

Mecklenburg County ARES®

What is a Communication Emergency?

When the power is off, land lines go out, cellphones stop working and the internet is down; when police, fire, and hospital services are overwhelmed, amateur radio operators are there to take up the slack as disaster communication volunteers. They have, in fact, been there in virtually all disasters in recent memory... Hurricanes, fires, ice storms, earthquakes, floods and so on.

New York City World Trade Center attack

During the September 11 attack in 2001, traditional telecommunications were stretched and overloaded. Phone networks in the North East were congested into uselessness. Amateur radio played a large role in facilitating communications between the various emergency departments, which operated on different frequencies and protocols.

2011 Joplin, Missouri tornado

161 people were killed and at least 990 injured when an EF5 multiple-vortex tornado hit Joplin, Missouri. Not only was almost the entire town decimated but the communication infrastructure was destroyed. Amateur radio played an important part in restoring the communications of the emergency services in the area, especially in regard to providing links between the local and regional hospitals.

Hurricane Katrina

When Hurricane Katrina, a Category 5 hurricane, hit New Orleans, the emergency communications systems were completely destroyed, including power stations, internet servers, mobile phone towers, and 911 services. Amateur radio was instrumental in the rescue process and maintained signals when other modes of communication were damaged or overloaded.

2013 Colorado Floods

Over 20 inches of rain fell on sections of Colorado in just 5 days. Many locations received an entire year's rain in less than a week. 19 Colorado counties were inundated. Amateur radio was the only link to civilization for several towns and was instrumental in evacuating many of the communities in the affected area.

One of the primary missions of the Mecklenburg County ARES is to provide communications during any emergency. But...what is a communication emergency?

A communication emergency exists when a critical communication system failure puts the public at risk. As shown in the examples just given, a variety of circumstances can overload or damage critical day-to-day traditional communication systems. It could be a storm that knocks down telephone lines or radio towers, flooding that severs a community from the outside world, a massive increase in the use of a communication system that causes it to become overloaded, or the failure of a key component in a system that has widespread consequences.

Examples are easily found. Violent storms and earthquakes can knock down communication facilities. Critical facilities can also be damaged in “normal” circumstances: underground cables are dug up, fires occur in telephone equipment buildings, or a car crash knocks down a key telephone pole. Hospital or 911 telephone systems can also fail; the entire Washington State 911 system went down for 6 hours just last April due to a computer glitch.

Even when no equipment fails, a large-scale emergency such as a chemical or nuclear accident can result in much more message traffic than the system was designed to handle. Some emergency operations occur in areas without any existing communication systems, such as with backcountry searches or fires.

With such endless possibilities, it is important to recognize that we as amateur radio operators are a valuable resource to the communities we live in. We possess the skills as disaster communicators, the equipment and the frequency spectrum to meet the needs of such communication emergencies.

Mecklenburg County ARES strives to have the communication networking capability to fill any communication gap whether it is small or large. Amateur Radio Operators have skills and equipment unavailable to most citizens. These special capabilities, along with a small amount of training, enable us to assist our communities during times of disaster.

Mecklenburg ARES provides communications to both Governmental and Non-Governmental agencies.

We serve:

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Office of Emergency Management
- Mecklenburg County Emergency Operations Center (EOC)
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department
- Charlotte Fire Department
- Mecklenburg County Communications and MEDIC departments (COUNTY WARNING POINT)

- American Red Cross, Greater Carolinas Chapter
- Duke Power Company, Joint Information Center (JIC), Weather Center and Damage Dispatch
- Charlotte Area Hospitals
- Salvation Army, NC/SC Divisional Headquarters and Regional Center
- State Emergency Response Team (SERT)
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

To be involved in providing communications for our Governmental agencies it is required that we take 4 FEMA classes that will prepare you to understand and fit into their organizational structure. Those classes are IS100, IS 200, IS 700 and IS 800. It takes about 12 hours total to complete these online classes and certificates are awarded after each class has been completed.

To get more info on these classes please e-mail me at KE4VVF@gmail.com or visit the Mecklenburg ARES website at www.mecklenburgares.org and a link to the FEMA class website is listed there under the “Links and Downloads” section.

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