

Why Ham Radio Needs One-Day Ham Classes

BY DAVID COURSEY, N5FDL¹
n5fdl@arrl.net

Sometimes it helps the radio amateur to have a tough skin, at least when dealing with his “brother” hams. I know this because lately I’ve raised the ire of some older hams that seem to believe the only “door” to amateur radio should be the one that was open to them.

To these people, my “crime” is helping to organize a program that opens a new door to amateur radio. Some people don’t like that. Specifically, I have been accused of throwing away “quality” to get “quantity” because I do events that help people get an amateur radio license or upgrade in just one day.

Guilty as charged.

My “one-day wonders” know nothing about amateur radio when they arrive and little more when they depart, 90 percent of them soon to receive a freshly printed Technician Class Amateur Radio License in the mail.

There are some good hams that see my “[HamCram](#)” events as further evidence of the moral decay that has swept the planet, along with the end of Morse code testing and the closing of the old Heathkit stores.

For many people, that was “their” amateur radio: Morse Code testing at an FCC office in a faraway city, building their first rig, figuring out antenna lengths, getting them wrong, doing it again. Maybe falling off the roof or out of a tree, ceramic insulator in hand. Solder burns and crystals. The Novice license.

There’s nothing wrong with that vision of amateur radio, except that it doesn’t exist anymore. And the types of people who used to be attracted to Amateur Radio, the geeks of their era, now gravitate to other interests. If the people who despise my HamCrams so much were today’s 16-year-olds I am pretty sure of one thing: They wouldn’t become ham radio operators. They’d do something else.

Times have changed. Some things haven’t.

According to [ARRL Web](#):

Although the main purpose of Amateur Radio is fun, it is called the "Amateur Radio Service" because it also has a serious face. The FCC created this "Service" to fill the need for a pool of experts who could provide backup emergency communications. In addition, the FCC acknowledged the ability of the hobby to

¹ The author is Emergency Coordinator for San Joaquin County (CA) ARES and an Extra class licensee who was first licensed in 1983. He is a life member of the ARRL.

advance the communication and technical skills of radio, and to enhance international goodwill.

I think it's fair to say that over the past few decades amateur radio hasn't done much to dramatically "advance the communication and technical skills of radio" the way hams once did. International goodwill is important—very important today—and we probably contribute, though the Internet is what's lately made the world a smaller place.

What that leaves us with—and this isn't likely to be taken away from us anytime soon—is "the need for a pool of experts who could provide backup emergency communications." The Amateur Radio slogan, "When all else fails," really is as true today as ever and we get many chances to prove it.

We need experts. But what kind?

But when we say "experts" what do we mean? True, you used to have to be a radio expert to provide effective emergency communications. And while technical proficiency remains important, other skills matter, too. Being a tornado spotter, in my experience, requires more meteorological skill than radio knowledge. Search-and-rescue teams find amateur radio very helpful, but search techniques and rope skills matter at least as much. Hospitals need backup communications, but knowing something about how an emergency department functions can help a lot, too.

Hams can and have learned about all these non-radio tasks, though often at a very superficial level. Just enough to do what the mission requires.

Likewise, weather observers, SAR volunteers, EMTs, and nurses have learned how to make a ham radio work. Often at a very superficial level, but it gets the mission accomplished.

Is one group—the "hams first"—better than the "emergency workers first" group? I don't really think so, especially when ham radio operators of any kind are in short supply.

Here in San Joaquin County

I live in a county of almost 700,000 residents. The number of hams signed up for its RACES program? Less than four dozen. Their mean age? Older than me – and I'm pushing 50!

How much, realistically, will these hams be able to accomplish in an emergency? Doubtless more than anyone might expect—hams always step up—but likely still less than the need that will exist. Need always seems to exceed supply.

Staffing our county's seven hospitals with just one ham on 12-hour shifts requires a third of the total RACES resource, presuming all its members would actually be

available when needed. Two hams per hospital, per shift? Hope there isn't anyplace else—shelters, perhaps?—that needs communications support.

As the ARES Emergency Coordinator for my county, this lack of volunteers frightens me. We've tried, but found it difficult to get more current/inactive hams involved in emergency work and nobody seems very interested in teaching the traditional multi-hour, multi-week ham class. And if they were, who'd actually sign up to take it?

Yet the potential need for emergency communications only increases. What does ham radio do?

Greater need. Fewer resources.

My response is simple: If we can't get more hams interested in emergency communications, let's get more non-hams involved. Let's find people who are already expert in one or more emergency skills and for whom amateur radio would be another useful tool.

I call this the "utility model" of ham radio, in which people get licenses not because they are interested in ham radio, per se, but because getting a license is useful in another context. Think of all the sailors and missionaries who, over the decades, have gotten licenses mostly because being a ham made it easier for them to do something else.

I use one-day HamCrams as a way to give people who already have useful emergency skills a ham radio license that will help them do something else that's important and requires communications.

In this way, I've helped firefighters, police officers, emergency managers, nurses, and the volunteers who work with them get their ham licenses. Some of these people are senior officials whose support for amateur radio can make good things happen for us. Likewise, their lack of support can hurt us. I've found that it's harder for people who've become "one of us" not to help.

I also use HamCrams to help current Hams get their friends and family members licensed. With that comes a responsibility for the old ham to teach the new hams what they need to know. HamCrams also help current Hams upgrade from Technician to General.

HamCrams aren't for everyone.

What I don't do—and don't recommend to anyone—is promote one-day events as a means for the general public to get a ham license. Those people are well-served by a traditional class, but if an individual ham or club wants to HamCram people first and then provide mentoring once the license arrives, that might be even better since the new ham could immediately get on the air and start learning-by-doing.

Will they make stupid mistakes? Of course, but that should only provide an opportunity for us to do what hams have already been pretty good at: Welcoming newcomers to our hobby.

Like many hams, I wish things could be like they used to be. I don't like many of the changes that I've seen. I liked it when the swap meets I attended were more radios than computers and, yes, took place in the parking lot of a Heathkit store.

I am sorry that more kids aren't interested in becoming hams, but if I were 12-years-old once again, it's hard to imagine I'd want a ticket or could even get a reasonable antenna in the air if I had one. Change happens and sometimes it sucks.

Keeping Ham Radio's promise.

Still, I've promised to do the best I can to help Amateur Radio keep its commitment to meet our country's emergency communications needs. Since I can't do it with traditional hams, I do it by creating non-traditional ones.

Right now, I am working with our seven hospitals to get maybe 50 nurses, techs, and other staff members licensed so they can operate during quarterly communications drills. During a real emergency, we'll use a mix of these folks, "real" hams, and, yes, unlicensed (but trained) operators to meet the communications requirement for reporting how many and what types of hospital beds are available at each facility.

These people will represent a larger potential resource than the total number of hams in our county's RACES organization. That ought to allow us to do more with the current RACES members than is possible today.

We're also helping Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) members get their licenses, giving their leaders a more effective tool than the FRS radios they now use. And, yes, we'll do what we can to get at least a few of these new hams interested in becoming "real" hams.

It's your right to criticize.

As for those who choose to criticize, that's your right and I understand and sympathize with your concerns about my one-day classes. I'll even admit you're right, as far as your argument goes. I am substituting "quality"—at least in the Hertzian wave model sense—for quantity. Of course, if you think emergency training matters as much as radio training, it's a toss-up.

For my critics, this question: When the disaster occurs and you or a family member is injured, do you want to be rushed to a hospital that doesn't have a bed for you? That's what my new hams are supposed to keep from happening—a situation that can lead to unnecessary death.

Does it really matter that the hams who prevent this from happening got their licenses in a manner that you don't find personally acceptable?

When the emergency is over, go ask the survivors.