

October 1989 Earthquake

Some Problems Experienced
by ARES Volunteers

by
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While amateur radio operators who volunteered for duty may not have experienced unique problems, when compared to other volunteers, the combination and level of stress factors may be singular.

ARES members and some other amateurs responded immediately to the disaster---that is within minutes. They were involved before being able to evaluate the situation. Once committed, it was next to impossible to become detached from the situation. Some had little or no opportunity to check on family and friends for several hours. This also imposed significant stress on the family members.

ARES volunteers went to the most vital locations---immediately.

Santa Cruz County OES headquarters in the basement of the County Government Center. This was the site of frantic activity for hours. Most of the other people involved at this location were "professionals"---that is they were doing their paid-job. Learning that damage to the county building might force evacuation added to the stresses, for everyone. The greatest stress for us resulted from the demands for additional ham volunteers, required to staff a growing number of sites throughout the county.

From the very beginning we experienced great difficulty in recruiting an adequate number of volunteers. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that ARES managers (AEC's) were not available to assist. Locally only a few in leadership positions were prepared to assume those duties. Frankly I was angered by this fact even more than by the dearth of local volunteers for the line positions. The stress of this situation continued for most of the full eight day operation. A feeling of isolation was intensified by the fact that the hierarchical structure of the ARES failed to function.

Out-of-town volunteers were confronted with unique problems. They were often assigned to sites where a local area knowledge would have been highly beneficial. Some shifts at County Comm (County OES) were staffed entirely by out-of-area hams. They were forced to assume even greater responsibilities than those from the local community.

All three hospitals in the county had lost internal and external telephone capability. Heavy reliance was placed upon the amateur radio facilities. Operations were set up in the heavily damaged Watsonville Community Hospital within the first hour. Operations

were conducted in a cramped and damaged area near the emergency room. Fortunately the operator assigned there had prior medical emergency experience. Another operator, one of the ARES managers, could not cope and simply "disappeared" until the next day. The need to obtain transportation for the evacuation of patients from the heavily damaged portions of the hospital created tremendous stress on the operator at the hospital, and amateur radio personnel at the county OES.

At the Red Cross Chapter House pressure began to build almost immediately after opening radio operations. As each new evacuation shelter was opened, additional amateur operators were needed. At the same time the hospitals were experiencing shortages of water and medicines. Supplies were moved from adjacent counties and other parts of the state. The activity continued at a very high level for the next 3-4 days.

During the first 24 hours of operations many hams were forced to work very long shifts in extremely stressful locations. Undoubtedly most of these people had never before experienced a similar situation. By and large the people involved did a tremendous job. We don't know what the after-effects may have been, however.

Hams were exposed to some unique situations in the Red Cross shelters. In addition to seeing firsthand the plight of the evacuees, they witnessed medical and psychological situations new to them. Because most of the Red Cross shelter managers were without prior experience, additional responsibilities were expected of the hams. This was especially true when the ham had worked previous shifts at the shelter and therefore knew "the ropes".

At the Civic Auditorium Red Cross shelter site, drug and alcohol abuse was a major problem. The first ham on duty there was mature and had a law enforcement background. Even so, he found it difficult to cope with the situation.

Some local hams withdrew from active participation in the ARES group following the quake related activities. Several expressed disappointment and anger at the lack of recognition from the organizations supported by the amateur radio operations. Some of the greatest stress, in my opinion, came from not knowing what was going on. The sense of isolation felt by everyone involved, "professionals" and volunteers alike, was surely a major problem. At the OES Center, we were of course privy to considerably more information than were people at other locations.

Following the event, a few area hams were highly critical of the hams who did volunteer. That some could not, or would not, volunteer is understandable. Why, though, would anyone be hostile to those who did what they considered to be a duty? Will this prospect deter future volunteers?

My personal experience shows what can happen under circumstances where the potential volunteers are also "victims" of the disaster. I was not at home when the quake occurred. My wife was at work, on the mall in downtown Santa Cruz. Traveling to downtown I tentatively determined the well-being of my spouse, I made the decision to proceed to the County Center. Those of us who made it there---within thirty minutes after the temblor---were totally immersed in the operation immediately. This was a situation which I can only describe as being akin to having a tiger by the tail---who can think of alternatives. I finally made it home about 3 AM the next morning. My wife had been all alone in the house, experiencing the aftershocks and attempting to do some cleanup. She didn't learn of my whereabouts and well-being until midnight, via another ham who heard me on the air at the OES Center. Volunteers with small children certainly were faced with special problems.

Looking back, it is obvious the many of the ARES problems are a result of the structure itself. The selection of people and preparation for leadership roles is a problem which will be very difficult to resolve. Unlike any other organization involved in disaster operations, ARES is 100% volunteer. There is not a single paid staff person in the entire United States. Each little local organization is virtually autonomous. Where effective groups exist, such as our own, full credit must be given to the leadership of the individual Emergency Coordinator. Among the enclosures I have included my summary of a debriefing meeting held at the regional level by ARES. Note the wide range of responses to the quake---from total involvement in Santa Cruz County, to the complete lack of an ARES organization in San Francisco.

The ARES comes under the umbrella of the American Radio Relay League. The ARRL is the national association of hams. The principal role of the organization is lobbying before the FCC and Congress, and publication of reference and education materials. There is a paid staff. Among the staff members is one whose responsibilities include ARES, among others. Essentially, at the national level the ARRL does not play an active role in emergency operations.

My hope was that we could share our unique experience with other ARES groups throughout the country. That was a major factor in the decision to commission the UCSC study. This was the most costly natural disaster in United States history---and the most severe quake to hit the continental U. S. since ham radio came into being. While hams have played vital roles in numerous disaster relief operations before, I believe the Santa Cruz County efforts were of a greater magnitude than those of smaller and more localized events. I realized that the story could be best conveyed via the ARRL publication, QST. This monthly amateur radio magazine, the largest in the world, carries stories of ham responses to disasters, and other public service, as well as other matters of interest to amateurs in general. Following on the heels of Hurricane Hugo, the quake story received relatively little attention. I was unsuccessful in creating interest in a story detailing our experiences and observations. Perhaps this should not be too surprising since little interest has been conveyed by others within the state of California. Certainly we know that most people don't like to dwell upon

unpleasant events, when they have been directly involved. Due to the local grass-roots nature of the amateur radio populace perhaps we can find another way to reach them. Perhaps that route must be via the County and State Offices of Emergency Services. Ideally FEMA would play a role at the national level.