

Message Handling Part I

For tonight as I mentioned in my email we are going to start to discuss message handling. In recent emergencies, it was observed that many hams who were ARES members were well equipped with radios, etc, but ended up becoming totally useless when it became time to actually send and receive traffic. In this case one unintentionally becomes part of the problem instead of being part of the solution. This is a consequence of not requiring training for ARES members. However, even though it is not a requirement, we can voluntarily do some training that will go a long way to help us in an emergency. So let's get started

1) First lets go over the documents on the training page of the Nueces County ARES website at www.pituch.net. I have created a separate section for message handling at the bottom of the page. The first general document was reviewed a few months ago on this net. The second document is the bible for message handling by W3YVQ titled The ARRL Message Format, Chapter I. It is very complicated reading but if you have a question this is the best reference. The next document is the N8JXO PowerPoint presentation that I will use for training tonight. This is a quick and easy reference to get started. Next is the ARES Field Manual. You should have a copy of this document on your computer as it not only has some info on message handling but also a lot of other things that are helpful if you get caught in the middle of a real emergency.

Last are two files containing the actual ARRL message form. The first file is the old official form that was used before computers were around and you had to buy a pad of these from the ARRL. It has a lot of black in it so it uses a lot of printer ink. The latter file is a text version more economical to print out.

2) The Preamble

As I mentioned previously we are going to discuss just the beginning of the message format called the Preamble. Most message formats have a preamble. With the ARRL format the preamble contains important information about the message. Without this information the message could be lost or misinterpreted by the recipient. The preamble is arranged across the top of the form. So you need to refer to a copy of the message form or N8JXO's presentation for a proper illustration to follow along what I say. It is broken up into 8 boxes each containing distinct information:

1) The Message Number

The message number is assigned to the radiogram by the ham who originally fills out the form. He is the one who is responsible for getting the message started on its way through the NTS (National Traffic System), and he will likely be the one who delivers a reply to the original sender. Because of this and other reasons he needs to be able to look up the original message in case there is a question about it. So he will assign a number from his own sequence. The sequence might start at the beginning of the year, or at the start of each month. If the message is relayed to another ham on the way to its destination the message number does not change.

2) Precedence

This is the importance of the message. The highest priority messages are always sent first. Lower priority messages may not even be sent in an emergency if there is not enough time to do so. There are 4 categories, and I will describe them from lowest to highest priority:

a. Routine (R) – A routine message is a normal message without the urgency of the other categories. This is the lowest priority. Very seldom will a message you send not be of routine precedence.

b. Health & Welfare (W) – Many times a loved one will want to know the fate of a relative in a disaster area. Such a message has a higher priority than a routine message, but will often not be delivered if many messages of a higher priority need to be sent.

c. Priority (P) – These are official messages in a declared emergency. They are important messages but are not considered to influence Life or Death situations.

d. Emergency (E) – This have a Life or Death urgency and are the highest priority.

3) HX – Optional Handling Code – This is optional. It does not have as much meaning as it did before the Internet. However they are sometimes used and you need to know what they are incase you run intoa message with one included. For Example HXE is a common one meaning that the delivering station should get a reply to originate back into the system. When originating a message if in doubt leave it blank, but HXE should be used if the sender wants a reply.

4) Station of Origin – This is the call sign of the ham would originally created

the message onto the form. He may have gotten the info from a non ham such as the Incident Commander but the ham's call sign goes here. If you receive or relay this message this information does not change for this message. This way a reply can be sent back to the original ham would can easily deliver it to the official.

- 5) Check – This is the number of words in the message. You would fill this out after filling out the body of the message. There are many rules to determine the number of words in a message. Only the words in the body of the message are counted. An “X” used as a period between sentences is counted as a word. It is used to check the accuracy of transcribing the message between stations.
- 6) Place of Origin – Once again this is where the originating radio station is located. It is not necessarily the place where the person resides who gave the message to the radio operator. However, if a reply is sent the location of the ham is important to get the reply back to him.
- 7) Time Filed – The time the message was originally entered into the system by the originating ham. Use local time and add the time zone designator like CDT.
- 8) Date – The date the message was originally entered into the system. Use a 3 letter designator for the month followed by the date. Do not put down the year.