

NECP Spotlight: Auxiliary Communications (AUXCOMM) Training

INTRODUCTION

Volunteer emergency communications is a common hobby where individuals learn to operate and communicate through radio networks. These auxiliary communicators (AUXCs) are vital during emergencies as they can enhance communication between first responders and the public even when phone lines and Internet may be down or disrupted. Due to the key role AUXCs can play during a crisis or event, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) created a standardized training called auxiliary communications (AUXCOMM). This training teaches students how AUXCs are incorporated into public safety, its command structures, and how they are best utilized, thereby effectively integrating them into the public safety community.

The National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP) highlights the importance of training AUXCs to strengthen communications coordination during emergencies when traditional communications systems are down. This spotlight examines how AUXCs have assisted communities with essential emergency communication that saves lives.

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK

In 2009, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), along with volunteer emergency communications subject matter experts, created the AUXCOMM training that has thus far educated 3,800 auxiliary communicators on how to support emergency communications. The public safety community has relied on AUXCs to fill communication gaps with the public especially during natural disasters. However, not all AUXCs have the crucial public safety knowledge and training to be utilized to their full potential during emergencies.

The AUXCOMM training is typically an in-person 2-3-day training session to help prepare AUXCs to work with emergency personnel and provide important communications with the public during a crisis. This curriculum was built for AUXCs, incorporating the National Incident Management System (NIMS) Incident Command System (ICS), to support public safety entities. AUXCOMM encompasses multiple volunteer-led organizations including the Radio Emergency Associated Communications Team (REACT), Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES), and state-led groups such as North Carolina AUXCOMM.



North Carolina AUXCOMM

During the aftermath of Hurricane Ian, while many 911 call centers were overwhelmed, AUXCs relayed distress signals which assisted in multiple search-and-rescue operations, especially on Sanibel Island, FL, where the only road in and out of the island collapsed. In Baltimore, MD, a volunteer emergency communicator connected local emergency personnel and relatives with a family stranded on Sanibel Island leading to a successful rescue. Additionally, another AUXC residing on Sanibel Island contacted the Coast Guard to help locate and rescue multiple neighbors who needed medical attention on the island. AUXCs have consistently played vital roles in natural disasters.

Volunteer emergency communicators are always eager to play a significant role in emergency response. Offering this AUXCOMM course has resulted in a larger cadre of AUXCs to assist the public safety community as a reliable resource. In order to fully realize the benefits of auxiliary communicators' life-saving support, public safety agencies are encouraged to include auxiliary communicators in their emergency planning efforts.



NECP ALIGNMENT

The effectiveness of auxiliary communicators in an emergency supports the NECP’s goals of strengthening and expanding emergency communications and preparedness. CISA, and some states, offer training courses and release field operations guides for AUXCs. AUXCOMM training provides education for increased integration of volunteer emergency communicators into response efforts. These initiatives allow first responders and their AUXC counterparts to work together effectively.

NECP Goal	Objective	Objective Description	Real World Example
Goal 1: Governance and Leadership	1.3	Adopt adaptive governance strategies to address the rapid evolution of technologies, capabilities, and risks	Training with auxiliary communicators gives first responders the ability to adapt in unprecedented situations through communication with members of the public who are out in the field and can both report back to and relay messages to others. For example, during Hurricane Irene, volunteer emergency communicators provided early warnings and status updates to public safety personnel when cell service and Internet services were down.
Goal 3: Training, Exercises, and Evaluation	3.1	Update and ensure the availability of training and exercise programs to address gaps in emergency communications	AUXCOMM courses provide essential training to help AUXCs work with public safety personnel. Some examples of the training include focusing on command structure, where information goes, and taking in information for point distribution. One of AUXCOMM’s goals is to remove the novice aspect of volunteer emergency communicators and increase the professionalism of operators so they can be utilized more in the field.
Goal 3: Training, Exercises, and Evaluation	3.3	Ensure training addresses information sharing (e.g. voice, video, and data) for multi-agency responses	Although AUXCs are not public safety personnel, they are often the best connection first responders have to the public when phone service is out. Proper training ensures they can communicate needed information in a secure, efficient, and useful manner. In Pensacola, FL, AUXCs trained alongside local public safety personnel, ensuring they learned how to communicate information using standard protocols.
Goal 4: Communications Coordination	4.4	Strengthen resilience and continuity of communications throughout operations	Volunteer emergency communicators dispersed among the public means that if phone outages (common in natural disasters) occur, public safety personnel and members of the public can reach one another and relay life-saving information. For example, in Pensacola, FL, AUXCs held a competition to test their ability to quickly set up emergency communications stations in the event of a disaster.

RESOURCES

Incorporating AUXCs into emergency communications planning allows for more flexible and reliable lines of communication during an emergency. The expansion of auxiliary communicators alongside AUXCOMM training enhances the coordination between AUXCs and the public safety community for greater preparedness during a crisis. For more information on how to sign up for an AUXCOMM course, please reach out to your Statewide Interoperability Coordinators (SWICs) at www.cisa.gov/safecom/ncswic-membership or email COMU@cisa.dhs.gov.

For more information on the NECP, visit: www.cisa.gov/necp.

Want to share your organization’s success and alignment to the NECP? Email us at: necp@cisa.dhs.gov.

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