

Excerpts from Dave Hartnett, K9DRH EMCOMM course

What Makes a Good Volunteer?

Emcomm volunteers come from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a range of skills and experience.

The common attributes that all effective volunteers share are a desire to help others without personal gain of any kind, the ability to work as a member of a team, and to take direction from others.

Emcomm volunteers need to be able to think and act quickly, under the stress and pressure of an emergency.

You cannot help others when you are worried about those you love.

Your family should always be your first priority.

Adequate personal and family preparation will enable you to get your own situation under control more quickly so that you are in a position to be of service to others.

What You Are Not

As important as what you are, is what you are not. There are limits to your responsibilities as an emergency communicator, and it is important to know where to draw the line.

You are not a “first responder.” Except in rare cases of chance, you will seldom be first on the scene. You do not need flashing lights and sirens, gold badges, or fancy uniforms. In most cases, beyond reporting the situation to the proper authorities, hams have little usefulness as communicators at the very beginnings of an emergency.

You have no authority. In most cases, you cannot make decisions for others, or make demands on the agency you serve or any other agency. The only decisions you can make are whether to participate or not, and those affecting your own health and safety.

You cannot do it all. When the agency you are helping runs short of doctors, cooks, or traffic cops, it is not your job to fill the void. In most cases, you are not trained for it. That does not mean you cannot lend a hand to fill an urgent need when you are qualified to do so, or perform other jobs for the served agency of which communication is an integral part, and for which you are trained and capable.

You are not in charge. You are there to temporarily fulfill the needs of an agency whose communication system is unable to do its job. They tell you what they need, and you do your best to comply.

“What does my attitude have to do with emergency communications?”

In a word, everything! It is even more important than your radio skills. Historically speaking, the attitude of some Amateur Radio volunteers has been our weakest point.

In situations where a professional and helpful attitude is maintained, served agencies point with pride to ham's efforts and accomplishments. The opposite situation is clearly illustrated in the words of one emergency management official who said, "Working with ham radio operators is like herding cats—get them the heck out of here!" This man was clearly frustrated with the attitude of his volunteers.

Although our name says that we are "Amateurs," its real reference is to the fact that we are not paid for our efforts. It need not imply that our efforts or demeanor will be anything less than professional. "Professionalism" means getting the job done efficiently—with a minimum of fuss.

No matter which agency you serve — emergency management, the Red Cross or others, it is helpful to remember that emcomm volunteers are like unpaid employees. If you maintain the attitude that you are an employee of the agency you are serving, with all that employee status implies, there is little chance for you to go astray. You are there to help solve their communication problems. Do whatever you can, within reason, to accomplish that goal, and avoid becoming part of the problem.