

Some General Guidelines For Operating At A Public Service Event

This document represents a compendium of things I've learned and/or read about ham radio operations at a public service event. I make no claim that any of it is original and this is NOT an official document of any organization to which I belong. It is simply a collection of things that I've learned – some of them the hard way.

IN AN EMERGENCY

1. If you come upon an injury, CALL 9-1-1 FIRST before you call net control. Do not wait for net control to do it. You can call net control after you call 9-1-1.

Obviously, if you can't get a cell phone signal, then call net control and ask them to call 9-1-1.

2. In general, DO NOT MOVE an injured person unless it is absolutely necessary to protect their life right now this instant (e.g., they're about to be engulfed by fire or they're face down in water and can't breathe). Even if they're conscious. Even if they ask you to move them.

Neck/spine injuries are difficult to spot and are tricky things. Moving an injured person, even for something as simple as placing a coat under the head, is not a good idea until someone who knows what they are doing has determined that there are no neck/spine injuries.

As horrible as it seems, it is best to leave an injured person in the street right where they are, as they are, rather than move them on your own. You should, of course, provide them with protection from traffic, but don't move them if you can avoid it.

BASIC COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOL

1. Usually, you will be assigned a tactical call (e.g., "SAG 2", "Rest 1"). When you communicate with net control, you use your tactical call (e.g., "Net, this is SAG 2").

2. All communications take place through net control. The general process is a simple call to net control (e.g., "Net, SAG2"), wait for net to acknowledge you, and then give your message.

3. No transmissions to other stations unless specifically directed by net control. If you need to talk with another station, call net control and tell them. Usually, but not always, you'll be directed to go off-net for communications with the other station. When you come back on net, tell net control that you're back.

4. You must also give regular ham calls per the FCC rules. You do that by ending conversations with your tactical call and your call sign. For example, you've been having a conversation back-and-forth with net and are finishing the conversation. You would say something like ".... SAG 2 out, KB1QBZ".

5. When you first get on-station, call net control and tell them that you're on-station.

6. If you're going to be away from your radio for any reason, tell net control when you're leaving, and tell them when you get back.

7. If you have been assigned to a specific location and will be away from your station, even if you have your radio with you, tell net control when you're leaving, and tell them when you get back. Same thing if you're going to be "indisposed" for a few minutes.

8. ALWAYS keep your transmissions short, sweet, and to the point. Don't transmit until you have

Some General Guidelines For Operating At A Public Service Event

thought out your transmission, until you have collected whatever information you need to collect, until you have something useful to say. "Net, wait one while I get you the information" is a very valid response.

9. If the people from the event have to formulate a message/response, let them formulate it off-the-air.
10. "Net, I don't know" is the right answer when you don't know the answer. Don't guess unless you've been asked for an estimate. Long-winded stream of consciousness soliloquies are for Shakespeare, not you. A wrong answer is almost always worse than "I don't know".
11. Minimize the information you send to that which is absolutely necessary. For example, if there has been a crash between a bicycle and vehicle, net does not need to know the type of vehicle, its paint scheme, the age of the driver, who was turning which way, or whatever. They need to know how many riders, if there are injuries, whether or not 9-1-1 has been notified, and whether or not the route is blocked.
12. If you're unclear about something net wants -- ask. If you're still unclear, ASK again. And again, and again, and ... A wrong answer is almost always worse than no answer.
13. Your job is communications. It's not your job to repair things, to hand out food and water, lug supplies, chauffeur people, or ... That being said, if somebody asks for your help and you can provide it without compromising your job as a communicator -- and you feel that it's consistent with your knowledge/ability and physical condition -- you can help out if you want to.
14. You are not authorized to make decisions on behalf of the event organizers.

RESTRICTIONS ON MEDICAL INFORMATION OVER THE AIR

1. Federal law (usually referred to as HIPAA) prohibits the release of an individual's medical information. That means that you cannot transmit medical information about someone over the air -- even in case of an accident. For example, you cannot say on the air that "Jon Perelstein has a broken arm, lacerations, and internal injuries". Save that information for a telephone, or better yet have the event organizers get the information themselves from the hospital.

If net control wants the identity of the injured, call it in by phone.

2. In general, do not indicate the nature or extent of injuries on the air other than something like "the rider does/does not need medical assistance". That's especially true if it's a serious injury!!! It is imperative if there has been a fatality.
3. Remember that event organizers may not be familiar with HIPAA restrictions, and may ask you to put information on the air that you're not allowed to put over the air. 'Splain it to them.

EQUIPMENT NEEDS

1. For some smaller events, an HT may be suitable. However, most events require something more than an HT. Typically, that something more is a 25 watt or higher mobile station with a minimum 1/2 wave antenna. The base station (or repeater) for many events is miles away from the individual hams. If you use an HT, you'll mainly be talking to yourself.
2. If you're going to be in a vehicle, you want to be using an antenna mounted outside your vehicle -- otherwise you'll mainly be talking to yourself.
3. If you're in a situation where you can use an HT, when transmitting either (a) hold the HT up to your mouth and use the built-in microphone, or (b) hold the HT up in the air with one hand while transmitting on an auxiliary microphone in the other. If you have the HT clipped to your belt or some sort of harness, your body will wind up blocking the signal and you will wind up mainly talking to yourself.

Some General Guidelines For Operating At A Public Service Event

4. Rubber duckie antennas are for the birds. Get an add-on antenna for your HT so that you don't wind up talking to yourself.
5. Make sure you have enough batteries or other power – whether you're using an HT or a mobile station. And make sure that everything is charged the night before. Nothing is more embarrassing than having your battery die in the middle of a public service event and not having a backup/spare.
6. Most HT batteries – BUT NOT ALL – are best charged by letting them fully drain a couple of days before the event, and then fully charging them. Once the battery is fully charged, do not use it until the event. Do not “top it off” the night before – that actually reduces your available battery time. Check your battery manual.
7. Other types of batteries may or may not work well with the “drain it” approach mentioned above. Check the manual on your battery.

WHERE AM I?

1. If you're in one of the mobile units, always have a real, honest-to-gosh hard-copy map with you and keep track of where you are along the route you are following. It's embarrassing to tell net control that you don't know where you are. It's even more embarrassing when you discover that you're 20 miles from where you're supposed to be because you took a wrong turn and weren't paying attention to the map (and yes, it's happened to me).
2. Event maps (e.g., for a distance bicycle ride) may not be sufficiently accurate for purposes of driving. If possible, have a detailed atlas in addition to the event's map, and make yourself aware of key landmarks before you start.
3. It is very very useful to have a GPS in the passenger compartment with you, especially in places where you can't get a detailed road atlas that shows every little side street. Keep the GPS turned on and have it tracking your location at all times. But don't let that stop you from keeping track of where you are via the map and landmarks. Having the GPS tell you that you're on Dead Duck Lane approaching Swamp Gas Road may not help you if you don't know where Swamp Gas Road is relative to where you're supposed to be.
4. The above holds even if you have an APRS tracker in your vehicle. There are many areas in the country where APRS coverage is not sufficient to provide net control with accurate information as to the location of your vehicle. And when you call net to ask where you are, they ARE going to laugh at you.

INSURANCE, THE LAW, AND UGLY THINGS LIKE THAT

1. While an event's insurance may cover you while you're doing the job you were assigned to do, it almost undoubtedly does not cover you if you are doing something that was not part of your assignment, or if you're using your own personal vehicle without written authorization.

For example, the event's insurance possibly covers you if you are in one of their authorized vehicles being driven by a driver assigned by the event. It almost undoubtedly does NOT cover you if you take over the driving from the authorized driver, or worst still if you decide to use your own vehicle rather than ride in the one provided. If the event asks you to drive or to use your own car, make sure you get it in writing.

Note that getting to/from your assigned position at the event in your own vehicle is usually your problem, not theirs.

2. Find out about Good Samaritan laws in the state in which you will be operating and understand what protections they do (and do not) provide you.

Some General Guidelines For Operating At A Public Service Event

3. You are not a police officer and you are not authorized to direct traffic. If someone gets injured because you are directing traffic, you can be sued and the event's insurance will not cover you. Even if it's a really busy intersection and "... I was just trying to help ...". Even if it's a really really busy intersection and "... I was just trying to help ...".

You can protect someone who is injured by directing traffic around that individual if they are in danger of getting hit by a vehicle.

4. You are not a police officer, and you are not authorized to compel anyone to do anything. You can advise, and you can warn, but you cannot order and you certainly cannot physically force someone to do (or not do) something. Even if the event organizers have declared that they want the area cleared. Even if the police have declared that they want the area cleared.

5. It is not a bad idea to have one of those rectangular plastic IDs with your name, ham call, and some ARRL or ARES identification that you can clip to your clothing. Do NOT get one that looks like a police badge because someone may think that you're trying to impersonate a police officer, and you will not like the taste of jail food. Worse yet, just when you're trying to impress that really hot babe/hot guy with your phony badge, a real police officer will come along and embarrass you.

6. Do not pimp your ride with police-style light bars, sirens, or other accoutrements to make it appear to be an emergency vehicle. See above re: the taste of jail food.

7. You are not authorized to violate traffic regulations.

8. Carry your ham license with you (or at least a good photocopy). You never know when something is going to happen that might require your being able to prove that you really are a ham and that that's why you're running around with a bunch of radio equipment.