

Worst to First: How Hall County Amateurs Turned EmComm Around

The director of the Emergency Management Association of Georgia gave Michael Crowder, AA4BA, a daunting task when he took the reins of Hall County Amateur Radio Emergency Service®: You have 90 days to turn your group around or we'll dissolve our Memorandum of Understanding.

With just 14 members and things "in a bit of a disarray," Crowder knew Hall County ARES®, based in Gainesville, needed to replace a lack of cohesiveness with a sense of direction and a forward-looking plan that would grow membership on a fundamental EmComm foundation . . . and in a hurry.

"A few months later," Crowder said, the EMAG director "nominated us for the (2009) Jack Hobbs Award for Excellence in Amateur Radio," an honor Hall County ARES® would go on to win, with Emergency Coordinator Crowder and Assistant Emergency Coordinator Marcus L. Shockley, KJ4EZQ, accepting the honor on behalf of the team at an EMAG awards banquet.

"I went from no active AECs (Assistant Emergency Coordinators) to five who work hard," Crowder said. "We went from about ten attendees at a monthly meeting to averaging more than 20 per meeting, and growing every month."

This "worst to first" scenario is not the stuff of fairy tales, though. Crowder's Biannual Report

released earlier this year, reflecting on 2009, captures some of the ingredients for Hall County ARES's® remarkable turn-around and touches on goals as the organization moves ahead.

If your EmComm group is looking for a blueprint for success, consider this:

Recruitment

"Last year we saw a tremendous increase in membership," Crowder said. "A better than three-times increase in manpower is significant, but still not enough according to our Tables of Organization and Equipment. We have a goal to reach a total of 100 operators by the end of the calendar year." They will come from the "existing ham community," Crowder said, "and by licensing new hams that we can encourage to become part of the EmComm community."

There are more than 600 licensed radio amateurs in Hall County, "and we are working on contacting each of them either through letters, e-mail or phone calls."

Hall County ARES® also sponsors "ham cram" classes, in which prospective radio amateurs and those wanting to upgrade undergo a quick course and obtain their license in short order. In 2009, the team brought in 38 new hams and upgraded six more to General Class.

"We also participated in special VE (Volunteer Examiner) sessions during which we licensed 22 Technicians and upgraded four additional Generals," Crowder said. "Sixty new Techs and 10 Generals are a significant addition to the ham community."

Several more "ham crams" were planned by the team in 2010.

"We have recruited and licensed a local meteorologist (Brian Willard, K4BCW) to run our SKY-WARN (as AEC), the editor of the local newspaper has joined our group, and we are making inroads to all sorts of other organizations with which to network our group."

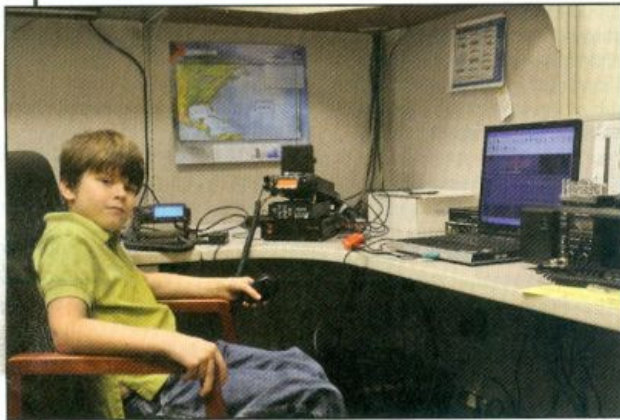
"Many of our members are newly licensed hams who have skills that apply to our mission. Tom Keith, KJ4FQT (AEC/Personnel), is a retired Army Sergeant Major who brings great motivation and organizational skills to the group. Marc Shockley, KJ4EZQ (AEC/Digital Modes and Equipment), is an electronics wizard.

"We just added an electronics engineer to our roster as well. We are looking outside of the box, finding folks with skills we need even if they are not hams. When we find these people, we license and train them for radio, and then integrate their life skills into our program," Crowder said.

Cooperation

"Communications is as much a relationship business as it is technical," Crowder said. In his Biannual Report, he noted that Mutual Aid Agreements

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Hall County ARES's® youngest member, Marcus R. Shockley, KJ4PCR, operates the WE4EOC Hall County EOC station. He has checked into the state ARES net "on multiple occasions, functioned as alternate net control on VHF nets, and helped deploy our mobile station," said EC Michael Crowder, AA4BA. "He can outwork most full-size hams, is 10 years old, and was recently licensed in a 'ham cram'-style licensing class taught by Hall County ARES." (Courtesy of KJ4EZQ)

Update: Depiction Introduces APRS Live Add-On

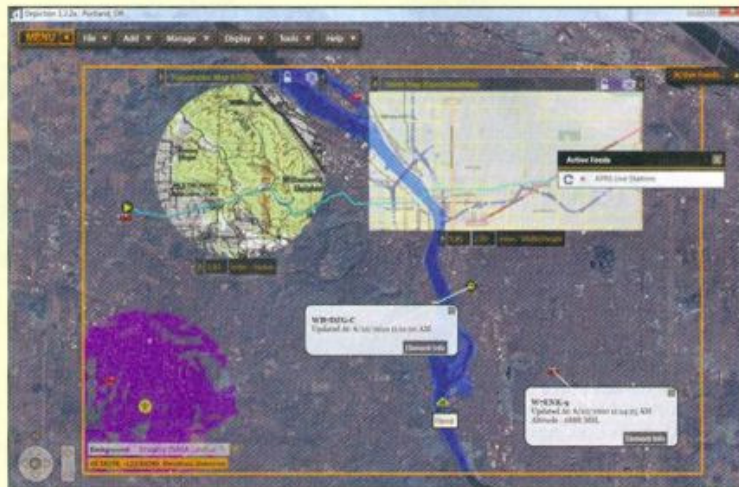
Product development officials from Depiction, Inc., say radio amateurs "can now achieve two-way, real-time *visual* communications from within a dynamic simulation scenario using the new APRS Live add-on for Depiction mapping and simulation software."

Featured in *CQ's* January 2010 "Public Service" column, "Depiction is a powerful tool for the integration of multiple types of data, including images, spreadsheets, and GIS files," noted the add-on's creator, Brian Smucker, KF7GDY. Depiction has been used extensively in emergency communications for mapping, information recall, and many other functions.

"The ability to receive Automatic Packet Reporting System (APRS) data in real time via radio, and to visualize it using the advanced tools that Depiction provides, is a powerful new capability. Now hams can do things that used to only be available to big corporations and large government agencies."

The APRS Live software, produced by Smucker Data Solutions, "takes data received by a radio using APRS and visualizes it within any Depiction scenario the radio operator has created. Scenarios such as search and rescue, emergency response, marathons, and others can be depicted quickly and easily on an ordinary laptop," officials said.

"APRS is a digital communications protocol for exchanging data between multiple radio stations across a region, including position information, telemetry, weather data, short text messages, and more," Depiction said, and "is used by amateur



Two-way, real-time visual communications "from within a dynamic simulation scenario" is now possible during EmComm incidents using the new APRS Live add-on for mapping and simulation software by Depiction, Inc.

radio users for position tracking, gaining situational awareness during emergencies, coordinating large-scale public service events such as bike races and marathons, and more."

The add-on "allows APRS packet information received by a radio and transmitted to a computer using a terminal node controller (TNC) connected to a serial port to be displayed within Depiction as simulation elements. For example, search-and-rescue workers can be tracked alongside a simu-

lation of an 8-foot storm surge, or bike race volunteers can be tracked along race maps. APRS Live also enables the sending of short APRS messages from within Depiction.

Depiction and APRS Live both function without internet access, but if the internet is available, the add-on can bring in APRS data from any of the many public APRS-IS servers across the world."

For more information, go to <www.depiction.com>.

had been negotiated and signed with 12 other ARES® groups in the northeast Georgia region.

"We are actively sharing information and training with these groups. In the event of a disaster that activates us, these relationships and mutual training should help all of our groups perform to the highest standards. These agreements give us ready access to several hundred trained communicators."

In addition to other ARES® groups, Hall County has reached out to the Civil Air Patrol (CAP), Military Auxiliary Radio System (MARS) and others.

Inter- and Intra-Group Communication

Crowder cites as a "major achievement" the launching of Hall County ARES's® website: <<http://www.HallCountyARES.com>>.

"In just a few months (it) has created quite a stir in the regional EmComm community," he said. "Our site has more



A wide range of HF, VHF, and UHF frequencies communications modes can be utilized from Hall County ARES® mobile communications truck.

online tools and information than any other ARES® website in the state. We are creating a clearinghouse of information for EmComm operators throughout the region." Bob Drumm, N4YT, AEC/Training and Web, has oversight of Hall County ARES's® online component. Bill Sant, KJ4FVT, is AEC/Reports.

On-the-Job Training and Success

In 2009, Hall County ARES® took part in three field exercises. "Two were associated with the quarterly state-mandated tornado drills," Crowder said, "and the other was our participation in the American Radio Relay League Georgia Simulated Emergency Test (SET)."

"Hall County ARES has the highest recorded score in the state, southeast and the nation," Crowder wrote to the membership after 2009 SET scores were announced. "We want to thank all of our operators that helped . . . and encourage everyone to be ready to help with the 2010 SET."

The team had scored 861 points. "To put this in perspective," Crowder said, "a score of less than 400 points won the state and the southeast regional in 2008."

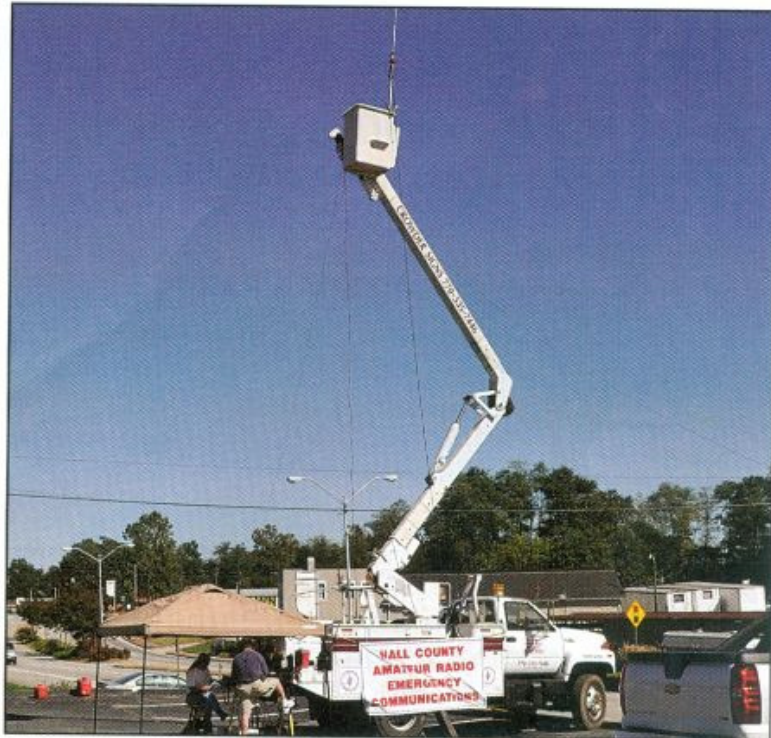
He added that the team has been "running a weekly digital net in which we practice (techniques) with our operators and other ARES® groups from around the state . . . the software and instructions on operating with this exciting mode are available on our website."

Technological Advancements

"Last year, Hall County ARES® adopted the use of the Narrow Beam Emergency Messaging System (NBEMS) for the transfer of digital data over the radio," Crowder said. "This system works with HF, VHF, and UHF systems. We can even send data through FM repeaters. We are now considered one of the leading ARES® groups in the state for digital communications. Due to our work with the software developers for this technology, we now have a software application for the easy transmission of ICS-213 (general message) forms from desktop to desktop through our radios."

Crowder said the group has "really pushed NBEMS and digital modes in the region-and a gazillion other projects."

"With the support of the Hall County EMA," Crowder said, "we added both D-STAR and digital modes capabilities" to the station at the region's Emergency Services Complex. "This gives us full HF, VHF, UHF analog, along with VHF and UHF digital capabilities. We have initiated specialized new training for our



For EmComm deployment, Hall County ARES® calls to duty its mobile communications unit, built around a 43-foot High Ranger bucket truck equipped with all-band/all-mode capabilities.

Emergency Operations Team. This will ensure a standard of excellence in the event we are called to support the EMA during a communications disaster."

Broadening the Footprint

Crowder noted that Hall County ARES® has established an Official Emergency Station affiliated with the ARRL. "This station is an all-band/all-mode location with a 60-foot tower, battery backup and generators. We have also configured an emergency communications vehicle, based on a 43-foot High Ranger bucket truck, that has all-band/all-mode capabilities," with plans to obtain and equip a second mobile unit.

"In another long-fought battle," Crowder said, "we have received a \$10,000 grant from the state to add amateur radio to the Northeast Georgia Medical Center, and the hospital is planning on matching that grant to ensure we have the proper equipment to serve their mission properly."

Hall County ARES® has acquired Memoranda of Understanding for five additional repeaters. "We now have priority emergency use of machines from Braselton to Wauka Mountain and over toward Baldwin," Crowder said. "We

also have received coordination for three additional repeaters from SERA (SouthEast Repeater Association) and are on the cusp of getting our funding to install these machines."

Looking Back and Ahead

In closing his Biannual Report, Crowder told membership that "as Emergency Coordinator, I am proud of our progress in 2009 and look forward to an even better 2010. I hope that everyone in the amateur radio community will join us to see our local community served with the best communications capabilities possible."

EmComm in Action: Send Us Your Stories

The "worst-to-first" saga of Hall County (GA) ARES® is a great example of how radio amateurs take decisive action to fulfill our fraternity's obligation as public servants.

Do you know of other organizations or operators who have taken decisive action in the EmComm arena? Please let us know, and we'll feature their stories in an upcoming column. Please drop an e-mail to: <ki6sn@cq-amateur-radio.com>. 73, Richard, KI6SN