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Amateur radio operators simulate missing boy in drill

By Karen Madden • Daily Tribune Staff • October 25, 2010

For the second year, amateur radio operators from across the state gathered in Wisconsin Rapids to work with local emergency services to practice their skills.

About 25 operators took part in a drill that simulated a 9-year-old boy missing in the Wisconsin Rapids area.

The drill tests the group's ability to get communications from out in the field into dispatch, Wisconsin Rapids Police Lt. Kevin Schwartz said. Schwartz worked with the group Saturday evening and played the role of incident commander in the scenario.

"What we're going to learn is what they're capable of doing and how we can use them in the future," Schwartz said.

During a disaster, it's possible regular communications such as police radios, cell phones and land-line phones can be shut down, Schwartz said. The amateur radio operators can help with emergency government and at incident command posts throughout the county.

The state is home to about 1,400 amateur radio operators, said Kathy Schramm, assistant section emergency coordinator. Schramm was acting as the public information officer for the drill.

The people who gathered Saturday night at the Hotel Mead are passionate about emergency services and want to help all they can during emergencies, she said.

Members learn a lot from the annual drills, said Dennis Rybicke, 67, of Fort Atkinson. It's important to gain experience in interagency cooperation.

Rybicke has been an amateur radio operator since 1958 when, as a Boy Scout, he served as a messenger during a Civil Defense activity. He sat next to a radio operator during the exercise and became interested in it. The operator began teaching Rybicke about amateur radio operation, and Rybicke has been involved in it ever since.

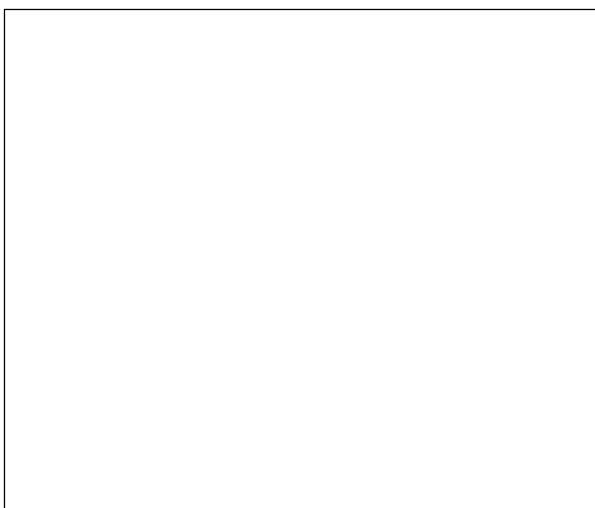
"It's a fascinating hobby," he said.

Wisconsin Rapids is a good location for the annual meeting and drill, said David Levorson, the radio group's senior leader for the northeast part of the state. It's centrally located, and the people and emergency services in the area were helpful during the 2009 exercise, when members oversaw the area's trick-or-treaters.

During this year's drill, a 100-year flood in the area had local emergency personnel tied up and unable to search for the 9-year-old boy. The radio operators divided into teams and searched their designated areas for the child. In the end, the imaginary child, represented in the drill by a balloon, was found.



Incident commander Lt. Kevin Schwartz of the Wisconsin Rapids Police Department briefs one of the search teams Saturday at Hotel Mead in Wisconsin Rapids during a simulated search for a lost child. (Dan Young/Daily Tribune)



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