COTN Trains to Keep Communication Flowing
by C. Matthew Curtin, KD8TTE

We all know the mantra "when all else fails," and expect that amateur radio will be able to provide communications services when normal phone and Internet service is disrupted. But how exactly does that happen, and what role can you play?

The Central Ohio Traffic Net (COTN) provides central Ohio's gateway to the National Traffic System (NTS), the ARRL's organized system of relay stations throughout the country who put messages into radiogram form and relay them from station to station until they reach their destination. We meet on the CORC repeater at 146.97 every day at 7:15 P.M. to move these messages—known as "traffic"—in and out of the area. We've been training radio amateurs to perform this service for over thirty years, and would like you to join us.

Traffic handling has three basic stages. The first is *origination* of traffic: taking a message from a person and formatting it into a proper radiogram, indicating the sender and recipient, message precedence, and instructions for how the message is to be handled along the way. The second is *relay* of traffic: using a formal procedure for getting the radiogram from one station to another such that it arrives at its destination matching the original, word for word and character for character. Relay can take place by voice, digitally, or CW. The third is *delivery* of traffic: actually handing the printed radiogram to the recipient, or talking to that recipient by phone or in person to see that the message is properly received. Working with us on COTN, you'll have an opportunity to participate in all three steps of traffic handling.

Moving traffic requires development and maintenance of skills through training and practice. COTN practices by handling radiograms on its daily net. We train by discussing the correct procedures for originating, relaying, and delivering traffic. Training takes place in person and on the air. In the past year we've conducted two types of exercises.

As we do every year, we participated in the League's Simulated Emergency Test (SET). While our sister organization ARES connected Emergency Operations Centers around the state together, NTS was moving traffic throughout the state and country. COTN held a total of 22 net sessions over the course of two days, with 26 stations moving 112 pieces of traffic. Everyone participating did so from home or wherever they happened to be operating.

We also conducted two exercises in conjunction with Franklin County Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). In those exercises, a severe weather event like a large tornado caused significant local destruction, overwhelming local first responders' response capabilities and taking out critical communications infrastructure needed to support phone and Internet service. While CERT was busy extracting and treating victims at a disaster scene, COTN had volunteers on the site helping victims to get information on their status and whereabouts to friends and family by originating and relaying that outbound traffic. Other COTN volunteers were operating from home as Net Control Stations, Relay Stations, or Section Net Liaisons.

Our Net Control Station directs the formal net to keep traffic moving efficiently and accurately. Relay stations take the traffic from the stations on the scene to keep it moving in NTS on its way to delivery. Some relay stations could deliver the message directly, for example, with a phone call in our area where phone service is working. In other cases, we used a Section Net Liaison station, one who can take traffic from our local VHF net and bring it to a net that covers the entire Section on HF, allowing for relay from station to station until someone locally can deliver the traffic.

If you're interested in developing the skills needed to participate in a formal net, to run a directed net, to relay traffic, as well a interfacing with the public and the agencies that serve the public in originating and delivering traffic, COTN has work for you! You can get started by visiting our "Getting Started" page on our web site at www.cotn.us, or on the air at 146.97 any day at 7:15 P.M.