

Frequently Asked Questions about SEPAR

What is SEPAR?

SEPAR is an acronym for Surrey Emergency Program Amateur Radio, a non-profit, volunteer based component of the City of Surrey Emergency Program committed to providing Amateur Radio services in the event of an emergency or disaster. SEPAR will provide a communications link from the Surrey Emergency Operations Centre to the various emergency shelters and neighbourhoods in the city and provide general back-up communications to emergency services.

Where is SEPAR located?

SEPAR operates from the Amateur Radio room at the City's Emergency Operations Centre at the Number One Firehall. The mailing address is: 8767 132nd Street, Surrey, BC V3W 4P1.

Why was SEPAR created?

In recognition of the critical role that Amateur Radio can play in emergency communications, the City of Surrey wished to include an Amateur Radio component as part of its emergency plan. SEPAR fulfils this important role.

What are the SEPAR volunteer requirements?

- Must be 16 yrs. of age - for applicants aged 16-18 yrs, parental/guardian consent is required.
- Must complete a consent for criminal records search and personally take it to the Surrey RCMP. (There is no charge for this search)
- If you have a driver's license, you must provide a driving record, available from the Motor Vehicle Branch.
- Complete a Provincial Emergency Program (PEP) enrollment form.

Why is Amateur Radio used in an emergency?

Because it community based, widespread and reliable. On successful completion of a course and exam, an Amateur Radio operator is federally licensed to operate two-way radio and television equipment. 'Hams', as they are also known, spend many hours devoted to their hobby fine-tuning their equipment and making radio contacts around the globe. The 'Amateur' in Amateur Radio reflects the unpaid volunteer nature of the participants. Many Amateurs are professionals in technical, broadcast, IT and other professional fields.

Amateur Radio is an example of how leisure activities contribute substantially to the improvement of products and services and the standard of living in our many world cultures. Amateur Radio operators have frequently found practical on-the-job applications of ideas learned through their study of electronics and communications, and they continue to do so. Amateurs have been on the forefront of significant developments including Voice over Internet Protocol

(VoIP), data transfer and cellular telephony.

Amateur Radio has a proud history of assistance of service during emergencies. Because it is widespread and non-centralized there are countless examples of Amateur Radio's ability to communicate when commercial systems have failed. Recent Canadian examples include the Eastern Ice Storms, Winnipeg Flood, and 2003 B.C. Wildfires. In the United States, Amateur Radio provided critical communications after the 9/11 attacks, the Colorado Wildfires, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and in many other emergencies. Amateur Radio was one of the few links to the areas devastated by the Tsunami on December 26, 2004.

Mr. Brian Inglis, Task Force Leader of the Vancouver Urban Search and Rescue Team (USAR), recently deployed to New Orleans as a result of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina also reported in his debriefing that they became involved in a situation that severely impacted their ability to render assistance, because communications was almost non-existent. No commercial radio repeaters were functioning but Amateur Radio was successfully being used by other relief agencies. Although USAR has satellite telephone capability in their kit, congestion severely overloaded the system and they were unable to make use of the technology. USAR is now including an Amateur Radio component so that they can rely on a non-commercial fail-safe communications alternative. In fact, Amateur Radio is so reliable that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) astronauts use amateur radio equipment as a back-up communications system and many astronauts routinely make contacts with hams throughout the world.

In the City of Surrey, Emergency Social Services (ESS) has the responsibility to provide necessary clothing, food and shelter to residents affected by an emergency. To do so efficiently ESS staff work closely with the Red Cross, Salvation Army and many other agencies. ESS relies heavily on volunteers to staff their emergency relief centres, known as Reception Centres. These Reception Centres are located in neighbourhoods throughout the city.

As ESS has no communications network of its own, or with the other agencies involved, Amateur Radio has usually been relied upon to provide this essential component. The primary task of Hams has been to convey emergency messages between Reception Centres, provide information on persons seeking missing family members via the Red Cross (usually via packet radio – similar to wireless e-mail), provide back-up communications and damage reports from the field to emergency providers, and Amateur Radio can even provide live television coverage.

Frequently it is not a major emergency that requires Amateur Radio assistance. Hams also provide communications for searches and community events.

Does SEPAR offer training?

To train members and promote the Amateur Radio hobby, SEPAR sponsors voluntary training sessions to familiarize its members with the city emergency plan and the role of Amateur Radio. A regular weekly radio 'net' provides a meeting forum for members and an opportunity for discussion on emergency preparedness topics.

Practical training is provided through regular emergency exercises and activations for pre-planned community events. For example, during community events, Amateur Radio operators

provided communications between the event organizers, volunteers and emergency services. This was an invaluable service and helped to ensure better coordination of the event.

What sort of commitment does the SEPAR expect of its volunteers?

SEPAR does not require a large time commitment. A willingness to assist and participation in two to three volunteer exercises per year are all that is required.

Need more information?

Please visit the SEPAR website www.separ.comm.sfu.ca