

# Amateur radio operators keep emergency communication lines open at area hospitals



Andy Finick explains how the repeaters are used in amateur radio communications. (Nancy Coltun Webster / Post-Tribune)

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Andy Finick walks up the stairs and opens the door onto a roof at Franciscan Health in Hammond. He points up to a higher roof at several antennae that would — in an unthinkable emergency — provide communications for the hospital.

In Northwest Indiana, Finick, a licensed amateur radio operator, helps hospitals maintain communications when all other systems fail in an emergency situation. He has radio equipment bolstered with a repeater system and antennae squirreled away in hospitals throughout Lake County.

Finick's recent tour included a stop at Community Hospital to pay a call on Gary McKay, co-chairperson/training officer of the District 1 Hospital Emergency Planning Committee Inc. and chief manager of Emergency Preparedness, Safety, & Bioterrorism Prevention for Community Hospital/St. Catherine Hospital.

Finick maintains equipment at Community Hospital in Munster, St. Mary Medical Center in Hobart, Franciscan Health hospitals in Hammond and Dyer and the Lake County Department of Health in Crown Point.

St. Catherine Hospital in East Chicago will be equipped next, according to McKay.

McKay, who oversees a high-tech command center at Community Hospital, keeps Finick's ham radio and hand-held transmitter in his office. It provides a dedicated space for a radio operator to talk without a lot of background noise and disturbance.

Though called amateur radio, professional first-responders are respectful of its role — and Finick — in their disaster-response plans. The D1HEPC has scheduled drills and Finick participates as liaison for Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES) and the Amateur Radio Association (ARA) to the District 1 Homeland Security Emergency Preparedness and Response team for Jasper, Lake, LaPorte, Newton and Porter counties.

The D1HEPC purchased a portable trailer to transport the amateur radio equipment.

"If we are in a disaster scene, Andy can hook up the trailer and bring it to a site. We are proud of it," said McKay.

Finick's interest in amateur radio was piqued as a kid. He became licensed as an adult in 1986.

Amateur radio operators like Finick, also known as "hams" are licensed to communicate across specific radio bands allocated for their use, per Federal Communications Commission guidelines.



Andy Finick operates the amateur radio equipment at Community Hospital in Munster. (Nancy Coltun Webster / Post-Tribune)

According to Finick, over the years the FCC has made it easier for more people to become certified for amateur radio. Still, he said he doesn't see many young people joining the ranks.

"When I retired in 1996, I spent a couple of years at the Career Center (in Hammond) and taught amateur radio," said Finick. "Even then they said, 'why should I get my license when I can get on the computer.'"

But in a disaster, when electricity is out and cell towers fail, the Internet may not be an option.

"The first thing that always go bad, is communications. It becomes overrun," said Lori Postma in a telephone interview. Postma is a member of the Incident Management Team for Indiana District 1 Department. of Homeland Security and director of the medical branch of Franciscan Health's bioterrorism and emergency preparedness.

According to Postma, when the infrastructure is critically damaged and the system is overwhelmed, "the only ones who never lose the ability to communicate are the ham radio systems. They are the most reliable communication. Until we can get satellite phones from Indianapolis or we can get Sprint or AT&T to bring in a portable tower, those ham radio guys can get there (and set up) pretty quickly."

Postma said she witnessed Finick's group set up during a District 1 mass disaster drill at the Steel Yard baseball stadium in Gary.

"He reaches out to all the other facilities and they all talk back and forth and we can push messages," Postma said.

"It truly is a great art and it is an art that's losing the people who do it," said Postma. "There is not a huge amount of young people in this. It's an art we are going to lose. It truly is really amazing the way they are able to get the message out when we can't."

*Nancy Coltun Webster is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.*