

Ham radio operators and Boy Scouts test Newport back-up communications system



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Newport County Radio Club members Rob White and his son, RJ, 16, an Eagle Scout, staffed what was Relay Station #1 in the parking lot of the Met School next to the Florence Gray Center on Girard Avenue Saturday. They are holding portable antennas and a clip board to record all the contacts they received during a two hour drill. From all reports, the first Newport area communications resiliency test went very well. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

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Boy Scouts assist in city's first effort to integrate hand-held walkie-talkie radio system into emergency communications network to help people stay in touch in the event of a disaster.

NEWPORT – Mary Nebiola and Andrea Wilson sat at a ham radio in the city's main fire station Saturday afternoon taking messages from five other ham radio operators set up at relay stations around the city.

The relay operators in turn were taking messages from about 20 Troop 3 Boy Scouts and family members who had hand-held Family Radio Service (FRS) radios. FRS is an improved walkie-talkie radio system, but the range is limited for each device.

“This is the first time we have tried to get the FRS radios linked into the larger emergency communications infrastructure,” said Jim Sammons, vice president of the Newport County Radio Club that coordinated the test with the Fire Department.

The purpose of Saturday’s exercise was to find the weak points to determine where more relay stations are needed in the case of a catastrophic event, Newport Fire Chief Brian Dugan said.

“If a major hurricane knocked out communications, there would be no way for people to reach us,” Dugan said. “What we are trying to do, is make preparations for a worst case scenario.”

“We could set up relay points with ham radio operators around the city, have people call the relay points, the relay point can then contact us and we can get to the house.”

The ham operators who were equipped with both their VHF radio and an FRS radio were set up at the East Bay MET School, William Street, Braga Park, Rogers High School and Ocean Drive.

The Boy Scouts and family members with FRS radios then walked, biked and drove to various points around the city and contacted a relay station.

For example, Beth Cullen, mother of senior patrol leader Mac Cullen of Troop 3, went to places like the Mainstay Inn, Wal-Mart parking lot, Pell Elementary School, Shell station at the Rotary, Coggeshall School, and Community College of Rhode Island.

She checked in with ham operators Rob White and his son, R.J. White, who were set at the Met School to test the signal strength of each call that came in.

This round of testing was duplicated by the scouts at many other locations.

“It was great,” Nebiola said afterwards. “Any test like this is successful. We found out the locations where ham radio operators can reach people with FRS walkie-talkies. It’s an alternative means of communication.”

“It was really beneficial,” Wilson said. “We talked about this in December and then the gas outage came in January.”

Navy veteran Wilson is a contractor at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center and a volunteer coordinator for Team Rubicon, a veterans disaster response organization that has more than 100,000 members. “I coordinate with Newport and work with the fire department to build up a relationship,” she said.

Steven LaCroix, the fire department’s superintendent for the fire alarm division, was on hand to monitor the testing. He explained the sophisticated radio communications system and back-up radio emergency system that fire departments and emergency management agencies around the state have.

“We also have the staff, training and drills to back that up,” LaCroix said. “But what happens at the street level?”

“Emergency communications is well organized at the higher levels, but weak at the house-to-house level,” agreed Sammons.

An FRS radio can be purchased at Amazon, Walmart or other outlets for around \$15. They have a limited range that varies depending on factors like tall buildings in the way.

People use them when hiking or out on boats or for other activities where family members may become separated but are not far away.

“The drill was very successful from the tech side,” said Mike Cullen, a member of the Newport County Club and the club’s resiliency project leader who has long advocated setting up a network like this.

“Most of Newport appears covered,” Cullen said. “Thames Street south of Memorial Boulevard needs some additional testing.”

The radio club now will pull data together and make equipment and process recommendations to the fire department, Cullen said.

The Newport County Radio Club, founded in 1947, is looking for new members, Nebiola said. They meet at the KVH Industries building at 75 Enterprise Drive, Middletown, on the second Monday of every month at 7 p.m.

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