

Working with Public Safety Officials

Public service communications performed by ARES members are based on a number of requirements. Specifically, public safety officials must accept us; once accepted, our continued ability to contribute in times of disaster is based on the efficiency and effectiveness of our performance. While acceptance, image, efficiency and effectiveness are all important to the ongoing working relationships between amateurs and officials, it is the initial acceptance that is often difficult to achieve.

Police and fire officials tend to be very cautious and skeptical concerning those who are not members of the public safety professions. This posture is based primarily on experiences in which well-intended but somewhat overzealous volunteers have complicated, and in some cases jeopardized, efforts in emergencies. The amateur operator or other volunteers who wish to be of assistance must be aware of this perception.

The police have generally had their fill of "groupies" or "hangers on." They can ill afford to tolerate frustrated individuals who have always wanted to be police officers or firefighters, but for one reason or another have never reached that objective. There seems to be an abundance of people, especially during a crisis, who will quickly overstep the limits of their authority and responsibility if they are given any opportunity to assist in an official capacity. In their zeal, such persons often inhibit the actions of trained personnel.

Worse yet, they can make an already dangerous situation even more so by their reckless abandon. With rare exception, Amateur Radio operators do not fall into this category. The problem is, however, that police officers in the midst of stressful operations may have extreme difficulty in distinguishing between those volunteers who are problem solvers and those who are problem makers.

Those very few hams that behave emotionally are overzealous in offering their services or in describing their abilities or who abuse the established limits of their authority are doing the amateur fraternity a real disservice. The typical police officer or firefighter, like the typical civilian, does not understand the vast differences among various radio services, the types of licensing involved or the high level of expertise and discipline that is characteristic of the Amateur Radio Service.

When an amateur arrives at a scene and jumps out of a vehicle with a hand-held in each fist and two more clipped to the belt, all squawking at once, officials simply don't know how to respond. They are either overwhelmed by equipment they don't understand, or so awe-struck that they try to avoid what they perceive as threatening.

How Amateur Radio volunteers are accepted depends on their establishing a track record of competent performance in important activities. This begins with convincing officials that amateurs offer a cost-effective (otherwise known as free) substitute for functions previously paid for by the taxpayer. Local radio amateurs also must demonstrate that they are organized, disciplined and reliable, and have a sincere interest in public service.

The most effective way to accomplish this is for you, as head of your communications group, to initiate the contact with public safety agencies in an official capacity. This is better than having individual amateurs, particularly outside an organized structure, making uncoordinated and poorly prepared contacts that often result in an impression that your group is disorganized.

Approach that first meeting well prepared, and give a concise presentation of Amateur Radio's capabilities. Illustrate accomplishments with newspaper clippings, QST articles, etc., highlighting Amateur Radio public service. Discuss the existing Amateur Radio structure, emphasizing that a certain number of qualified operators will be able to respond to the public's needs.

Demonstrate the reliability and clarity of amateur gear. Nothing is more impressive than asking for a roll call on a 2-meter repeater using a hand-held radio in the police or fire chief's office and having amateurs respond with full-quieting signals from locations where municipal radios are normally ineffective. Such a demonstration several years ago convinced officials in Laguna Beach, California to ask for the assistance of the South Orange County ARES. The wisdom of this decision became evident a short time later when that seaside resort community was hit by a series of local emergencies.

Suggest specific ways in which amateurs can be of assistance. Indicate you are aware that police and fire radio frequencies are usually saturated with tactical or operational traffic in emergencies, and offer to provide an administrative frequency for use in overall management and coordination of the relief effort. More importantly, offer to demonstrate what you are capable of doing by supplying a demonstration of your communications capabilities. It is of tremendous importance that you emphasize that the services supplied by your group will free public-safety officers for other duties.

Demonstrate how easily amateurs and their equipment can interface with public-safety efforts. A perfect way to do this is to demonstrate equipment that can be made operational quickly inside the headquarters building, in a mobile command post or in field units.

Express your group's willingness to meet the needs of the sponsor or agency you are dealing with. Show a readiness to provide training to your membership. Offer public-safety officials the opportunity to have their own representatives appear before your group and provide orientation and training they feel is essential.

Finally, be realistic and objective in terms of what your group promises to provide. Be fully prepared to keep all promises you make. Remember to be organized and competent. Once you have implemented these suggestions, be patient. The requests for your services will be forthcoming, perhaps in a volume you had not anticipated!

Grass-roots action is the name of the game when it comes to achieving effective liaison. With the proper groundwork accomplished in advance, it is possible to dramatically increase your group's recognition among those sponsors and agencies having communications. It's symbiotic; these people need us, and we want to help. Now that all the necessary introductions have been made, the rest is easy, for we are indeed the experts in meeting communications requirements of every sort.