

## *Situation Critical! – The Shape of Ham Radio Today*

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Emergency communications depends on amateur radio operators. Today's most experienced, knowledgeable, skilled and able hams tend to be the ones who entered ham radio as teenagers or younger. These hams tend to renew their licenses, engage in public service, such as emergency communications, and serve in roles which advance amateur radio. These are high commitment hams.

Since the 1980s with computers, the internet, cell phones and video games, many people have written off amateur radio as obsolete. However with Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the public, the media, and lawmakers alike, saw a meltdown in communications infrastructure. They saw about one thousand hams from across the U.S. and Canada volunteer and bring their own equipment, pay their own way and pay for their own food and lodging to help in the disaster relief. Policy makers also noted the age of these volunteers. Most were over fifty years old. Smart policy makers realize that as this group grays, their ability to provide communications in disasters will decline.

Yearly, almost 870 hams in Los Angeles County are lost primarily due to death, non-renewal, and/or moving. As the older, well trained and experienced hams die off, they are being replaced with new hams who have got their license after a one-day cram session. Many of these new hams are concerned with emergency communications and seem willing to use ham radio to help their neighborhoods and the country. They tend to be in the 50s and 60s but unlike the previous generations, these new hams tend to regard ham radio as a back up to the 911 emergency personal cell phone.

It has been observed in the Glendora area that almost none of these new hams are on the air on a regular basis. The main reason for inactivity of these new hams seems to be that they really don't know how to use the many “bells and whistles” of their radios leading them to think that ham radio is too technical or time-consuming to learn. Repeatedly I have had many hams simply bring their rigs to me to program for them, not willing to take the time to really study their own equipment! In contrast, hams who started in the 1970s and before built their own equipment or kits, and eagerly learned about electronics. As these hams die off, they are being replaced by hams who are totally dependent on store bought equipment and tech support from ham radio stores. These ham radio stores will not be opened in an emergency. In fact they will likely be looted and burned. Few of these newer hams are capable of

independently establishing a communications link in times of emergency. Passing a test in which the questions and answers are published does not mean one can carry out the mission of the amateur radio service.

73,

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