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NEWS

Amateur radio operators essential during emergencies



Dennis Eilers, center, and Randy Gray, right, chat with Sun City Center Amateur Radio Club president Albert Clark in their club room on Monday.

By [Times Staff Writer](#)

Published Aug. 9, 2013

SUN CITY CENTER — On weekday mornings, in the corner of a metal maintenance building, a group of white-haired men connect with the world.

Bent over multiknobbed machines with headsets covering their ears, they communicate with people in Texas, Detroit and, once, as far away as South Africa. Conversations circle around the weather, mostly.

There was a time when fiddling with a ham radio wasn't just a hobby. Before the advent of email and cellphones, radio operators were a lifeline to other communities. In times of disaster, operators became even more important — organizing supply drops and reconnecting loved ones.

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With most of the world now just a text message or phone call away, it's easy to assume radio operators have become obsolete.

"If ever there's a hurricane, the only thing you have left is us," said Albert Clark, the president of the Sun City Center Amateur Radio Club.

Even with today's technology, communication systems may go down, Clark said. That could mean no phone calls, no Internet, and at times, usually reliable text messaging may fail.

That's when amateur radio operators get to work. It happened during Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, and more recently during the Boston Marathon bombing and in tornado-ravaged Oklahoma.

There are more than 700,000 registered amateur radio operators in the country, Clark said. The Sun City Center group is one of a dozen groups across the Tampa Bay area.

"Their basic role is to provide backup communications for the city and county," said Bill Williams, assistant emergency coordinator for Hillsborough County Amateur Radio Emergency Services/Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service.

"In any emergency, cellphones get jammed, everybody is on them and they aren't any good to anybody," Williams said. "If the phones go out, places like shelters wouldn't have any communication to anywhere, so we would provide communication to shelters, public works, public utilities and more."

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Area groups run disaster drills multiple times a year.

In June, the Tampa Amateur Radio Club set up operations in a tent and ran for 24 hours on generator power as part of a nationwide "field day" to demonstrate the potential of emergency radio communications.

"We are independent of the Internet," said Warren Elly, a Tampa Amateur Radio Club board member. "We don't depend on the communications infrastructure, we have our own. We use the ionosphere, we transmit through the air."

The Tampa club has years of experience behind it. Now 130 members strong, the group was started by the founders of Tampa, Elly said, including Peter O. Knight. The original members met over a radio repair shop in the 1930s, he said.



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"We are the second oldest club in Florida and have a very close relationship with the Emergency Operations Center and the Tampa Police Department," Elly said.

If a hurricane does strike Hillsborough County, there's space at the Emergency Operations Center for a handful of amateur radio operators, Elly said. They may also be asked to ride along with emergency vehicles and responders to help keep communication lines open.

They also can help affected residents, in disasters both far away and close to home.

During Hurricane Katrina, when most forms of communication were down, members of the Tampa group handled hundreds of "I'm alive" messages streaming out of Mississippi. They sent a team to shelters in the hardest hit areas, and those who stayed in Tampa spent days calling people's families and passing the messages along.

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In Sun City Center, the group's 66 members have bright orange signs to put in their windows in case of an emergency, declaring their house as a place with radio communications. That way, neighbors, many of whom who have family in other states, can let loved ones know they are okay.

Using portable radios and golf carts, the radio operators also play a large role in events held in the retirement community. On July 4, members helped maintain crowd safety during fireworks. They also assist area law enforcement and emergency responders.

"We can operate a long time just on a golf cart battery," said Clark, the Sun City Center Amateur Radio Club president. "If someone keels over or if we have a golf cart accident, we can call an ambulance."

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