

## Emergency vs. Disaster by KI5LNM

An emergency and a disaster may seem to be about the same thing, but they are actually quite different. It is good to have a handle on what each word means and how one responds. First disasters are not just exaggerated emergencies. They are not just something bigger than an emergency.

One definition of an Emergency is that it is a sudden, urgent, unexpected event requiring that one take immediate action as help is usually required. There are sufficient local resources to handle it.

Emergencies are the more common events that the fire, EMS, and police normally train for. This is the fire department getting a call for a house fire. They know what to do and have what they need.

A definition of a Disaster is a calamitous event, occurring suddenly and causing loss of life, damage, and/or hardship. Sufficient resources are scarce and not available. Another way to look at it is that a disaster is a serious disruption to how a community functions and exceeds its ability to cope with the event with its own resources. These can overwhelm hospitals, police, fire, etc. They can be natural, man-made, or a hybrid of the two.

Disasters are often tragic overwhelming events that become bigger than what local resources can handle. They need to call in help.

Disasters can develop quickly or slowly. A quick disaster is a tornado, earthquake, sink holes, explosions. There is generally little time to plan or realize it is about to happen, or you only know after it has happened. Slow developing disasters are hurricanes, wildfires, droughts, and pandemics. They have a lead up time and can build in their nature and what they consume.

The problem with disasters is that often they are looked at with hindsight and the same issues come up that need addressed each time. There is seldom the learning from the event to help the next time in any real way. As opposed to an emergency where the fire department gets the call and heads out. They constantly train for whatever scenario may happen and know how to tackle it. Sometimes, as here with our smaller local volunteer fire departments, they may need to call in another department to get some more help but each knows what is happening and how to handle it and it is over soon. People can handle the normal emergency event that happens to an extent as they are not too unusual. But the Disaster is unusual, and many times there aren't people around that have experienced that kind of event to help. To some extent though this isn't true say in hurricanes where coastal areas have then over time. But still remember that it can be years between events so a complacency can happen.

The one thing though that shows the difference between an emergency and a disaster is communication failure. It is a given generally in a disaster. There are many different ways for this to happen and Amateur Radio can help solve some of them but not all. Even radio can have its troubles in a disaster.

Here are some problems that ARES can work on and practice for the disaster that can even happen to radio. Not all will be solvable in the event but having ideas ahead of time can still help.

One issue that I think we often think of is equipment failure. The phrase we use often, "Two is one, One is none." But in a disaster this can even include bigger issues such as repeaters off air, towers down. It would be good to plan and see what can be done in events if these different situations were to happen.

Sometimes little information can get through on the radio. Such as on 9/11 when all that was getting through was hundreds of Maydays! But not anything else. No one knew where or what. Need to practice to be calm and succinct in messages. One knows when the big disaster happens, it is hard to keep ones wits about them. So practice for these events even though you may never actually have to use the skill. Disaster skills are ones one should have under their belt even if they never get to use them. And hopefully one doesn't have to use them.

Also being aware that all radios are not frequency agile. This is the time when different departments can't communicate to each other even by radio. Something to be worked on ahead of time and not wait for the disaster, we need to realize this can be an issue. This can be a recognized problem that is not dealt with between disasters. So continues to be an issue. Be sure a plan is in place. This we got to experience a bit at Down Home Ranch and are already talking about different ways to work it out than what was tried then. Having this practice could help in a disaster situation.

An issue seen in disasters is how fast batteries can go down. They can lose power at incredible rates because of what is required of them. So having backups is good. Depending on the disaster they can still go down though. Not all situations can be solved in a disaster, but we can try and mitigate it as much as possible.

Another problem can be reaching the people one needs to reach. Even reaching sites and agencies. Sometimes things do get so chaotic that often the worst hit areas are the last reached and the last to get information. Look into ways to help note where information needs to get to and from as quickly as possible, Then being able to make it happen could be a great benefit to served organizations.

Another situation is that as long as phones are working most people will want to use them as opposed to radios. So having a phone connection to different groups can be a help. But one thing we do know in our county is that phone connections can be sketchy and just not there as coverage isn't complete. So do keep that phone handy but the radio will be wanted if things really go south.

Also a disaster as opposed to an emergency can make it difficult to be sure to pass on information correctly, and making sure it is acted on quickly and properly. We do know that sending Winlink messages make sure that at each point the language doesn't get changed. But we also need to practice repeating back exactly what we hear, as well as making sure that what is being communicated is understandable to all. WE don't want messages worded some odd way that can be interpreted in different ways.