

# The American Red Cross

Let's take a look at the American Red Cross. Disaster relief is only one of the many facets of this nation-wide organization. Thanks to the kind assistance of Mr. Ted Harris, Function Lead Partner for Communications at the Disaster Services National Headquarters in Redwood City, California we have an opportunity to become better acquainted with the inner workings of this organization's communications requirements, abilities and protocols.

## ARC HISTORY AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The American Red Cross (ARC) was founded in 1881 by Clara Barton and was first chartered by Congress in 1900. A second charter, which is still in force, was granted in 1905. Under it, the American Red Cross is required to function as a go-between for members of the armed forces and their families; to maintain a system of national and international relief to relieve the suffering caused by earthquake, flood, fire, and other disasters. The American Red Cross organization is directed by a board of governors consisting of 50 people, of whom 30 are elected by the local chapters, 12 are chosen by the board, and 8 are appointed by the President of the United States, who designates the chairperson. National headquarters is in Washington, D.C.; the organization has eight regional offices, about 2200 local chapters, 44 regional blood centers, and 26 tissues services centers. American Red Cross services are organized into several programs. Services to the armed forces and veterans help in solving personal problems. This program provides counseling and in emergencies, facilitates rapid communications and makes available financial assistance.

The disaster services program develops disaster preparedness plans and, when a disaster occurs, responds with emergency care for disaster victims and rehabilitation assistance to render aid to individuals and families. The blood services program is the largest blood donor service in the world. Blood given by volunteers, is collected, processed, and made available to doctors and hospitals. Clinical research is an integral part of the service. Other programs are a tissues service and the nation's first bone marrow registry which was established in the mid-1980s.

The nursing and health services program enrolls registered nurses to serve in disasters, sponsors classes in home nursing and preparation for parenthood, works in the blood services program, and assists in other health services provided for communities. The safety services program hosts a corps trained instructors, most of them volunteers teach first aid, small-craft and water safety, and cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

In the international services program, members work with international Red Cross organizations in providing supplies, funds, and disaster specialists for relief in major foreign disasters. The American Red Cross has over 1.5 million volunteers participating in activities that are supported mainly by voluntary contributions through local American Red Cross Chapter campaigns and donations to the United Way.

## "Considerations and Options"

There are many parallels between the disaster operations of the ARC, those of ARES and other disaster and emergency response organizations. Like the rest of us, initial size up of the local situation is in the hands of the affected unit staff. One of the first things for any communications related personnel to do in an emergency situation after assuring safety of self, is to do an assessment of WHAT WORKS and WHAT DOES NOT. Are landline telephones,

cellular and pager communications working? Are local Public Service bands operating, as they should be? Are amateur radio repeaters functional?

The affected communications team at the direction of their leadership should try to get word out about their needs and capabilities as soon as possible to their respective state levels of emergency management, and disaster relief agencies and organizations. If the affected local team does not have sufficient resources to handle the needs of the situation then state level once informed as to the situation should then have an idea of where to begin to coordinate the movement of additional outside resources to the affected area. Likewise, state staff should pass the word up the ladder to the national level about the situation and report conditions and resource shortfalls.

The American Red Cross has several avenues of communications options open to them. Some are good for regular day to day use, while others are mutual aid type arrangements for back up communications. Other resources are available through their national headquarters though these, because they are not in close proximity, take time to arrange or acquire. To put it more directly... If it's not a "national" disaster...that is, one where the "national" volunteer coordination system (called DSHR) is engaged, you will not likely be getting help from National HQ itself.

Under ordinary conditions the ARC's communications are conducted in the same manner as everyone else's, telephones, pagers, fax, and Internet connections for e-mail etc. When needed, they also have a licensed frequency and radio equipment in most Emergency Response Vehicles (ERV) for FM 2 way radio communications on 47.42 MHz that gives them typical ranges of 10 -20 miles. The FCC for their use has granted seven HF frequencies as well, though HF gear is not normally a staple in the average local ARC Chapter's inventory. Also, these HF frequencies are a part of the SHARES system; a set of federal government frequencies that can be accessed by FEMA, Red Cross, and other national-level entities. Unless you are explicitly instructed to use this system, you don't.

Amateur radio is also an alternative for their use as a back up communications medium and this is where we come in. Local ARES groups can be invaluable to the staff of a local ARC Chapter during a local disaster response. Coordination and planning well before a disaster will make things run more smoothly.

Any local agreements should include a statement regarding the confidentiality of some disaster-related conversations and communications. Again, prior drilling and pre-planning efforts between these two organizations can pay off BIG when an actual response occurs. Once your group 'connects' with a local ARC unit it is very likely you will be encouraged to take Red Cross training (first aid/CPR) and disaster training (Damage Assessment, etc.). This helps you, help them, more effectively and adds to your personal knowledge and preparedness as well.

The American Red Cross Chapter, could at their discretion, establish agreements with a local General Mobile Radio Service (GMRS) group, REACT Unit, Civil Air Patrol Unit, local businesses or even a governmental entity for use of frequency space in disasters. In MAJOR DISASTERS, National ARC's Disaster Operations Center Communications Function Leads have access to Satellite Communications gear such as NASA's ATS-3 System which can be sent to an area, though again this takes a great deal of time. Some International Maritime Satellite (INMARSAT) equipment has been placed in high disaster risk areas for immediate use when a disaster occurs, but again this is not the norm. Those with experience in these units have said that, "The INMARSAT units aren't easy. Your Red Cross hams should get training on how to set up the transceiver, antenna, laptop, and printer and if you can't see a large patch of blue sky (about 35 degree elevation anyway), don't even bother." So we can assume that their service, though high tech and sophisticated is not always the best choice in all situations.

A limited number of American Mobile Satellite Corporation (AMSC) telephone units have been placed at national ARC headquarters and could be sent to a site for use by the communications officer. Again this would take a good deal of time to acquire, is not available in all situations and will only allow for limited communications benefit.

Any group considering working with the local ARC chapter or other groups/agencies should adopt a policy of "plain language" communications and avoid code and acronym usage. To simplify, as amateurs look at 2 meter (or maybe 70-cm for crossbanding/linking) as these are likely to be the primary interest. HF is very good for your larger ARC service areas that contain several counties without good (or any) repeater coverage. The important thing is to be flexible.

Check out Rick Palm's article in QST last spring called, "The Changing Needs of Served Agencies." If you want your ham group to be really valued by the ARC, and have the maximum opportunity to train with them, and assist during times of need, you must be flexible.

In a disaster, there are communications needs long after the hams are done. Once the damage assessment is done, and the shelters are set up there will be cell phones, fax machines, and temporary phone connections all over the disaster area. Disaster volunteers will be carrying cell phones and alphanumeric pagers as well. In that period that the 'ham radio' need is diminishing, we can reinforce/increase our value by assisting the transition to other needs. Troubleshoot a fax machine. Show a guy how to use a cell phone or pager...do whatever it takes to make the ongoing communications work.

That kind of stuff is NON-ham radio activity. It will upset some people when I say this... but as we near the 21st century, ham radio isn't always at the top of the technology curve any more. Anything we can do to go above/beyond is always appreciated by the local served agency.

As mentioned earlier, one of the earlier priorities of disaster response is to assess the post disaster condition of the ordinary communications infrastructure. Do phones, pagers, cell phones, normal radio systems still function or not? Once the leadership at local level learns the current situation then they can decide if the response is within their ability to handle or if additional resources from the state chapter are required. This provides the basis for a 'Communications Service Delivery Plan'.

## "COMMUNICATIONS NEEDS"

In a disaster response ARC will need communications for Administration, Mass Care, Damage Assessment, Disaster Mental Health Services, Government Liaison and Disaster Health Services. If phones etc. are down then radio may be the only reliable link in the first hours and days of the response. Work with and follow the requests of your ARC leadership. They know their needs and operational protocols better than we and remember as amateurs, WE ARE ONLY COMMUNICATORS. We do not make decisions and give orders that affect their operations.

Mass Care Communications are a high priority in the early stages of disaster response. Remember that often in the course of these communications some requests, comments and information will likely be too confidential to be aired over open radio frequencies. In such cases messengers may be required to 'hand carry' the material if no other secure means exists. Never put any communications that could be considered confidential over the radio without verifying it is all right to do so with someone of authority in the ARC. Mass Care feeding and communications between ERVs and kitchens etc can likely be handled over ARC's 47.42 MHz frequency if the equipment is on hand to do so.

Damage Assessment Communications requires immediate response of communications equipment to survey and report damage information. An initial assessment must be done in the first 24 hours or less to determine the disaster's extent and what resources will be required.

Detailed assessments are done in the first 72 hours (depending on the scope of the event, this may take much longer) of an incident and communications for coordination of teams and moving information is vital.

Disaster Health Services and Disaster Mental Health Services will need communications in what will most likely be a multi level array. Assignments include shelters, service centers, emergency aid stations, and outreach. This must be provided in a 24-hour continuous format. Much of the information in this role will be very confidential in nature, and we need to ensure communications with all staff, community EMS and local health and mental health providers remains that way.

Disaster Welfare Inquiry may need assistance from radio communications personnel in receiving or responding to inquiries, talking with DWI Search Units or DWI Centers and National ARC Headquarters. If the ARC staff asks for your help in this field of response or in Disaster Health and Mental Health, be alert for sensitive communications that should not be transmitted over open frequencies. Remember anyone with a \$79.00 scanner or a basic short-wave receiver can monitor your transmissions. This includes the media. This type of information is about people, their problems, and their needs. You must respect this fact.

A few summary points. You may find yourself operating or helping set up American Red Cross equipment for anything from the 47 MHz. FM gear to satellite communications technology in a major disaster. The time to learn about such equipment is now before a disaster and not by 'On-The-Job-Training'. Attend any training that your local ARC feels is beneficial to you. In the latter days of the response the need for amateur radio itself may not be as great, but your skill as a trained communicator can greatly enhance the overall response. Knowing how to help with other equipment or concerns can not only make you a more valuable volunteer, it can also lighten the load of others. Training is the only way to achieve this.

Remember, much of what we are looking at is '24 hour' a day operation and therefore personnel must be shifted on and off duty and sufficient numbers of personnel to handle this would likely require. Importing amateurs from neighboring areas and coordination with your Section Emergency Coordinator, District Emergency Coordinator(s) and very possibly the Section Traffic Manager as well. Likewise, remember that under FCC rules, "All disaster or emergency communications are legal." Be sure though, that your control operator does hold a class of license that is valid for his task.

One more note. Personal radio equipment should be looked after carefully as the ARC may feel bad that you had your equipment damaged or stolen, but they are not responsible for replacing it.

Have no fear that the American Red Cross or any other group for that matter, will "take over" your command structure. They have enough to do just to handle their own details in a response, let alone yours. By working and training together before a disaster we can lay aside the myths and suspicions that have hampered effective cooperation in the past in many areas. Go ahead, knock on that door, make those contacts and train and exercise NOW before disaster strikes.