

Do We Serve?

By Ron Dodson, KA4MAP

From July 7-23, 2002, "E-Ham" ran a survey on their web site asking, "Which emergency organization are you the most involved with?" This survey had 2,095 responses and had an additional 32 comments (Some favorable, some not). While I realize that feedback from only 2,095 amateurs out of 889,910 or more is only a drop in the bucket, I found the results and comments all thought provoking. How closely this represents the "true" picture of amateur radio operators as public servants, I'll leave to your own opinions.

The results of the survey with 2,095 hams participating shows ARES gathering 17% or 366 votes, RACES reflected 9% or 180 hams actively involved, Skywarn came in close to ARES with another 17% or 358 hams responding, MARS/CAP/SATERN, together reflected 6% or 126, 5% or 108 hams stated that they were involved in "Other" types of work, and 46% or 957 of the hams in the survey signified, "I am not currently involved with an emergency organization"!

Again, it makes one ask, "How close is this to the real picture of how many amateurs are actually fulfilling their DUTY under FCC regulations to serve the public, especially in times of disaster?" (Part 97.1 (a), Part 97.401 etc.).

If this were deemed to be a fair estimate of amateurs involved in some facet of "E COMM" or emergency communications work, then almost half of all amateurs nationwide are doing absolutely nothing to validate the need to keep amateur radio alive or to use their talents to assist their communities in some form or fashion! Yes, some people do have jobs or family situations that pull all or nearly all of their waking moments. This, I'll grant to be true. We've all been there at one time or another in our lives. I can recall ten years ago when I was almost totally off the air except for two meters for a number of years in dealing with multiple family crisis, one after another in a horrible decade I'll never forget. But, surely sooner or later one can stop being a biblical example of "Job" and begin to participate at some level.

One may ask, "Who cares? No one in my local government wants me. So What?" Well, in some cases this is true, but in the post Y2K and post 9/11 world most governments, state and local, are waking up and seeing amateur radio as a real option in their continuity of government efforts. Many other organizations like American Red Cross and Salvation Army already have a history of using amateur radio in their plans.

If you had looked at the comments that this survey generated, you'd see examples of both sides of the coin and the no-man's land in between. Some were full of optimism and others were full of gloom. In many areas, KY included, there have always been personality conflicts among hams as well as among hams and their served agencies. Turf wars and what I call, "me-ism" have ruined many opportunities for this service to take place. Battles over "Who's the Boss here?" have in some cases, done damage that may never be repaired. When amateurs are serving government or other groups, The "Served Agency" is the boss! We are communicators; we do not make policy for their group or direct their operations. I don't care if it is ARES, ACES, MARS, SATERN or who, the served agency is boss! There is no place in amateur radio "E Comm" for ego trips.

Everyone loves a pat on the back now and again. In some areas this is common and in others it is seldom seen or done. In many of the negative comments, you could see a pattern of either a lack of interest among leadership to recognize their team members' efforts or possibly some "political agenda" at play. If amateur radio is to survive into the next century and beyond, we must get past apathy and politics and move into a new mindset. At Lexington's Central KY Hamfest, this year's ARRL KY Section Convention, we will be recognizing a few of the hams who went the extra mile and looked to the public good. By no means are these few the only KY

amateurs we have who deserve a pat on the back, a handshake and a big "thanks!" for the work they put in. These are the hams that were nominated by their peers as being the MVP's of their respective services. Nets all across KY could not and would not exist, were it not for the Net Controls who call the nets and the individual hams, young and old, male and female, who participate in them each day or week. To the EC's out there who see to it that their local group's activity is reported to me each and every month so that I can report to ARRL HQ just what Kentucky has done over the previous month. To each and every one of these people, I send huge thanks!

Hams tell me every so often just what a great job I do as the KY SEC. Well, I always answer back, "It's easy when you have so many people who work so hard to make me look good!" I mean this sincerely! If the interest and enthusiasm that I get from so many of you daily (yes, I said daily) did not exist, I'd have moved on long ago screaming with my hands in the air. It's also easy (for this very reason) to see why a few of the negative comments in the survey were there, as this kind of environment so obviously did not flourish wherever they were.

There were also some comments to the effect that there was nothing going on locally to participate in. Perhaps this could be resolved by a little 'push' on some amateur's part to start things rolling. Let me tell you about my neighbor hams in the state that borders me. They started out participating locally with our KY group on the local VHF net. Interest blossomed and they soon made the effort to get in touch with the SEC in their state to get info on starting their own ARES group in their community. Today, they have a good following, have weekly nets (with training material like this), are active in local storm spotting efforts and even assist in the warning siren tests conducted in their county.

This would have never happened if they had not taken up the ball and started to run with it. Has it been real easy? No, I think they'll agree it has not always been EASY. Has it been worthwhile? I can tell you that they will likely answer, "yes" to this question unanimously. We still work together, side by side. Each group the stronger for the other's presence across state lines. Both ready to help wherever/whenever needed. How many other communities in all 50 states could benefit by this same example? All because someone got up one day and did something!

Lets move closer to home and look at Kentucky ARES from different angles as we continue to ask, "Do We Serve?" I occasionally hear some say, "Well, I don't do ARES 'cause I'm not an ARRL member". Who said you had to be? The Kentucky portion of the Amateur Radio Emergency Service is made up of 914 hams (as of June 2002) who REGISTERED to volunteer their time and equipment to serve their community and state in times of disaster. Who can say how many other hams in Kentucky who participate weekly in nets and would be willing to assist in a disaster are not on any local ECs list of membership? ARES membership is maintained at the local level. Yes, we have a place online to register <http://www.qsl.net/kd4pwl/update.html>, but that info is forwarded from me to the local EC for their records, as they will be the ones who oversee operations locally. In a disaster, these Emergency Coordinators need their local info on points of contact and resources each ham has available to allow them to assign duties and request equipment not available at home from other areas.

Yes, I am sorry to report that in Kentucky some communities do not have active ECs in place. The EC post is a volunteer post and yes, under ARRL policy you must be an ARRL member to be an "EC" however, this is not true for Assistant EC's or ARES membership! No ARRL membership requirement exists to be an AEC or ARES member! I take a risk in saying what I am about to say, but feel it is time to say it, the past three years experience as SEC have shown me the following regarding ECs:

1. There have been a few out there who want the title and certificate, but not the job. Solution:

2. (There is little to be done about this except screening and asking questions before making appointments)
3. There are some who want the job but don't know what to do to get going once they get it. Solution: We have the KY Amateur Radio Web Site and other resources to assist them in their undertakings. Plus, I am always here to discuss areas of concern and answer questions/offer suggestions.
4. There are some excellent ECs out there who are not "Official ECs" because they are not ARRL members. Yet I would not trade them for the world as they sometimes more active than a dues paying, "Official EC".

At the risk of insulting some EC out there, I say this not to pick on anyone, but to illustrate that paying dues does not necessarily make you a good EC. The effort that goes into doing this job can be huge and sometimes it just takes someone with the initiative to get the job done. Appointing AECs, Official Emergency Stations etc. to spread the work around can turn an overworked EC into a great EC. ECs need not have the personal "pull" to get involved with a local government or organization, but it is sure helpful if you can have the balance of knowledge, confidence, diplomacy, professionalism and consistency to make that connection or know of someone else in the ARES team who has! Reporting activity is another job that can be delegated. Nothing in the world says a good EC cannot delegate!

We need more EC's to fill the open spots, but they need to be involved ECs! By involved I mean that they organize an effort to have a good ARES team. Whether by delegation of authority to several others in larger communities or handling it themselves with maybe only one other person to assist the main coordinative effort hams in a community rural or urban can be organized and trained to handle situations that may require their active response even if the local ARES unit is small. Time and again, I have heard the comment that a good team of 4-6 active hams is worth more than a team of 50 on paper!

Whether they pay dues to ARRL is also not a major concern to me as far as the ARES program is concerned. Yes, we all should be ARRL members and able to vote to get the leadership we want in place to help keep amateur radio on track, but some people are on fixed incomes, etc. and just plain can't. This does not necessarily mean that they would be a bad coordinator at local level to get an organized effort going. Communities need someone who will get on the ball and make a valid effort to have a viable ARES team. This is not a power trip. Ego has no place in emergency communications. If you want to be General Patton, join the Army! We in ARES serve our "Served Agencies". We do not make policy. We do not tell police, fire, EMS or others how to do their business. We communicate!

Let's get some activity going in these vacant areas of the map within Kentucky! Go to <http://www.kyham.net/county.html> click on your area of the map and see who is in leadership positions there. Contact them, and get involved! If the county you live in says, "vacant" why not contact your DEC if there is one or contact me and get a move on. I want people who are willing to serve, people who are interested in being ready to help when the next flood, tornado, earthquake, whatever comes to harm your community. Are you the only ham in your county? As strange as this sounds, in a few places this may well be true. Contact me and get on board. No one said, neighbor counties couldn't band together and create one good working ARES team effort when man (or woman) power is short.

I can't make anyone do anything. If we love amateur radio and love our communities then we should have little trouble being willing to "SERVE".