Amateur Radio Operators as Professionals

What has Attitude got to do with it?

a) Everything – attitude is more important than radio skills
b) The attitude of some ham volunteers has been our weakest point
c) One emergency manager stated “working with hams is like herding cats - get them out of here”
d) “Professionalism” means getting the job done with minimum fuss
e) No matter what agency we serve, an emcomm volunteer is like an unpaid employee

How Professional Emergency Responders Often View Volunteers

a) Professionals in any field often expend much time and great effort into developing skills and training
b) Volunteers are often part-timers whose skills and dedication may vary widely
c) Unless a positive and long established relationship exists, professionals are likely to consider volunteers as “less than useful”
d) Police agencies are often distrustful of outsiders – often for legitimate security reasons
e) It takes time to prove our skills and resources, and to develop a positive working relationship
f) If an offer of assistance is refused, do not press the issue – the served agency’s authority should never be challenged. They are in charge, not you.

Who Works for Whom?

a) It does not matter if you are a part of a group like the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) or Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES)
b) You’re working for your community and the served agency - you work for them
c) You are there to provide communications - communications is job #1
d) If you do not feel comfortable doing this, do not volunteer

Performing Non-Communications Roles

a) The old model of the emergency communicator was to format and transmit a message passed to them from the served agency. Those days are gone forever.
b) The new job description will likely be “any function that includes communication” as defined by the served agency
c) Emcomm groups should be prepared to perform many tasks, such as:

i) radio operator - using amateur radio or agency equipment
ii) dispatcher - organizing the flow of personnel, vehicles or supplies
iii) resource coordinator - organizing the assignments of volunteers
iv) field observer – watching and reporting weather or other conditions
v) damage assessor – evaluating and reporting damage conditions
vi) van driver – moving people or supplies
vii) searcher – providing communications for search and rescue
d) You may need to complete task-specific training, and participate in exercises and drills

Specific Agency Relationships
a) Relationships between volunteers and served agencies can be quite different from agency to agency
b) “Memorandums of Understanding” (MOUs), “Statements of Understanding” (SOUs), or “Statements of Affiliation” (SOAs) define general relationships
c) Emcomm groups often have written agreements with local agency officials
d) Some examples of MOUs can be found with:
i) Department of Homeland Security
ii) Federal Emergency Management Agency
iii) American Red Cross
iv) The Salvation Army
v) State or Local Emergency Management
vi) SKYWARN

Talking to the Press
a) In an emergency situation, the press will be hunting for tidbits
b) NEVER give out personal information
c) NEVER give out information about a served agency
d) Some emcomm organizations have their own spokes person
e) Emcomm spokes persons provide information about the ham radio group’s efforts – NOT about the served agency
f) If a reporter will not leave you alone, only discuss your part of the emergency communications effort, but only if permitted

Volunteering Where You Are Not Known
a) Many emergencies will occur in neighboring or distant areas
b) It is best to contact emergency communications or management teams in that area before making significant preparations
c) It’s possible your offer will be welcome, but it’s equally possible you may be refused
d) If the effort is not well organized, little information or support may be provided - you may have to improvise or fend for yourself
e) The best time to offer your services is well before an emergency occurs – when the time comes to serve, you will be ready for the job, and the job will be ready for you.

Worker’s Compensation Coverage and Legal Protections
a) In some states Worker’s Compensation extends to volunteers working on behalf of a government or non-profit agency
b) Worker’s Compensation law is complex and regulated by individual states’ laws
c) Emcomm managers should investigate the applicable Worker’s Compensation state law
d) Volunteers providing service to government agencies or tax-exempt organizations are provided immunity from liability by the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997, 42 U.S.C. Section 14501.

e) However, the statute does not cover damage or harm caused while operating motor vehicles, or acts of gross negligence, or criminal acts.

f) The statute provides broad liability protection for radio amateurs in most situations, especially amateurs who volunteer under ARES when providing communications to served agencies.