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## Ham radio aids Delaware events

Operators to be the eyes and ears for officials at Return Day, Punkin Chunkin

BY WALLACE MCKELVEY • STAFF WRITER • NOVEMBER 4, 2010

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GEORGETOWN -- From his post at North Georgetown Elementary School, Jerry Martin will monitor Return Day traffic for the Sussex County Emergency Operations Center.

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A member of the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service, he has relayed messages from shelters during this year's blizzard and watched for distressed swimmers at the Sea Colony Make-A-Wish Triathlon.

For Martin, a 48-year-old former fireman and Navy veteran, it's about community service.

"I'm on disability, so I can't go join a fire company," he said. "Like a lot of us, I can't get out and do the really heavy-duty stuff, but I can operate my radios."

RACES, stationed out of the EOC during emergencies and major events, has become a vital resource for emergency responders.

"You never know when cell phones or power might go," said Sussex County spokesman Chip Guy. "The things you rely upon for everyday operations may not be there, but these folks are the lifeline when those connections are gone."

Even Radio Officer John Ferguson was stranded by this winter's snow drifts, but he said many of his group's volunteers were able to get out and assist officials.

Many of the messages were routine -- head counts from local shelters and requests for supplies -- but volunteers also relayed emergency messages in areas with compromised phone service.

"I didn't have to be on site for it to move smoothly, and it's a credit to our people," said Ferguson,

who's held an amateur radio operator's license for 49 of his 65 years.



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Sussex Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service members Jay Rutherford of Bridgeville and John Ferguson of Georgetown were busy setting up on Wednesday for the Return Day Festivities that are to be held today in Georgetown. (Chuck Snyder photo)

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After more than a decade's absence, RACES has once again been called upon to assist the Department of Transportation and law enforcement in providing traffic control for Return Day festivities. They will serve a similar function at Punkin Chunkin this weekend.

"Because of our relatively small size, we were primarily supporting the EOC from inside," he said. "Now that our numbers are growing, we're able to support the Mobile Command Unit when it's deployed to events."

Since it re-formed three years ago, Ferguson said the group has grown from six to about two dozen radio operators.

Walt Palmer, a retired television broadcaster who took up amateur radio in 1990, said the group will be the eyes and ears for officials at today's festivities.

The best-laid plans can be undone by a busy cell phone, he said.

"Cell phones are terrific, but if everyone's trying to call the same number at the same time, it's not going to work out," he said.

Palmer said volunteers stationed along the parade route will update coordinators about the procession's progress, as well as the departures of any officials.

"The person organizing the event isn't necessarily notified by Secret Service if a person gets whisked away," he said. "It could ruin someone's day if a VIP got lost."

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