



Second Century

SAFECOM: A Seat at the Table and Why It Matters

Some 5 years ago, the ARRL Board of Directors decided that, given the importance of emergency communications to ARRL — and, indeed, its importance within FCC Part 97 — we needed to elevate our focus and our capabilities.

Two important things developed from that decision: first was the establishment of a senior position at ARRL responsible for EmComm, while the second was the establishment of a new Board-level standing committee, the Emergency Communications and Field Services Committee (EC-FSC). Taking these two steps has led to the re-establishment or development of relationships with served agencies, like FEMA, and Memorandums of Agreement (MOAs) about how we will work together. We've learned that these MOUs are not sufficient on their own to contribute to or guarantee success. It takes very strong interpersonal relationships with these agencies and the ability to function within a network of players during a time of need.

The federal government has learned the same lesson. There were significant lessons to be learned in the weeks and months following the attacks on September 11, 2001. Communications between agencies and the active sharing of information were the most significant weaknesses identified. In order to rectify that, the newly formed Department of Homeland Security established an advisory group called SAFECOM. SAFECOM is continuously working to improve emergency response providers' interjurisdictional and interdisciplinary emergency communications operability, interoperability, and security across state, local, tribal, territorial (SLTT), regional, and international borders, and with the federal government, allowing emergency responders to communicate through different communications systems to exchange information. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) administers and supports the program and its stakeholder activity.

SAFECOM brings together more than 80 representatives from SLTT emergency responders, appointed and elected officials, and major intergovernmental and national public safety associations. SAFECOM's membership also coordinates with elected and appointed officials, as well as other key emergency communications stakeholders, to provide input on the challenges, needs, and best practices facing emergency communications. Over the past 20 years, SAFECOM has produced many public service communications documents, white papers, and guides that are now best practices for communication services and 911 systems, and is widely accepted as the premier authority for public safety communications resources.

Why does this matter? The first and foremost concern for ARRL's Amateur Radio Emergency Service® (ARES®) is interoperability. Long gone are the days when amateur radio

stood on its own, providing communications in response to an emergency. With advanced portable cellular and satellite capabilities, SAFECOM members in their individual capacities will get involved in emergency response, and our ability to understand and co-operate with them is critical. Having a seat at the SAFECOM table is critical. ARRL being a SAFECOM member provides the opportunity for EmComm officials to see amateur radio in a new light and bring that vision back to their respective agencies, associations, and groups. That is the power of SAFECOM: bringing good ideas and best practices to the forefront in our communities.

In the coming years, ARRL, through its participation in SAFECOM, will look to work with their member organizations to develop and evolve training programs that better prepare our involvement and preparation around the country. The interactions and involvement will build a better-trained and professional volunteer resource pool to support emergency management functions for all hazards, and serve as a technical asset for all response organizations.

As ARRL gets more involved in the SAFECOM committees, working groups, and task forces, we will have the opportunity to build relationships and create contacts, as well as learn directly from subject-matter experts within the public safety community. These relationships serve as an example for state and local hams in the relationships they should be working to build in their local communities. Our ARRL Director of Emergency Management, Josh Johnston, KE5MHV, has been named to the AUXCOM working group on the Emergency Communications Task Force. He also serves on the Education and Outreach Standing Committee.

SAFECOM matters. Having a seat at the table matters. Our ability to integrate and interoperate ARES into the SAFECOM community matters. It also underscores the reality that communicating over the radio may not be their first priority, but being able to provide those communications is. Be radio active. Look to get involved in emergency communications locally, starting with ARES. Be a connector. If you already have a strong relationship with local emergency authorities, let us know! And be prepared personally for that potential time of need.

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