ULLWA - Polk County Area ARES

Tropical Storm Beryl Response

July 8-13, 2024

After Action Report

July 2024
ULLWA's Polk County Area ARES
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THE EVENT

For several days in early July of 2024, the HGX office of the NWS, as well as local and state agencies, had been watching Hurricane Beryl cross the Caribbean. After weakening into a tropical storm over the Yucatán Peninsula, the system moved into the Gulf of Mexico, where it gradually reorganized into a Category 1 hurricane on July 8, just before making its final landfall near Matagorda, Texas, with it's track moving through the Polk County area.

The ARES DEC was notified on Sunday evening July 7 by the Polk County Emergency Management Coordinator (EMC) that ARES would be part of the Emergency Operations Center activation the following morning (July 8) at 0600.

The Polk County and San Jacinto County Emergency Coordinators were notified and the two ECs and DEC reported to the Polk County EOC at 0600 hours. The DEC was also in contact with the Walker and Trinity county ECs.

RESPONSE and ACTIONS

Day 1 - The EOC radio room was activated and the FM and HF radios were working. An Emergency Net was activated and 18 hams checked in, several providing reports. A laptop was set up and direct link to NWS was established. The EMC gave us access to the in-house reporting program on the laptop, allowing realtime reporting between the Radio Room and the main EOC. Winlink was attempted on HF multiple times, but all RMS stations available were constantly busy. Winlink Telnet was eventually used.

Tropical Storm Beryl began affecting the area around 1100 hours. By early afternoon ~98.7% of Polk County was without power. Several trees and powerlines were down. NWS reported 60-70 mph winds. At ~1230 hours, the .04 and the .15 repeaters went down (and came up about 4 hours later) due to a generator issue. The NCO moved the net to simplex 146.52.

At ~1300 hours, the EOC generator failed. We had no phones, lights or internet. Only AT&T cellular devices worked until late in the day.

Day 2 - We reported to the PCSO (the Secondary EOC). ARES personnel in the EOC are asked by the EMC to call all 35 gas stations in the county to determine (a)if they had power and (b)the quantities of fuel on hand. We did this for the remainder of the activation - generally 3 or 4 times per operational period. The DEC was asked by the EMC to be the EOC liaision with the NWS via NWSSlack app. Since we were at a temporary EOC, we could only operate by handheld FM, which did not get out from inside the SO. Because of this, the EMC had the County's Mobile Command truck brought in for ARES to operate from. We got into it and the trucks' onboard generator failed. County maintenance eventually set up and hooked a portable generator to the truck for us.

Day 3 - Reported back to the PCSO facility. Two ARES personnel in the EOC again checking all 35 gas stations in the county to determine (a)if they had power and (b)the quantities of fuel on hand. Had five ARES folks in the field calling in damage reports as found. The County's Mobile Command truck brought in for ARES to operate from. One ARES member is assigned to the POD at Pedigo Park and calls in hourly reports on commodities on hand. Gas Stations are contacted four times during the operational period. Kept in contact with NWS for updates on Heat Advisories for the area and passed this info to EMC. From 1700-1900 we assisted moving all EOC supplies back to the EOC at Emergency Management as power was back on.

Day 4 - Reported back to EOC. Had two operators in the EOC, four operators in the field and one operator at the Pedigo POD. Kept EMC updated on NWS. By 1100 hrs most gas stations in the county are open and have fuel, with exception of the Corrigan area. Operator at POD called in hourly commodities counts.

Day 5 - Reported back to EOC. Had two operators in the EOC, seven operators in the field and one operator at the Pedigo POD. Kept EMC updated on NWS. By 0815 hrs all gas stations in the county are open and have fuel, with exception of one station in Moscow, which lost power overnight. Operator at POD called in hourly commodities counts. NWS contacted at 1200hrs at request of EMC to get max wind speed estimates for the storm and federal contact info for insurance companies that had been contacting the EOC.

Day 6 - Reported back to EOC. Had one operator in the EOC, five operators in the field and one operator at the Pedigo POD. Kept EMC updated from NWS. Operator at POD calling in commodities count hourly beginning at 0600. By 1200, EMC reuests POD reports on VFD and City Commodity pickup totals. POD counts continued until all supplies depleted at ~1349 hours. 1400 hours - EMC notifies us that EOC activation is terminated.

LESSONS LEARNED

What Went Right

Nineteen area Amateur Radio Operators participated over the six days of activation, putting in a total of 720 person hours. Incredible for a group of volunteers. The Radio Room at the EOC was staffed by a minimum of two ARES personnel every day with the exception of the last day and was staffed by one.

With the exception of the outage mentioned above, all equipment in the EOC worked well. In addition, the EMC supplied our room with a county ethernet connection, a hard line phone and a WI-FI hotspot for the periods of WIFI outage.

There was great interaction between EMC staff and ARES personnel and the county made sure all personnel were fed.

Areas For Improvement

1) Training - During the relatively short time the area repeaters were down the ARES radio was switched to simplex (146.52 mHz) but did not hear any radio traffic during that time. I will take ownership of this issue as nothing was published in advance that made it a SOG (Standard Operating Guideline) to switch to simplex if all local repeaters go down. (However, we do practice this once per month by holding three training nets on the last Tuesday of the month, exercising the primary Skywarn repeater, the secondary repeater, as well as a simplex net on 146.52).

2) Generator Concerns - While there is a generator at the primary Skywarn repeater site, it went down. We do not own this site, but we were able to contact the site owner, who remedied the problem in short order. There is no generator at the secondary repeater site. Of course, it seems, every generator we encountered during this activation went down or offline at some point. Generators that went down at some point include; EOC, County Command Vehicle, Secondary EOC.

3) Staffing Concerns - It proved difficult to get ARES volunteers to physically come in and assist - both at the EOC as well as when we were looking at the possibility of providing operators at four potential POD sites, the hospital and two fire stations. Had we been activated for 24 hour operation it would have been challenging at best to staff the requested positions.

4) Equipment Concerns - We had virtually little traffic in/out on HF frequencies. This very well could have been because of band conditions but could also have been because of antenna issues. In addition, when were forced to move to the secondary EOC, all we had for comms were personal handheld, 5 watt HTs. Though, one ARES operator did let us borrow a small go-box containing a dualband rig and magnetic antenna.

Suggestions For Improvement

1) Training - Add written training protocol to include things like "If both repeaters fail, all ARES volunteers should switch to 146.52 Simplex and listen for Net Control."

2) Generator Concerns - Obivously, we have not control over secondary power supplies at third party facilities. However, we could have benefitted if the club owned a secondary power supply that we could have set up just to run our radio equipment.

3) Staffing Concerns - Though we had a list of ARES/RACES members, along with capabilities, as well as a "phone tree" notification system we have trained with, there was a lack of response of members. To remedy this will be a long-term effort in;

a) Recruiting in General
b) Training involving specific roles (EOC, POD, FD and Hospital, etc)
c) What to Expect during times of activation
d) Notification and filling a roster upon notification of an anticipated event (when possible).
e) Revamp local volunteer protocol. For example, we used to issue official ARES vests to all who joined ARES. That needs to change.

4) Equipment Concerns - First, we would like someone proficient with an Antenna Analyzer to check the HF antenna at the EOC.

Second, it is suggested that the club build and/or purchase a go-box containing everything needed to operate in a situation when all generators have failed, such as occured during this event. To include;

a) Dualband VHF/UHF rig
b) HF rig (80/40 meter capable)
c) Power Supply
d) Portable antenna system
e) Battery/solar system
f) Winlink connectivity

END OF REPORT