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Ham Radio During the Northeast Blackout of 2003

On August 14, 2003, a series of events in northern Ohio led to a power blackout that left most of New York, Michigan and Ohio in the dark. Almost every aspect of modern life was immediately disrupted, including transportation, sanitation and, most importantly, communication. Without power, the regular broadcast communication methods failed and nobody was able to send or receive reliable information about the situation. Luckily, amateur radio operators were able to assist in crucial duties, such as emergency response and message relaying.

When the power went out, amateur radio operators who had been trained to operate in emergencies immediately started using their stations. Members of ARES (The Amateur Radio Emergency Service) and RACES (The Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service), two groups dedicated to organizing ham radio operators during emergencies, had backup power generators or batteries connected to their stations so that they could operate in a situation without power. While several repeaters failed, most remained online with their backup power sources, facilitating communication throughout the area. The amateur operators were able to assist many of the Red Cross stations that were set up across the region for several hours until telephone communications were restored. One hospital in New York even used amateur radio operators to keep in contact with its fleet of ambulances. Hams accompanied the New York Fire Department on several calls to assist with their communications. Also, many concerned citizens passed messages through the amateur service to loved ones outside the city, assuring them that they were safe.

Both nets that were planned for emergencies and impromptu ones played a big role in communications during the blackout. Large nets were established on the repeaters that were still

running on backup power while smaller ones popped up on many of the available frequencies. Hams trained through ARES or RACES acted as net control throughout the disaster. Nets relayed crucial traffic for the Red Cross and other emergency management agencies until power was restored the next morning. Some hams worked all night, providing information for blacked out areas.

In addition to providing communications during the emergency, amateur radio operators collaborated to improve transportation and other problems. Since the power was out, many stores that relied on electricity to process payments or to serve their customers, like gas stations with electrically controlled pumps, had to shut down. Hams were able to relay messages about where supplies were still available to areas that needed them. Gasoline, for example, was in short supply in most areas, so amateur radio operators were able to direct emergency response vehicles and citizens to gas stations that were still open.

Nearby ARES groups were put in a standby condition in case the blackout spread and many amateur operators not directly affected by the blackout were able to relay messages to the rest of the country. Stations as far away as Nebraska were assisting with message relaying, even though the closest blacked out areas were in Ohio. These hams that still had power were just as important to the emergency management efforts as the operators in the blacked out areas.

The blackout happened almost two years after the September 11 attacks, so the amateur radio community had been through a similar disaster recently. After September 11, the Department of Homeland Security awarded the ARRL (Amateur Radio Relay League) a large grant to improve the response of the amateur radio community to a disaster. The extra training was evident in the smooth operations of the amateur community during the blackout. Hams were able to respond faster than the government in some areas and provided the only lines of communication to these

areas.

Organizers estimated that around 100 amateur radio operators in New York City assisted with communications during the blackout. The region has a population well over 10 million, so the high level of preparedness demonstrated by the hams was necessary to keep communications as smooth as they were.

There is still room for more improvement, however. The ARRL offers emergency communications classes across the country that hams can take. Every licensed radio operator should have some emergency training because their services would be invaluable during an actual emergency. Regular training and drills are held locally on ARES and RACES nets to ensure that interested operators know what to do during an actual emergency. Hams should also consider hooking up their stations to a backup source of power in case line power is lost, like during the northeast blackout.

During the blackout, amateur radio operators once again demonstrated their unique ability to provide communications during an emergency where the usual means are cut off. Emergency preparedness organizations such as ARES and RACES performed their assigned duties extremely well and assisted all types of emergency management teams, from the local governments to hospital, fire, and police services and the Red Cross.

Works Cited

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