

NJ 2023 Simulated Emergency Test – Debriefing

The overall exercise plan testing the proposed emergency communications plan for the American Red Cross Shelters to Districts offices and other locations, during a period of no commercial communications was successful. It proved the proposed operating procedures would provide effective communication through amateur radio. The after-exercise debriefing pointed out areas of improvement that could enhance this effort in the future. The list summarizes the State-wide list while each Section, NNJ & SNJ, have additional internal future improvements.

What Worked:

- Collaboration of American Red Cross of NJ and two ARRL Sections NNJ and SNJ in planning, implementation, assessment, and identification of future improvement of service to ARC of NJ.
- Voice operations by N2ARC and Districts net control stations for providing instructions and announcements, plus liaison and back-up net control stations.
- WINLINK successfully communicated prepared ARC forms from 8 Shelter locations through NJ to 4 ARC District offices and other locations.
- An electronic event log, ARCNJ-NETLOG, successfully captured all formal messages at Princeton as well as providing a method of monitoring of shelter operations.
- A remote Welfare message site, ARCNJ-WELFAR, demonstrated how Welfare messages can be routed to wherever resources are available to process them, National Traffic System, or other American Red Cross location.
- Use of liaison stations and back-up net control stations effectively supported backup and relaying operations.
- The attendance of American Red Cross of NJ representative at N2ARC Princeton provide the agency an overview of exercise and encouragement to amateur radio operators.

What Lessons were learned:

- Use of Shelter verbal Tactical Callsigns in the future would reduce some confusions for liaison stations.
- Remember FCC rules that require operators identify with FCC assigned callsign in addition to Tactical Callsign at least every 10 minutes.
- Verbal instructions should be delivered slower in the future. One way is for sending operators to pointing to each word while reading.
- If verbal announcements or instructions for a specific area or counties should be announced first, then provide information.
- Logs, ICS-214 Activity and ICS-309 Communications, should continue function and location, such as shelter or district plus name and town. Realize the served agency will most like collect all logs at the end of the event.

Suggested Improvement:

State-Wide

- Net Control Stations' skills and practice should be encouraged in formal training, local training nets and events. All operators should practice net control operations locally rotating net operator during weekly nets.

- Request American Red Cross to staff Shelters and District offices with at least one representative to prepare ARC WINLINK Forms, interact with emergency communicator, and react with typical emergency responses.
 - Provide ARC staff or volunteers with experience in forms preparation for radio communications.
 - Suggestion may require a series of events by Districts with Shelters normally reporting to that District rather than a State-wide event.
 - Consider involving other volunteers, such as local CERT, in shelters during future exercises.
- If two Shelters are established within a county different Tactical Callsigns should be used for each to reduce possible confusion.
- Develop and test procedures for:
 - Compressing large files that are difficult to handle, especially on packet and HF while were not difficult with VARA.
 - Compress PDF files without loss of data, if accidentally provided by serviced agency.
- Prepare written procedures for American Red Cross -NJ, and NJ ARRL Sections for inclusion within Section Emergency Operating Plans.

Section Specific

- Investigated solutions for communications voids in both voice and WINLINK.
 - Goal to eliminate need for relaying wherever possible.
 - May require adding or repositioning repeaters, digipeaters, RMS sites, or agreements with other repeater/RMS trustees.
- Investigate interference issues:
 - Operating location background noise or other activities that limits operators' ability to hear voice announcements. Possible solutions could be location of station, use of headphones, or liaison monitoring station.
 - Radios interfering between voice and digital stations. Possible solutions could be moving one radio, changing frequency, or using liaison station relay.
- Investigate and test alternate backup frequencies for all Shelter and District sites in advance:
 - Always have alternate or backup operating frequency for all sites.
 - UHF may be needed.
 - Directional Antennas may be needed for some locations.
 - Multi-band antennas increase flexibility.
- Prepare and plan for equipment failures:
 - Permanently located station equipment, radios, antennas, and should be inspected at least monthly, plus digital software updated.
 - Plan for equipment breakdown with extra fuses and radio.
 - Prepare for antenna problems considering backup portable or vehicle mounted.
- Training and reinforcement of emergency operating practices:
 - Vebel instructions should be delivered slower, practice applications during local training nets.
 - Logging:
 - Have individual operators practice ICS-214 Activity Logs during local training nets and events.
 - Practice using ICS-309 Communications Logs and application of WINLINK system automatic ICS-309 generation during local training nets and events.
 - Offer formal training to NJ ARES operators on emergency communications procedures, message handling, and served agency interactions.

Continued

American Red Cross – NJ

- Princeton N2ARC location should not have District responsibilities. Its State-wide net control operations require full attentions. Consider having Mercer County Shelter(s) report to another District.
- Pennsauken District:
 - Facility installed radio antenna systems was problematic, needs inspection.
 - Consider limiting the number of Shelters reporting. Duringin an actual disaster, it most likely will not be able to handle multiple Shelters within southern counties.
- Fairfield District:
 - Need to investigate and test antenna system. Site had difficulty connecting with assigned Shelters.

R - 10/29/23