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Great Lamorinda ShakeOut gives radio users a refresher course

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During the "hotwash" the incident team reviewed what worked well, and what didn't. Photo Sora O'Doherty

emergency?" Radio skills are considered perishable, and the exercise was also designed to allow CERT and LARIG members to refresh their skills, as well as to develop a citizen-level communication plan for Lamorinda.

After the announcement went out, a group of volunteers gathered at Incident Command on Donald Drive in Orinda, an area known for good radio reception. Several volunteers known as scribes answered radio calls, collected information from the callers, and forwarded it along to Wesley Ayers, HAM Team Net Control, who collected the data on a computer and sent it to Moraga-Orinda Fire District Fire Station 45. There the calls were being mapped, to create a visual guide to the response.

As often happens, there were some surprises. The plan had included check-ins from all the local schools. Moraga schools did check in; Orinda schools did not. It turned out that the reason was simple: Moraga schools have GMRS radios; Orinda schools have only one. CERT Safety Officer Julie Sparks noted, "We did not have contact with Lafayette schools; they are on a different radio system." She added, "It will be noted in our after-action report as an action item to follow up on."

In every emergency, communication is always a problem. Macler hopes that one result of this exercise will be developing a protocol for radio use, a training module for CERT training, and then routinely using the protocol at events. The volunteers answering the radio calls at the incident command center reported difficulties in clearly hearing and recording the names of callers and especially of their locations, many of which sound similar, such as La Cuesta and La Cresta in Orinda. The problem was compounded by two factors: static and callers speaking too fast.

Another objective of the exercise was to test equipment, including radios owned by individuals and the three local repeaters, installed by LARIG. The installation was completed in 2016. The repeaters boost the signal from the radios, giving them greater reach. All three were found to work in the exercise. Another goal was to identify where there is GMRS radio coverage. For this exercise, all three repeaters were linked, so that when a radio user connected with any one repeater, the message was conveyed by all three.

At the close of the exercise, a "hotwash" was conducted via the Zoom video conferencing platform. A hotwash is when participants review what went right, and what didn't, during the exercise. Those receiving calls reported some frustration with poor reception and lots of "doubles" which occur when two radio users attempt to call in at the same time. But overall it was concluded that the exercise went pretty smoothly and Keith Rylie, Net Control on the HAM Team at Station 45 concluded, "Julie's group is just amazing!"

The map of radio responses can be viewed at www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1rxwL7iNxoKWC28_fWaUH08Z6VY4FJaNL&usp=sharing

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