

# RACES--Targeting the Wet Noodle

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No kiddin'. That's what we in RACES/ARES (Radio Amateur Communication Emergency Service/Amateur Radio Emergency Service) ought to be striving for: the wet noodle, as in "flexible as a \_\_\_\_". As some may be aware, I am the new RACES Admin Coordinator, and I am on the steep slope of the learning curve for what appears to be a somewhat daunting task—especially for someone who is new to this aspect of amateur radio (by the way, I think "amateur" is a misnomer for this rather important activity. It is almost a pejorative and is differentiated from other synonyms like *dilettante* and *dabbler* in my dictionary as "one practicing an art without mastering its essentials." It seems to me that the majority of the hams that I know have mastered the essentials and more as engineers, technicians, and others with professional communications/computer background and experience, many with law enforcement or military training as well. I'd prefer a term like "Citizen Communicator"). Anyway, tackling RACES administration is like eating a mountain—I am not even sure where to start.

I will be asking for some assistance later in the article, but first let me tell you what I have been up to, what I found out (I think), and what goals/targets/directions we might consider moving towards. In looking at available information on RACES and ARES, a clear distinction is made between the official government service connection of RACES and the non-official health and welfare function of ARES. The reality in Charlotte County seems to be that RACES/ARES is operated as a single unit and that the focus of the EOC's (Emergency Operation's Center) view of RACES utility is to provide backup support (to a robust 800 MHz county system) mainly to shelters and hospitals. The county's viewpoint is gleaned from a meeting I had with Gerald Mallet, Emergency Management Coordinator, and the designated liaison to RACES.

The acid test for RACES was the 2004 hurricane season. Viewpoints diverge on the performance: There is consensus that RACES/ARES did perform sterling service passing traffic and sometimes providing primary communications, thus proving the utility of RACES/ARES during an emergency. County emergency managers were disappointed however at the participation level of local RACES operators, particularly during the pivotal hours after hurricane Charley. There may have been some miscommunication and misunderstandings that led to a perception leading to a lack of operators available. We will be working on that issue. There were also control problems reported like one outside operator tasking ambulance services on his own authority. RACES operators, on the other hand, complained of (at times) not being utilized, being treated somewhat disdainfully by people running the show, not allowed entry at times, and not being relieved after long shift obligations were met and exceeded.

During routine, non-emergency interactions between RACES and EOC, other issues of concern surfaced, to include a perceived lack of central authority within RACES. The EOC staff cannot, they say, coordinate services and training with a large number of individuals, who on any given occasion have shown up individually or in droves indicating “I am/we are so-and-so and are here to ....”. The unfamiliarity with RACES equipment and techniques puts the EOC staff at a loss in terms of restricting access or providing requested assistance. They do not know whom to work with, who is what, and what are the roles and duties. They did not know what has been going on with RACES. The EOC will deal with a single representative and an alternate. In turn that representative will keep the EOC informed on RACES matters, exercises, participation, and concerns.

It is noted that one person who was knowledgeable about RACES, Paul Winter, is no longer with the county. It is important to know that Mr. Winter was reportedly in agreement with other EOC staff that RACES was not living up to its potential. The good news is that Gerald Mallet and Lisa Schaber (Emergency Planning Specialist) absolutely do want to work with and utilize RACES. It is my task to listen to the concerns of the EOC staff, follow their lead in terms of preparing the RACES volunteers to assist the County with supplemental or primary communications in the areas that the county feels need such support. I also want to get input from and listen to the RACES membership to plan for and include situations and scenarios where we might be helpful or needed

I guess one of the problematical issues is that technology—cell phones and 800 MHz systems-- have made backup communications to government functions mostly superfluous. Our operators exercise but often its “hurry up and wait.” We take comfort in being there, but it’s kind of cold comfort. Is it going to be another 40 years before the next major hurricane hits this part of Florida? What kinds of scenarios could RACES/ARES provide “essential” support for? We need, as a group, to explore such scenarios; we need to develop exercises, and train. We need to prove to ourselves and others that we provide a meaningful service. There are two kinds of emergency call outs: Government and Non-government; for instance, the Red Cross was active for certain storms where the EOC did not declare an emergency. We “can” provide community support as ARES and/or work with the county as RACES as the situation dictates. This is where the “wet noodle” comes in. We need to be able to flexibly respond in a variety of ways to any situation that calls for our expertise.

The question is begged: How many operators are available for a given emergency and if there are not enough how do you decide where to station them? How do you get more operators if you need them? What if government communication is disrupted? What if neighborhoods are isolated? We need brainstorming and we need to exercise realistically. The county will have drills and training and we in RACES/ARES should be supplementing that training/drilling with our own.

The EOC's (and thus our) biggest issue: It is *sine qua non* that when we are called out for a drill and especially for a real emergency that operators assigned to tactical stations are both reliable and available. To address this, I see a tiered (sort of like *triage*) system of participation. The tactical sites are to have designated operators who are committed to serve. All sites will be prioritized theoretically (subject to change as conditions warrant). The most reliable operators are assigned in priority order (this will be an evolving task and I expect that most current assignments and preferences will remain the same). We need alternates for all tactical positions. Alternates are still a primary level of participation, a level for people who are ready and able to commit when the time comes. It would be nice to have two operators at the tactical sites during drills, but it does not appear that we have enough people to do that. We also have a number of volunteers (snowbirds) who are not available during a portion of the most volatile weather season. They can still be primary level participants for the time they are here but must be replaced when they are gone. The second level of participation is for floaters; i.e., people available on standby for any assignment to a tactical location as needed once they are called up. The third level is also called up (and can include all amateurs) but remain in their home or where they are temporarily residing. These people can pass traffic, relay from operator to operator, or provide information as needed. Thus, all amateurs can participate at one level or another, to include people who cannot travel or can devote only a nominal amount of time.

We need to accomplish a number of tasks to bring RACES up to speed: a number of positions need to be filled or verified; we also need to do housekeeping and training.

- We need someone to keep track of membership (perhaps also to recruit)
- We need an operations and planning staff member
- We need a trainer
- We need a logistician (first step inventory)
- We need an alternate administrator (county point of contact in my absence)
- We need to participate in EOC training exercises (this is in the works)
- We need to meet as a group
- We need to update, revise and publish a new RACES manual
- We need to coordinate with other RACES/ARES units in neighboring counties and regions
- We need to recruit more members

- We need to optimize our equipment
- We need to have fun, to socialize, enjoy each other's company

Until we get other members on board, I will be handling most duties with the able assistance of Mac McDaniel, W8HTD and Aldo Disalvo, KC4NUX. I look forward to meeting all RACES/ARES volunteers in person at the forthcoming meetings and training sessions and drills and to working with those of you who continue or elect to fill the necessary positions. In the meantime, please, please forward your comments and ideas to me.

Lastly, the county will be hosting a hurricane expo at the town center mall on Saturday, the 14<sup>th</sup> of May. RACES/ARES will be given a table. We invite members to show up (start time around 10 AM) and spend some time with us and hopefully recruit some new hams that would then like to be part of emergency services. If anyone has or can get some RACES/ARES brochures or can develop a professional banner, that would be helpful.

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