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Motivating Amateur Radio Clubs to Open New Initiatives (MARCONI)

Program 7: BECOMING AN NCS

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Operational Guidelines

Statement of Program Purpose: Studying to become a Net Control Station (NCS) involves learning how to lead a group of amateur radio operators having a group discussion, live OnAir (i.e., a Net). The NCS is responsible for starting, conducting, and terminating the Net much as does an orchestra conductor. The NCS ensures the group or Net, starts on time in a reliable and coordinated fashion, operates together during the performance (Net), and ends in a structured and coordinated fashion. There are many different types of Nets. Nets that need a Net control are known as a Directed Net. Among these are rag chewing (conversational) Nets, traffic Nets, special interest Nets like county hunters, emergency Nets, tactical Nets, incident Nets, armed forces Nets, weather Nets, and resource Nets. All of these have at least one thing in common—they have an NCS. There are also open Nets lacking an NCS. These Nets operate in a fashion similar to a conversation held on HF where each participant is expected to act in a respectful and collegial manner towards the other attendees. Having an NCS leading a Net,

permits effective and orderly communications among the checked-in amateur radio operators. When Nets are held to simply chat and have like-minded amateurs share time together (rag chew), being an NCS can be fun, low stress, and enjoyable. In times of crisis, however, be it man-made or due to natural causes, being a competent and confident NCS can mean the difference between a well-coordinated response to an emergency and a catastrophe – literally, the difference between life and death for those whose lives are in danger. Special training is needed for emergency Nets and such Nets often follow special rules and may have different codes of conduct from the usual traffic, rag-chew, or information Nets.

Scope of A Net Control Training Program:

A good NCS should be able to confidently:

- Identify the different types of Nets.
- Be aware of the important aspects of the specific Net they are directing, i.e., its purpose and goals.
- Decide how to keep track of the Net using a logging program or even paper!
- Clearly delineate expectations for the participants who check in.
- Deal with those who are untrained and may be unintentionally or purposefully disruptive.
- Manage technical interference problems, or glitches in equipment or propagation.

These Guidelines will help provide some introductory insight into what and how an NCS should function and how to react to crises or situations that can negatively impact the function and effectiveness of the Net.

Getting Started: A critical prerequisite for being an NCS is the ability to transmit a good signal.

An NCS with a weak signal really becomes a burden to the participants and in some cases

discourages participation. You want to be sure that your signal is the best it can be. A weak transmission makes it difficult to communicate among the checked-in stations. With a bad signal, other stations may drop off the Net or just simply avoid checking in. Importantly, before you become a new NCS, the rule is listen, listen and then listen some more. By listening – not speaking, you will learn the style of the Net and the call signs of the regular station operators who check in.

What does the NCS actually do? As described, the NCS starts, conducts, and terminates the Net in an orderly manner. Pile-ups are fun while contesting on 20 or 40 m, but on a traffic Net or an emergency management Net, a pile-up is a disaster. It can literally be life-threatening; an NCS needs to know how to expect the unexpected and act accordingly. If someone's signal suddenly degrades, they need to be told in a non-confrontational or non-embarrassing manner. Being respectful and tactful is a key skill an NCS must have or develop.

As NCS you will need to:

- Learn the call signs of the stations and the names of the operators who regularly check into the Net.
- Learn the general locations of all stations. This is especially important for traffic, SKYWARN, emergency, incident, and resource Nets.
- Write down some comments about style—are stations to be welcomed by call and name? Are just call signs recognized? If this is a formal Net, are there comments that follow? How does the Net end?
- Be sure to participate in the Net often for at least a month before you assume operating as the NCS.

- Ask questions of the Net Manager (NM) because that person is the one who coordinates NCSs. The NM will be delighted that you are volunteering to help out as long as you are collegial, cooperative, willing to take advice and have a good signal into the repeater or on HF.

Conducting a Net: To get ready, ask the NM for the beginning and ending scripts. This is absolutely a key point to remember. Those are statements that the NCS says at the beginning and end of a Net to let listeners know what is expected and to inform all when the Net is ended. Closing statements often recognize repeater owners for hosting Nets and let everyone know when the next Net will meet. Read the scripts several times beforehand so you can deliver it smoothly on the radio. Everyone has their own way of keeping track of stations. Writing down the call signs of stations, one on a line and listing anything that is needed is one way to know what is going on. For traffic and Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES) Nets, it's a good idea to check off the traffic that has been passed. If you are running any of the ARES Nets, you will need a backup station who can be helpful by either reading maps or keeping track of activity. Don't try to do both in a busy ARES or SKYWARN Net. In an activation or other ARES exercise, you will also need a person assigned to "go for" tasks, to find people or information.

Some traffic Nets pair stations together and ask them to go off frequency (QSY) to manage the traffic. In that case, you may wish to use a spreadsheet to keep track of where each station is at any point in time. Don't be afraid to ask questions and get advice from more experienced controls on your Net. As you get practice, you will find the system that works best for you. For more information on how to run a Traffic Net in an emergency as an NCS, see Appendix developed by John K1LYP.

Taking Control: When you are ready, just dive in and do the job. Here are some hints from “Hints for Being Net Control Amateur Radio Emergency Service”

(<https://www.k7yca.org/how-to/hints-for-being-net-control-4/>)

- Start the Net on time. If you are late, others may think that there is no NCS and will assume control.
- Speak clearly and with a calm tone of voice.
- Take your time, do not rush. Do not talk fast, especially in an emergency Net when you might become excited.
- Less is more. Be as concise as possible as you run the Net.
- If you fumble or mumble, un-key, take a deep breath and start over. The extra few seconds will do wonders for your composure.
- Smile. Your friendly tone will come across to others which keeps them calm.
- Keep good logs and documentation. In an ARES Net, keep track of the time of check-in and check-out.
- Do what you can to be efficient but don't stress over it; this will come with practice.

NCS Training Challenges to Consider:

- **How to manage types of interference (Human and Environmental):** The best way to deal with a “lid” – or person who attempts to disrupt another person's radio transmission – is to ignore the individual and pay no attention to him/her. Saying anything simply brings attention to those interfering. You should have an alternate frequency in mind so that you can move the Net if necessary. If stations can copy each other on the Net frequency, go ahead and pass the traffic or manage whatever business there is to be conducted. If the traffic is important, the business can be managed via phone off the air. This gives the interferers the idea that the Net is still being run despite their behavior and

they'll most likely go away. Their whole aim is to disrupt the Net. As best you can, do not let them do that. If ignored, often they will tire of not being engaged and leave the frequency.

Propagation interference can be caused by a host of adverse conditions.

Recommending they boost their signal power, or if the check-in is using a hand-held receiver, just suggesting that they physically move around (even only a few feet) can make the difference between an inaudible transmission and "arm-chair copy."

- **How to manage the untrained person:** Sometimes, especially in an emergency, you will have people try to help. They may not be trained. The best thing to do is to stay calm and pair them with a trained person. Move that pair off frequency and let the trained operator come back to relay the information. Do not let an untrained person take control.

Reward of Becoming An NCS:

A seasoned, confident NCS is an invaluable member of the amateur radio community. Such individuals are in high demand as there are many Nets OnAir in need of a reliable and competent NCS. It takes a lot of effort and commitment to run a recurring Net that week after week demands the NCS be on frequency so that check-ins can reasonably expect that the Net will be held. Not everyone has the needed skill set. If you have the interest and can develop the necessary expertise, you will be in high demand and sought after for your leadership qualities. After you have finished your first Net, likely you will be amazed how many stations will call to congratulate you on your effort. And for weeks after, you will be encouraged by the positive comments received from Net participants. To get started, contact the NM of the Net that has captured your interest, and which is in need of an NCS or a back-up. You will be glad you did.

The MARCONI Program is funded by a Grant to the Meriden Amateur Radio Club W1NRG, from the Amateur Radio Digital Corporation, administered by the ARRL.

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MARCONI PROGRAM

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MARCONI OG Prog-7 BECOMING AN NCS FNL 1May2023



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