



Second Century

ARES vs. AUXCOMM: The Conspiracy that Never Was

EmComm is a hallmark of our hobby, having played important roles many times in the aftermath of disasters, from small to large. You may not be aware of this, but nearly half of new hams indicate that they are interested in becoming amateur radio operators to pursue activity in emergency communications.

ARRL has built an infrastructure for EmComm within our public service organization that we call the Amateur Radio Emergency Service®, or ARES®. This is both an organization and a framework for people to volunteer, take needed training, join a local group, and then practice or drill to ensure readiness when required. It is the responsibility of your Section Manager to ensure that the position of Section Emergency Coordinator (SEC) is staffed and managing emergency communications.

Auxiliary Communications (AUXCOMM) has created, in conjunction with the states, a national certification for individuals called Auxiliary Communicators (AUXC) who support the public safety community. They have been given a path where they can study, test for, and earn certification under the US government's Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). This certification is an important first step in potentially being deployed into a Communications Unit. As a part of the National Incident Management System, communications is defined as a required capability, with the kinds of responsibilities you'd expect — from deployment and setup, to staffing and operation, to tear down.

The communications section of Homeland Security in each state may be managed differently. For example: in Connecticut, there is no defined opportunity for amateur radio to play a role, whereas in Colorado, amateur radio by definition and decree is recognized as a supplemental element of its plan. How it is managed plays a fundamental role in how AUXCOMM certification eligibility is defined. It also defines how and when amateur radio plays a role in state-level response to an emergency situation. Regardless of how amateur radio broadly is defined within each state, credentialing is universally a rigorous process, and taken very seriously.

So, where is the controversy? It seems clear that ARES is the public service organization that trains and organizes amateurs for emergencies. AUXCOMM is embedded on a state-by-state basis into its requirements for establishing professional public safety emergency responders. It seems that in some states, individuals have taken it upon themselves to diminish the importance and role of ARES, focusing instead on a very narrow definition of state-only response to incidents. This logic is flawed.

ARRL enjoys a close working relationship with governmental agencies at the state and federal levels. The officials

that we speak with are huge fans of ARES. Why? As radio amateurs, this is a passion and pursuit of ours — not just a job. ARES groups can, and do, enthusiastically practice and drill. They constantly seek to upgrade their capabilities from operator and infrastructure perspectives. If and when a state needs to supplement their EmComm capabilities, they know there is a pool of trained and equipped operators that could be called upon to supplement their ranks.

Another thing that is clear is that over the past decade or so, ARRL has not always been the leader it should have been in this space. Although we were keeping relationships alive, too much reliance was placed on the field organization to just get it done. ARRL HQ needed to strengthen its support for EmComm. We have staffed Field Services with Mike Walters, W8ZY — who was the Connecticut SEC at the time — who is working with the Section Managers, and Josh Johnston, KE5MHV — who has nearly 30 years of experience in EmComm — to work with the SECs and the served agencies. On top of that, the ARRL Board has created the Emergency Communications and Field Services Committee that meets every 2 to 3 weeks with a group of subcommittees focused on various initiatives. The point is: we get it and have responded in a huge way to close the leadership gap we created.

If you are one of those people who came into amateur radio seeking involvement in emergency communications, where are you today? Have you joined your local ARES group? Are you willing to commit to the training to prepare yourself for the next incident that may be unique to your area?

Get yourself involved in EmComm. Reach out to your Section Manager and make sure there is a healthy ARES program in your area. If you are an experienced and capable ARES member who wants to take it to the next level, reach out to your Section Emergency Coordinator and explore AUXCOMM opportunities. Be a connector and pull those new hams who want to pursue EmComm into your local group. And as always, stay radio active!


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