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Where Do We Go From Here?

by Wayne Thalls, KB6KN

VOLUNTEER --- The dictionary defines a volunteer as "a person who offers himself for a service without obligation to do so; to give, bestow or perform without being asked."

In the aftermath of the October 17 'quake, nearly 400 ham volunteers provided critically needed communications for relief efforts. Most of these volunteers came from other counties. Just ask officials of the Santa Cruz County Office of Emergency Services, and the Red Cross, how valuable these efforts were. This may have been the largest totally volunteer group involved.

The amateur radio experience in Santa Cruz County was unique---certainly in no other area of the state did hams play a similar role. Never before in our country, since the beginning of the hobby, had such widespread devastation occurred in a single natural disaster. Damages exceed \$7 billion. This was the third largest earthquake to occur in the continental U.S. in this century. The 1906 8.3 temblor happened before ham radio---the 1952 Kern County 7.7 quake involved a lightly populated area of the state.

The greatest challenge we faced, especially on October 17-18, was a severe shortage of help. We were involved in a situation quite different from floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, forest fires, and other natural disasters. These are often predictable, and almost always involve relatively small areas. Everyone in our county was a victim of this disaster. For hours we were virtually cut-off from adjacent counties.

Everyone can learn from the experiences of others. The local amateur community has an obligation to share our experience with other hams throughout the nation. It was felt that an objective professional study should be made of the local experience. Arrangements were made with the Sociology Department at UCSC to conduct this study. Diana Dull, a doctoral candidate, agreed to take on the project.

Among the things we hoped to learn were:

- ◆ How to better inform and prepare the "average" ham to cope, when he is involved in a disaster.
- ◆ How to motivate more amateurs to become involved in emergency preparedness.

The study has been completed, and Ms. Dull has published an excellent report. The study is based upon confidential interviews with local amateurs who were involved in the quake operations, and those who were not. It also included volunteers from outside the county. There are some interesting findings.

1. Many hams vastly underestimated the severity of the quake---amateurs, like the rest of

the populace, were not uniformly affected. Perceptions of the situation convinced many their services were not needed.

2. Hams who did not volunteer, but did monitor the two-meter net, commented that the

net was running smoothly the whole time they monitored. This convinced some that

their services were not needed, while others concluded their operating skills were

inadequate. Both assumptions were erroneous. A good net should run smoothly, even

during a disaster---and there was a place for everyone with radio equipment.

The most disturbing information to come from the study is the attitude of some amateurs toward the role of volunteerism. They expressed outright animosity toward the volunteers. Were these the same hams that also observed that "it is only a hobby"?

Ham radio has many facets. Hams themselves come from a wide variety of backgrounds. It is a free country---and every individual may pursue any aspect of ham radio they wish. In fact, diversity is one of the things I find

most appealing about the hobby.

Let me leave you with a thought, however. Ham radio is the only hobby, I know of, which relies solely upon the use of a limited national resource for continued existence. Since the principal argument for retaining our rather large chunk of radio spectrum relies upon our public-service performance, perhaps we do have responsibilities unlike those of other hobbyists. A ham license is a privilege---not a right.
