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Volunteers train to talk around Lamorinda during auxiliary communications exercise

By Cathy Dausman



Photo Cathy Dausman

Once upon a Tuesday evening in Lamorinda, 26 volunteer emergency communicators spread out among five locations. Some met where Lafayette's new police station will soon be located; others were off to Moraga Town Hall and Orinda's City Hall. Still others staffed Moraga-Orinda Fire District Station 45 in downtown Orinda; the final few headed to Saint Mary's College. They opened up industrial sized suitcases, plugged in various radios and connected them to exterior antennas. Then they waited. The call came in: "This is a drill." Operation Communications Exercise, or CommEx, had begun.

Participants were told to imagine a scenario where a natural gas line had ruptured along Lafayette's Reliez Valley Road; as a result six vehicles had been destroyed and several houses had caught fire. Pleasant Hill Road was blocked. In event of an emergency, when cellular phone service becomes limited, interrupted or overwhelmed, organizations may need other means to get the message through. So Lafayette radio operators

gathered information and dispersed it to their counterparts across Lamorinda over amateur radio bands, public works frequencies and General Mobile Radio Service frequencies.

"Check in! And use all frequencies to find someone," one communication leader urged his group.

"All Lamorinda agencies are working together so that we can manage emergencies that arise," said Lamorinda Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein. Rein has encouraged the Lamorinda community to standardize the radio equipment and materials each has to use.

"CommEx was a great opportunity for city and town staff to work with local amateur radio operators and Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team neighborhood leaders to exercise our auxiliary communications capabilities," Rein said. Professional emergency responders throughout Lamorinda value the drills as well as the volunteer communicators. "Having the ability to communicate and get the word out about damage from a disaster and the immediate needs whether food, water or shelter is critical to recovery success," said Orinda Chief of Police Mark Nagel.

"We have limited resources in Moraga and will need everyone's help in a major disaster," said Moraga Chief of Police Jon King. King said he was impressed with how quickly the radio equipment could be assembled and functioning.

Rein hopes this exercise is merely the first of many. His goal is to hold "at least three CommEx practices per year, the next as early as June or July," he said.

MOFD Chief Stephen Healy calls information "the most valuable asset" at an Emergency or Department Operations Center, and said CommEx "adds tremendous value." When it comes to emergency communications, Healy believes talk is not just cheap - it is priceless.

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[back](#)

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