Message Handling

Formal Vs Informal Messages

Both formal (written in a specific format, i.e. ARRL) and informal (oral or written, but not in a specific format) messages have their place in emergency communication. In general, informal messages are best used for non-critical and simple messages, or messages that require immediate action, those that are delivered directly from the author to the recipient.

Formal messages are more appropriate when two or more people will handle them before reaching the recipient, or where the contents are critical or contain important details. The most common formal message format is that used by ARRL's NTS.

Informal Oral Messages

Some emergency messages are best sent informally in the interest of saving precious seconds. If you need an ambulance for a severely bleeding victim, you do not have time to compose and send a formal message. The resulting delay could result in the patient's death. Other messages do not require a formal written message because they have little value beyond the moment. Letting the net control station know where you are or when you will arrive need not be formal. The message is going directly to its recipient, is simple and clear, and has little detail. Many of the messages handled on a tactical net fit this description.

Formal Written Message Formats

A standard written message format is used so that everyone knows what to expect. This increases the speed and accuracy with which you can handle messages. The ARRL message form, or "Radiogram," is a standard format used for passing messages on various nets, and is required for all messages sent through the National Traffic System. While this format may not be perfect for all applications, it serves as a baseline that can be readily adapted for use within a specific served agency. Another standard format used in disaster response today is the "ICS-213 General Message" form. Regular practice with creating and sending messages in any standard format is recommended.

Message Handling Rules

Pass messages exactly as written or spoken. Even more important than speed, your job as a communicator is to deliver each message as accurately as possible. Therefore, you must not change any message as you handle it. If it is longer than you would like, you must send it anyway. Apparently misspelled words or confusing text must be sent exactly as received. Only the original author may make changes. If you note an inaccurate word count in a NTS format message, you must maintain the original count and follow it with the actual count received at your station, i.e.: "12/11."

Message Handling

Should you return a message to the author before first sending it if it seems incorrect or confusing? This is a judgment call. If the apparent error will affect the meaning of the message and the author is easily contacted, it is probably a good idea. Whenever possible, it is a good practice to read each message carefully in the presence of the author before accepting it. This way, potential errors or misunderstandings can be corrected before the message is sent.

The Importance of the Signature

During an emergency, the messages you handle can easily contain requests for expensive supplies that have a very limited "shelf life" (such as blood for a field hospital), or for agencies that will only respond to properly authorized requests (i.e.: for medevac helicopters). For this reason, it is critical that you include the signature and title of the sender in every message.

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