

Radio Volunteers a Key Component of Public Safety

Agencies at the local and state level recognize the importance of the ham operators.

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SHUTTERSTOCK

(TNS) - Police, fire and medical personnel immediately come to mind when the citizenry thinks of emergency responders, and for

good reason. They are highly trained, highly skilled professionals who put their lives on the line in times of natural or human-caused disasters. For government agencies, an essential link consists of dispatch crews that garner information and quickly get the word out about trouble spots. That critical function gets a huge assist from a group of volunteers who perform a key role on the airwaves.

In Yakima County, the Amateur Radio Emergency Service consists of a team of 20 ham radio operators who are very much in the loop during times of emergencies. In mountainous areas where steep terrain renders cellphone service precarious, the ham operators are able to communicate with search and rescue crews that are scouring the area for missing hikers, skiers or snowmobilers.

Agencies at the local and state level recognize the importance of the ham operators, who locally have been headed by Jo Whitney for the past quarter-century or so. Yakima County Sheriff Brian Winter, an amateur radio operator, coordinates with the group, and some operators are part of the sheriff's Search and Rescue Team. The team also works with the Yakima Valley Office of Emergency Management and has a radio room at the county Emergency Operations Center in Union Gap. Both Yakima hospitals have amateur radio stations.

It doesn't stop at the county level. Last year, a number of state agencies used radio teams for communications during the massive Cascadia Rising earthquake and tsunami drill. State emergency officials have recommended that local agencies establish a "habitual relationship" with the teams.

Fortunately, disasters are few and far between, but the operators still get plenty of work. Earlier this month, they were situated along the course of the Round Mountain Half-Marathon footrace, which includes a grueling four-mile uphill — and corresponding downhill

— as part of the 13.1-mile course. They also help keep track of the hundreds of runners strewn along the course of the the Yakima River Canyon Marathon, in another locale where terrain makes cellphones unreliable. Next month, they will be on hand for the Grey Rock 50-kilometer trail race — again, a mountainous challenge where the operators are an essential part of safety preparations. Many other events have benefited from their presence over the decades.

The county's Amateur Radio Emergency Service is there for the public not only in times of calamity, it also to enable events that enhance the quality of life for the Yakima Valley. They may be seen — and heard — by only a few, but their presence adds a measure of safety for everybody in Yakima County.

* Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Bob Crider and Frank Purdy.

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