

Plumas Amateur Radio Club

Plumas County Pandemic Flu Exercise

19 November 2015

On Thursday, 19 November, PARC participated in providing EmComm in support of the Plumas County Health Department. This was a RACES event, supported by ARES personnel. As a note here, nearly all ARES Operators are also RACES Operators in our area. With less than 20,000 people in a 2500 square mile County, most Ham's locally wear several hats when working EmComm.

The call came from our OES Director, Jerry Sipe, KK6VAL to our RACES EC Brian Verhalen KJ6EAC at 0900 hrs. Brian opened a Net at approximately 0905 and performed a Roll Call of Operators that had previously affirmed they would be willing to assist on the Drill. (Note: See attached list for assignments) The first call was to the ARES EC, Larry KI6YUK who was assigned to the Fairgrounds, the location of the IC, Public Health Nurse, Tina Venable. The assignments were given over our Mt. Hough repeater 145.470 and a Simplex frequency given as backup comm and traffic channel, as 146.550. This was a "cold start" action by the Club and was not pre-staged, as is typical for our area. Each of our 3 Hospitals is equipped with a permanent Station on the premises; all have VHF voice with 1 having Packet capabilities. This event was all done with VHF voice. Stations were assigned as follows:

Plumas-Sierra County Fairgrounds—Mobile on battery power only—VHF/UHF

Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at the Plumas County Annex Radio Room (adjacent to the EOC) with VHF, UHF, HF, computer and Packet capabilities; Wi-Fi, landline; cellphone enhanced coverage.

Plumas District Hospital (PDH)—VHF, Packet, computer

Seneca Hospital (Seneca)—VHF

Eastern Plumas Health Care (EPHC)—VHF, Packet ready

The EOC acted as Net Control for this event as is usually the case and all comm went through NC. The event was designed to use ARES/NTS trafficking; however, neither RACES nor ARES was at the Planning Table for the event. The NCO began checking in stations at 0945, all Stations operational. Station logs were kept and message traffic went on through the exercise, with all Stations participating. The drill was scheduled for 0900 to 1300 hours, however the comm element was to end at 1200 hours. The RACES/ARES operators were released at 1145 hours.

ISSUES:

- 1) The PDH VHF radio initially was not operable at start-up. The "radio room" is a small corner in a working office and our equipment had apparently been moved, disconnecting some power leads. Hospital maintenance was kind enough to bring a meter, trace the problem and get them up and running.

2) The EPHC has a permanent station in a non-medical use building. PARC has been allotted a small space in the former kitchen where a fully functional VHF voice Station is located. At the time the station was assembled and put together, a Packet station was planned and a second dedicated antenna placed about 8 meters away at a slightly lower elevation. When the Station fired up, comm to Mt. Hough was poor at best. RACES EC Brian was on station and it occurred to him to switch to the Packet antenna, which was an easy fix and comm improved by 100%, though still in white noise.

3) When operating for a RACES event, our standard protocol is to not self-deploy, but to wait for a notification from the Office of Emergency Services (OES). The Incident Commander (IC) notifies OES, who notifies the RACES EC, who in turn, calls out ARES and subsequent available Operators. During the event our NCO is in charge over all communication and can direct stations to go Simplex for message trafficking, keeping the repeater open. During a drill, the NCO repeatedly states on the air that **“This is a Drill”** and directs traffic as needed. At the drill’s end, the event IC notifies the OES Director, who in turn, notifies the RACES NCO that Stations can secure.

At the end of this event, a message was trafficked to all Stations that PDH and EPHC hospital personnel were done with their portion of the Drill. Both Stations responded, asked for and received permission to secure. Seneca Station did not respond after 3 attempts by Net Control. At this point, the NCO elected to release all stations, permitting all to secure. One Operator at the Fairgrounds (which Station, coincidentally had not been released) realized that the last message from the IC had NOT released Seneca OR the Fairgrounds stations. The Operator went back to the IC and asked if the remaining stations were to be released. The IC wrote a message to OES that Seneca was done with the drill; asked if RACES was still needed for the OES and IC; and if OES wanted to end the drill, which the Operator sent to the NCO for traffic. The OES messaged back that the Drill was concluded, all stations could be released, but wanted notice when the IC had been secured. The IC messaged back that the IC had been secured, but she would remain until 1300 hours to finish the Flu Clinic. The Operator sent this final message to NCO for the OES. Thus ended the RACES/ARES portion of the Drill.

LESSON: ARES handles traffic for RACES in support of governmental agencies and we train on drills such as this one. Our job, as message handlers, is to relay this traffic exactly, precisely and as effectively as possible. We are not to “correct” any spelling, punctuation or alter the message, only transmit as received. Further, we do not decide when an event is to begin or end. The NCO has no authority in this respect and was in error releasing “all Stations” without the permission of the IC. Fortunately, the mistake was remedied by the Fairgrounds Operator, despite the fact that ostensibly, no one should have (technically) been at the radio room at that time. It might be added, coincidentally, that 2 women Operators found the “work around” to mitigate the error, to their credit.

SUMMARY

From the standpoint of the ARES EC, this was a successful exercise, with a 90% satisfactory rate. ARES and RACES have some issues to mitigate, such as relocating the Station at PDH; radio surveys are needed at EPHC and protocols need review in timely refresher courses. Additionally, developing rapport with Hospitals and other agencies, especially in the area of message trafficking is imperative.

Signed: Larry Trotter, Plumas County ARES EC and PARC Secretary

20 November 2015

