooked factors is signal strength and audio quality. A weak station is virtually useless as a net control. The NCS should be easily heard and understood by all net participants. All the experience in the world is negated by a weak signal and poor audio. A less experienced operator with a good signal and audio is much preferred to fill the NCS operating position. Net Control functions can always be passed off to a more experienced operator with a good signal.

Your experiences in emergency nets will eventually lead you to encounter something called the "Incident Command System." This is a more or less universal method of operation and communication for fire departments, emergency management, law enforcement agencies and other government entities that deal with emergencies. It varies little from place to place.

Well designed ARES/RACES organizations will incorporate elements of the Incident Command System into their organizations, net structures, operating procedures and training exercises. This allows responding hams to understand and operate without confusion because they have been trained using the same basic organizational structure as the served agencies. Nearly any time that conflict occurs between a served agency and an amateur radio group, the conflict is based on the fact that the amateurs and their leaders don't understand, utilize and practice using ICS structures. The biggest problems occur when an amateur operator or net control is suddenly told to report to someone new. Just do it! Report the change to your NCS. (He probably already knows about the change.) The Command System approached an overload point and it just split up some duties and responsibilities. Your job is the same . . . you just got a new boss.

The operational principles of the ICS are quite simple and easy to incorporate. The basic concept of the ICS is that a system (net) will reach a point of overload and inefficiency at some point in an escalating event. The ICS pre-defines these limits quite effectively. When a lead organization (Main or Tactical net) begins to hit the overload threshold, it splits off into smaller pre-defined and easily controlled special units (sub-nets) that take on specific responsibilities and levels of authority in support of the lead organization. These smaller units operate independently and report only priority traffic to the lead organization. The focus is always on keeping the "Span of Control" quite narrow at all levels. In a big emergency situation, you will seldom find more than 7 (usually 5) units (sub-nets) reporting to a lead organization (net control). Simple and highly efficient. So, why don't hams like to use it?

Hams are patriotic, independent people and they are volunteers. The general attitude among hams is that "Volunteers don't have to take orders." That's absolutely correct. We don't *have* to take orders. But, in the opinion of this Author, if we are going to be really effective in dealing with the served agencies, we have to respect and cooperate with the word "command" in the Incident Command System. When we step into a professional para-military "Command" structure as a volunteer, we should *expect*, and be *willing*, to be commanded!! We pay great lip service to the words "Serve, Service, and Served." All these words relate directly to the word "Servant", and Servants do have to take some commands occasionally. We should expect it, respect a system that works, accept it and learn how to function within it.