

Damage Assessment Exercise - November 28, 2007

Members of the Sarasota County Auxiliary Communications Service (ACS) participated in a "Damage Assessment" exercise on Wednesday, November 28, 2007.

For about 2 years, ACS has been assisting with local Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training, by teaching the communications class (which we developed as part of the local CERT training program). We've also been using that opportunity to promote ham radio, and do some recruiting to get CERT team members licensed, so they have backup communications, should the phones go down. During our presentations, the questions that come up the most, are "who are we going to talk to and what information are we going to give them?"

Over the past several months, ACS has been working with Emergency Management and the County Damage Assessment folks, to develop a plan to get immediate post storm damage report information from the field back to the Damage Assessment folks. This will allow them to make plans and know where to send their people, once the "all clear" is given for them to head out. We thought this would be a good opportunity for CERT and other neighborhood associations with their own neighborhood disaster plan, to provide this information from "ground zero" immediately after a storm. A form was developed for the CERT and neighborhood teams to use, to gather needed information, and then call or radio that information to the the Damage Assessment folks.

We also needed a way to get that information from the field, to the Red Cross (where the Damage Assessment folks would be working from), and to the EOC. We initially thought about using packet to do that, but then started looking at Winlink, which allows you to send e-mail (with attachments) via packet to other Winlink users or to a regular e-mail address. This system could be used to send the reports between the EOC and Red Cross ... or better yet, directly via e-mail to the folks who need the information. So, we set up a local Telpac (Internet to packet) gateway at the EOC and several ACS members started playing with the Airmail program ... which is the program used to compose, send, and receive messages (directly from the Internet or via RF and then to the Internet).

We were then invited to participate in a Damage Assessment exercise, and decided to test our Winlink capabilities. As part of the drill, we wanted to try and collect damage assessment reports from teams in the field, radio those into the "Command Post", and send those out via packet, and have the County folks receive them as an e-mail.

Teams doing the actual Damage Assessment, included the City of North Port, North Port CERT, Hardee County Code Enforcement, Hardee County Community Housing, Manatee County Red Cross, Sarasota County CERT, Sarasota County Emergency Management Neighborhood Disaster Plan group, and the Southwest Florida Red Cross (Sarasota).

We had three folks positioned around the Damage Assessment site (an old and abandoned Trailer park) to collect the forms from the teams, compile the numbers, and report those to the Command Post. We set up two of our "jump kits" at our Command Post. One station would collect the reports on voice, the other station would be connected to a laptop and TNC to compose and send the reports out via packet.

Once we started to receive reports, we took the information from the forms and used a word document "template" similar to the form, to fill in the reported information. We then sent a completed form via 2 Meter packet with Airmail. One of the recipients of the e-mail was set up with his wireless Internet on the next table, while another was at the EOC. We heard a "got it" when he received the reports on the next table and got an acknowledgment e-mail from the EOC as well.

All seemed to be working well ... and then things started to happen! We began having trouble connecting to the Winlink servers ... either the Internet from the EOC was acting up ... or the servers themselves were! We started trying to troubleshoot, but were limited in what we could do from the field. I called up to the EOC to have them reboot the Telpac program, but that didn't fix the problem. Not being able to reliably send e-mail anymore, we decided to go to "Plan B". Since we also had Airmail up and running at the Red Cross, we decided to connect directly to the Red Cross and send reports there directly via RF. Since that was where the Damage Assessment team would be stationed, they would still be able to get the reports ... even if the Internet wasn't working - as happened during our exercise!

After the drill, we found out that both the County Internet AND the Winlink servers were acting up at generally the same time ... right in the middle of our exercise! But ... we also proved, even with the problems ... we were still able to move traffic from a disaster site.

This was our first attempt at using Winlink for any type of emergency work, and we were very pleased with how things worked. We knew going in, relying entirely on the Internet is a bad idea, but that's as far as we've been able to go. Even before the exercise, we were planning on setting up backup RF links as well as setting up several more Telpac gateways in the County to be able to cover more area and to serve as backups, should one go down. Finding locations and equipment to do this, will be one of our future projects.

ACS members participating in this exercise, include:

Bob, KA4BOB
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Ron, WD4AHZ

By the way ... this Damage Assessment plan being developed in Sarasota, is one of the first in the state. Several other Florida Counties have already contacted Sarasota County to use this as a model for their Damage Assessment plans. Using Amateur Radio and CERT as part of this plan, emphasizes the importance of these resources. We're hoping adoption of this plan in other areas, may help open doors for local ARES, RACES, or ACS groups who may not have the same working relationship with their County, that we have here.

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