



## Hams to the rescue

Amateur radio networks help victims of the hurricane

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Columnist

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With telephones down and wireless service disrupted, at least one group of people did manage last week to use technology to come to the rescue of those in need.

Often unsung, amateur radio operators regularly assist in emergency situations. Hurricane Katrina was no exception. For the past week, operators of amateur, or ham, radio have been instrumental in helping residents in the hardest hit areas, including saving stranded flood victims in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Public service has always been a large part of being an amateur radio operator. All operators, who use two-way radios on special frequencies set aside for amateur use, must be tested and licensed by the federal government, which then issues them a unique call sign. (Mine is W2GSK.)

Ham operators communicate using voice, computers, televisions and Morse code (the original digital communication mode.) Some hams bounce their signals off the upper regions of the atmosphere, so they can talk with hams on the other side of the world; others use satellites. Many use short-range, handheld radios that fit in their pockets.

When disaster strikes, ham networks spring into action. The Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) consists of licensed amateurs who have voluntarily registered their qualifications and equipment for communications duty in the public service.

In this disaster a number of ham emergency stations and networks have been involved in providing information about this disaster – from [WX4NHC](#), the amateur radio station at the National Hurricane Center to the [Hurricane Watch Net](#), the [Waterway Net](#), [Skywarn](#) and the Salvation Army Team Emergency Radio Network ([SATERN](#)).

On Monday, Aug. 29, a call for help involving a combination of cell telephone calls and amateur radio led to the rescue of 15 people stranded by floodwaters on the roof of a house in New Orleans. Unable to get through an overloaded 911 system, one of those stranded called a relative in Baton Rouge. That person called another relative, who called the local American Red Cross.

Using that Red Cross chapter's amateur radio station, Ben Joplin, WB5VST, was able to relay a request for help on the SATERN network via Russ Fillinger, W7LXR, in Oregon, and Rick Cain, W7KB, in Utah back to Louisiana, where emergency personnel were alerted. They rescued the 15 people and got them to a shelter.

Such rescues were repeated over and over again. Another ham was part of the mix that same Monday when he heard over the same Salvation Army emergency network of a family of five trapped in an attic in Diamond Head, La. The family used a cell phone to call out. Bob Rathbone, AG4ZG, in Tampa, says he checked the address on a map and determined it was in an area struck by a storm surge.

He called the Coast Guard search-and-rescue station in Clearwater, explained the situation and relayed the information. At this point, the Coast Guard office in New Orleans was out of commission. An hour later he received a return call from the South Haven Sheriff's Department in Louisiana, which informed him a rescue operation was under way.

Another search-and-rescue operation involved two adults and a child stuck on a roof. The person was able to send a text message from a cell phone to a family member in Michigan. Once again, the Coast Guard handled the call.

Relief work is not just relegated to monitoring radios for distress calls. The organization representing amateur radio operators, The American Radio Relay League or ARRL, now is seeking emergency volunteers to help supplement communication for American Red Cross feeding and sheltering operations in Mississippi, Alabama and the Florida Panhandle — as many as 200 locations in all.

Hams who wish to volunteer their time and services should contact the Hurricane Katrina volunteer registration and message traffic [database](#).

And, for the first time, the federal government will help hams help others. The Corporation for National and Community Service ([CNCS](#)) will provide a \$100,000 grant supplement to ARRL to support its emergency communication operators in states affected by Hurricane Katrina. The grant will help to fund what is being termed "Ham Aid," a new program to support amateur radio volunteers deployed in the field in disaster-stricken areas.

One last note for ham operators in the stricken area: The FCC has announced that it's extending amateur license renewal deadlines until October 31, 2005.

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