

Responder Safety?

Amateur radio operators, especially those who have mobile radio stations, can be the 'first on scene' at anything from a typical auto accident to a hazardous materials incident. Whether, driving to or from work or on personal business, you can be presented the opportunity to be either a part of the solution or part of the problem in how you respond. To many times we hear reports of amateurs being injured or killed while trying to assist at an accident scene. Not long ago in another state an amateur was electrocuted while attempting to gain access to victims in a car crash when he came in contact with the power lines that had been downed during the accident.

If you find yourself the first to arrive following any type of accident, **REMAIN CALM!!!** Attempt to evaluate what has occurred, but do it safely. Look and listen whenever approaching ANY accident site. Be mindful of gasoline and diesel spills, power lines, broken gas mains etc. How many times have you seen someone walk up to a wreck with a cigarette in their mouths or a flare in their hands?!!! Be mindful of hazardous materials as well. Some chemicals need only to be inhaled in minute quantity to KILL. That first breath could be your last!!! Also avoid moving victims unless they are in obvious peril (i.e. the car is burning and you have no way to put it out.) Injuries can be compounded by moving injured persons without proper means of first stabilizing their injuries.

Once you have some idea of what to report, call 911. If you have no cell phone or as is often the case, are in areas where they have 'NO SERVICE', try using your radio to make an autopatch. If the repeater is occupied, wait for termination of the current transmission then come on promptly with the words, "(Give Your Callsign) FOR EMERGENCY PHONE PATCH." Normally one of the parties will indicate they are standing-by for you. If you don't have phone patch capability, ask for a station that can access 9-1-1 for you. It is best that you talk directly with the emergency service operator rather than relaying through a third person. Give your CALL SIGN followed by the words "EMERGENCY PHONE PATCH."

Some repeaters will allow you to dial 9-1-1 as you would any other number. However, many repeaters provide a speed dialing function.

If for any reason you are unable to get through via the phone patch, seek assistance from a base station with telephone access. Ask them to call 9-1-1 and relay the information. Don't talk until the emergency operator answers. When the operator responds, identify yourself as an amateur radio operator calling from your portable or car radio. Pause for a few seconds. If the operator seems unfamiliar with such calls advise them that only one of you can talk at a time. Make your transmissions brief. Most operators will be aware of this constraint. Briefly describe the situation (including any known injuries) as well as the precise location. You will be connected with the appropriate agency based on the information you give. Follow this procedure even though you may be certain which agency will handle the incident. When you are connected to the appropriate emergency agency, identify yourself again and briefly and calmly describe the situation, location, and other important information.

Give the **PRECISE LOCATION**: For example: "1 block west of I-75 on Highway 42." Or, "2 miles east of Brandenburg on Hwy 448." Give the location first in case communications should be disrupted.

Give **ESSENTIAL DETAILS**. Don't tell the operator how to handle the situation. Dispatchers are trained to provide the correct response and they have the necessary knowledge of available resources.

If asked for **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION** (e.g., more detailed description, your name, telephone number, etc.) provide it to the best of your ability even if you don't understand the necessity for it. It may be required to determine the optimum response or even to provide assurance that the call is "genuine."

Then, if asked to remain at the scene, do so and continue to observe caution. I once arrived at a scene only to find an untrained volunteer deputy sheriff setting not 10 feet from a spill of blasting agent casually smoking a cigarette as he waited for other response personnel!!!

You may find yourself the first to arrive at the scene of an accident involving hazardous materials or you may be called in as a part of an ARES/RACES operation during evacuation and or sheltering from such an incident. There are some important things to remember about hazardous materials incidents. During such events people are frequently injured due to lack of knowledge or respect for what is involved. Just because you do not know the dangers does not mean that it cannot injure or kill you before you can escape.

Hazardous materials can be found in factories, commercial outlets, homes, schools, parks, farms, or anywhere you find people. They regularly pass up and down our streets and highways on a daily basis without incident. How do we know what a chemical is and the dangers it may or may not pose to the average first responder to a spill or leaking container at an accident site?

The U.S. Department of Transportation defines hazardous materials and publishes an emergency response guidebook. The newest is the North American Emergency Response Guidebook (NAERG) 2000 edition, just released this year. It lists chemicals by name and UN identification number and refers you to a series of orange-bordered "guides" which are numbered and has information regarding health risks, fire and safety hazards associated with each chemical. This book will provide enough information to allow a "first-on-the-scene" responder to make a rapid judgment of a safe distance to maintain and give immediate action steps to insure that the situation is not further complicated until more technical assistance can be obtained.

How do you know what to look up in this book for a certain chemical on board an eighteen-wheeler or rail car involved in an accident? Vehicles carrying certain amounts of hazardous materials are required to be "placarded" (marked) by the U.S. Department of Transportation. These placards give basic information about the materials involved and their hazards. Placards are diamond-shaped, with words such as "corrosive", "flammable", "flammable gas", "poison", etc. Usually you will find a placard with a four digit number, such as 1049, 1205, 1993, etc. This is the United Nations North America (UN/NA) number. Again, the NAERG lists chemicals by these numbers and by their names. This information should be relayed to the emergency responders as soon as possible so that a response can be planned.

If you are the first person on the scene, keep your distance and call 9-1-1, WAIT for competent personnel (police, fire, or others) to arrive and identify the materials involved. Remember, you are not equipped or trained to deal with a HAZMAT incident yourself. Even those trained to the "HAZMAT Technician" level do not carry protective gear and tools in their private vehicles for response. Such equipment is far too expensive to buy and even if you had one set of everything you'd need, laws and regulations are in place to prevent one person from working solo. Yes, it may be hard to see someone lying in a pool of an unknown chemical at an accident. But, YOU can be lying there with them if you try to remove them and overcome yourself while attempting an ill-advised rescue. Unpleasant as it may be, RESIST THE URGE TO RUSH IN!!!

Safety Tips for Hazardous Materials Incidents:

- Stay upwind at least a quarter to a half-mile away
- Consider any unknown materials to be hazardous until identified as otherwise by a competent person. Be PATIENT, don't become a patient.
- Fumes can damage radio equipment. Stay away from fumes. If you smell an odor of any sort assume you are TO CLOSE!!! Back off immediately.

- Flammable vapors could be ignited by operation of your equipment - stay clear of Hot/Warm Zone (up-close) operations. Unless you are a trained part of a HAZMAT team. **DO NOT APPROACH ANY MARKED AREA. REMAIN IN THE COLD ZONE.**
- **REMEMBER HAZARDOUS MATERIALS can KILL** or do permanent damage to your body. There is no such thing as a second chance in a HAZMAT situation.

"NAERG Handbook" classes and "Awareness Level" Hazardous Materials classes are offered frequently throughout the state. If possible, plan to attend one when it is offered. It could be the best 4 hours you've spent in a while. If you think you're in good shape because you have attend an NAERG class in the past, think again... The 2000 edition has new information on distances and "intermodal shipments" that was not discussed in earlier classes. Sign-up when you get the opportunity, you'll see what I mean.

We have discussed the fact that you must evaluate what has occurred, **BUT DO IT SAFELY.** An amateur needs to look and listen whenever approaching ANY accident site. Being mindful of **FLAMMABLE**, gasoline and diesel spills, downed, **LIVE** power lines, broken, **LEAKING** gas mains, collapsing structures etc. can save your life as well as those involved in the accident. **YOU** are the **MOST IMPORTANT PERSON** on that scene. **YOU** must remain safe to collect and pass on the initial information to all future responders. You owe yourself and **YOUR FAMILY** the duty to keep yourself safe. If you become injured or killed by making an error in judgment at a HAZMAT or other accident scene, then **YOU** will no longer be able to earn a living for 'X' amount of time or even be there when they need you.

Let those who are trained in dealing with the situation handle the main response. You did your job if you successfully communicated the initial assessment and necessary information for the response to be made. If you are interested in learning more about either the medical (first-aid, 1st Responder, EMT, Paramedic etc) side of the response, training is out there to help you. If you are interested in the physical end of the response (police, fire, HAZMAT technician etc) again training is out there. Never attempt to take actions you have not been specifically trained for. This has gotten more people involved in legal actions and either injured or killed than all other factors combined.

One other thing... I attended a class on medical helicopters and working with them in responses. Again, the pilot, who was teaching the course, advised those who were untrained to stay at a safe distance and resist the urge to rush up to a running helicopter just to "sneak-a-peek". If you do need to approach, do so from the front of the helicopter **ONLY**. Never approach from the side or rear. Also, watch the pilot. If he waves you off, **OBEY HIM or HER!!!** He told of a fellow pilot who recently had to physically **TACKLE** a man who was blundering toward the spinning tail-rotor even though the pilot had waved violently and screamed at the man to stay back. This likely saved the hapless fool from being decapitated or mutilated by the almost invisible, rapidly rotating blades! **BE CAREFUL!!!**

Remember that as amateurs, we are **COMMUNICATORS**. If you **ARE** a trained, fireman, police officer, EMT etc. fine. If not, either become trained or stick to the amateur's primary duty... **Look, Listen and COMMUNICATE!**