

GLOUCESTER COUNTY AMATEUR RADIO CLUB

W2MMD · Mullica Hill, New Jersey

Keeping It Alive

Drills, Exercises and Training Sessions

*Things to do together in a county where
real activations are rare*

Public Service and Emergency Communications Working Group
September 2026

The Problem This Solves

Southern New Jersey does not have many disasters. That is a good thing to live with and a hard thing to build a volunteer program on. A group organized entirely around responding to emergencies, in a place where emergencies are rare, has nothing to do most of the time — and a group with nothing to do loses the people it most needs to keep.

The pattern is well documented. Groups do not usually collapse from a failure of goodwill; they fade because capable adults will not keep showing up for a monthly check-in net that asks nothing of them. One ARRL field guide to running exercises puts the diagnosis plainly: groups decline when they lack the challenge and stimulation that active and bright people need. The club has seen the same thing in its own membership, where newer members who do not find something concrete to do tend to drift away after a couple of years.

The answer is not to wait for a storm. It is to build a calendar of activities that use the same skills an activation would, and that are worth attending on their own terms. Everything in this document is something other groups actually run, adapted to what this club already has: a clubhouse available most Saturdays, an operating Winlink station, two repeaters, a Sunday night net, a partially outfitted trailer, and a membership with real technical depth.

THE DESIGN RULE

Every activity here does double duty. It is interesting enough that people want to come, and it exercises a capability a served agency would actually ask for.

An activity that is only fun builds no capability. An activity that is only worthy gets four people and then gets cancelled. The ones worth running are both.

A second benefit worth stating outright: most of these activities generate Task Book sign-offs and documented training events. A drive test, a deployment exercise, or a net run as a structured exercise is a training record — which is what turns an interested volunteer into a credentialed one, and what a hospital or emergency manager asks to see.

What Other Groups Actually Do

This is a survey, not a recommendation. What follows is drawn from programs that have been running long enough to prove they are sustainable.

Program	Who runs it	What it is
Winlink Thursdays	EmComm Training Organization, national	A weekly Winlink exercise on a fixed rotation: ICS-213 on the first Thursday, ICS-213RR on the second, a custom training exercise on the third, ICS-205 on the fourth, and a Field Situation Report on the fifth. Instructions are computer-generated and unique each week, submissions

Program	Who runs it	What it is
		go to a regional clearinghouse, and results are published with feedback. Open to anyone.
Winlink Wednesday	South Carolina ARES, and many other states	A weekly Winlink check-in. Send a short message with call sign, name, town, county and mode; results appear on a map the next day. Deliberately trivial to complete, and that is the point — it builds the habit and shows coverage. Iowa runs the same idea on Saturdays.
5th Saturday Exercise	Washington State ARES	A recurring drill on the months that have a fifth Saturday — four or five times a year. Check-in nets reporting to the state EOC and county EOCs, Winlink traffic, and equipment testing. The odd scheduling is the feature: it is infrequent enough to stay an event.
Full-scale exercises, twice yearly	Northern Florida ARES and others	Actual deployment of equipment to multiple sites against a written scenario, with injects, evaluators recruited from local emergency management, and a published After-Action Report. Planned on a four-month runway.
Simulated Emergency Test	ARRL, nationally, every October	The annual nationwide exercise. Nets activate, units deploy to simulated incident sites, messages originate on behalf of served agencies, and at least one net session runs on emergency power only. Results are reported to the Section.
Field Day and Winter Field Day	ARRL and WFDA	June and January. Field Day is the better known; Winter Field Day exists specifically because disasters do not wait for good weather.
Hands-on skills sessions	DeKalb ARES and many clubs	Connector installation, antenna building, radio programming. Unglamorous, well attended, and the reason people own working equipment.
Public service events	Nearly every active group	Parades, races, walks, bike rides. Low stress, real traffic, visible to the public, and the standard entry point for new volunteers.

THE PATTERN WORTH COPYING

The programs that survive have something small every week, something moderate every month, and something large two or three times a year.

The weekly item is nearly effortless and builds habit. The monthly item is a reason to come to the clubhouse. The large item is the one people remember and talk about. Skip any layer and the other two weaken.

Tier 1 — Weekly and Monthly, Almost No Setup

These cost nothing, need no venue, and can start this month. Their purpose is rhythm: something is always happening, and a member who wants to participate never has to wait for the next big event.

1. Join Winlink Thursdays *weekly · individual · free*

The single highest-value thing an individual member can start doing, and it requires no club decision at all. Each week the EmComm Training Organization publishes a unique, computer-generated exercise; participants complete the form and send it to their regional clearinghouse during the submission window, and results are published with feedback. The rotation covers exactly the forms a served agency uses — ICS-213, ICS-213RR, ICS-205 and a field situation report — so a member who participates for three months has handled every form in the standard set several times over, with someone checking their work.

Exercises: Winlink operation, ICS forms accuracy, following written instructions precisely — which is the skill that actually fails under stress.

How to run it: Self-study, immediately. Point members at emcomm-training.org. The club's role is to advertise it, run a session at the clubhouse for anyone who needs help with the first one, and then ask at meetings who is participating.

2. Turn the Sunday Nets into Training Events *weekly · net control · free*

The Sunday SKYWARN and ARES nets currently consist of little more than check-ins. Adding one structured element per week converts dead air into a documented training event without asking anyone for extra time. Rotate through: a practice ICS-213 sent by Winlink to the clubhouse station during the week with results read on the net; a structured weather observation in NWS format instead of a bare check-in; a short scenario from net control with stations passing appropriate traffic; a roll call taken on simplex to find out who is actually reachable without the repeater.

Exercises: Net discipline, message handling, coverage knowledge, Task Book sign-off opportunities.

How to run it: Group, on air. Needs one person willing to own net content — a good first leadership role for a newer member, since it takes organization rather than deep technical knowledge.

3. Start a GCARC Winlink Check-In *weekly · club-run · free*

Our own version of the Winlink Wednesday idea that South Carolina, Florida and Iowa have all proven. Members send a short Winlink message to a designated club address each week with call sign, name, location and the path used — gateway or peer-to-peer, VHF or HF. Publish the results. It is deliberately easy; the value is that it builds a weekly habit, and over a few months it produces a real map of who can reach what from where, which is information the club does not currently have.

Exercises: Winlink habit, gateway and P2P path testing, and a genuine coverage dataset as a by-product.

How to run it: Club-run. Needs one person to hold the address and post results. Pairs naturally with the Sunday net — read the check-in count on the air.

4. Monthly ICS Forms Practice *monthly · clubhouse or home · free*

Thirty minutes at the start of an EmComm Saturday, or as a homework item announced on the net. A scenario is described in two sentences; everyone fills out the appropriate form and sends it. The point is not the radio — it is that filling out an ICS-213RR correctly is harder than it looks the first six times, and nobody wants to be learning that at a hospital during an actual outage.

Exercises: ICS-213, ICS-213RR, ICS-309 logs, the Hospital Data Reporting Form, shelter status reporting.

How to run it: Group session. Ties directly to the Winlink Thursday rotation, so a member doing both gets reinforcement rather than duplication.

Tier 2 — Clubhouse Saturdays: Training Sessions

The clubhouse is available most Saturdays, which is an advantage most ARES groups do not have. These are teaching sessions — someone who knows the material walks a room through it and everyone leaves having done the thing rather than having watched it. Roughly ninety minutes each, one or two a month.

A scheduling note that matters more than it sounds: these should be advertised to the entire membership, not to an emergency communications mailing list. The framing is "come learn something useful," not "join the EmComm team." The team forms from the people who show up.

5. Winlink, Part 1 — Connecting the Components *90 min · clubhouse · hands-on*

The hardware session, already drafted as a lesson plan. Radio, interface, laptop, cables, audio levels. Everyone brings their own gear and leaves with it working, or leaves knowing exactly which part to buy. This is the session that has to be in person, because every failure in digital modes is a cabling or audio-level failure and none of them are solved by reading.

Exercises: Go-kit assembly, audio interface configuration, troubleshooting.

How to run it: Group, in person, at the clubhouse. Lesson plan already written.

6. Winlink, Part 2 — Operating It *90 min · clubhouse or Zoom · hands-on*

The software session. Winlink Express, templates, gateway sessions, peer-to-peer, and the ICS forms workflow end to end. Can run on Zoom for anyone who got their hardware working in Part 1.

Exercises: Message origination, gateway and P2P operation, forms handling.

How to run it: Group. Lesson plan already written. Run it two weeks after Part 1, not two months.

7. Winlink Radio-Only — No Internet Anywhere *90 min · clubhouse · hands-on*

The session that separates a real capability from a comfortable one. Gateway mode still depends on the gateway's internet connection; peer-to-peer does not. This session runs the whole workflow station to station with no internet path in it at all, which is the mode that matters when the infrastructure is the thing that failed. Most operators who say they know Winlink have never done this.

Exercises: P2P operation, path selection, the difference between a mode that works in a drill and one that works in an outage.

How to run it: Group session. Best run as a follow-on to Winlink Part 2, and best finished by a two-site test where the stations genuinely cannot see each other's screens.

8. APRS 101 and 102 *90 min each · clubhouse · hands-on*

101 covers what APRS is, getting a position on the map, and the path settings that determine whether you are helping the network or clogging it. 102 goes to the part people rarely use: messaging, bulletins, objects placed

on the map for an incident, and telemetry. The county has no published digipeater — establishing why, and possibly fixing it, is a genuine club project that comes straight out of this session.

Exercises: Position reporting, APRS messaging, path discipline, understanding the local network.

How to run it: Group session, two parts. The digipeater question makes a natural follow-on project for whoever gets interested.

9. VarAC and HF Digital Simplex *90 min · clubhouse · hands-on*

Keyboard-to-keyboard HF messaging that works without any infrastructure at all — no repeater, no gateway, no internet. For regional and interstate reach when everything local is down, this is the layer below Winlink HF. Worth pairing with a demonstration of what the club's own HF Winlink gateways on 7.10150 can do.

Exercises: HF digital operation, regional reach independent of all infrastructure.

How to run it: Group session. Needs an HF station, which the clubhouse has.

10. Code Plug and Programming Day *half day · clubhouse · hands-on*

Everyone brings every radio they own and leaves with the standard zone order programmed in all of them. Cables, software, and someone who has done it before for each radio family. This is the session that turns the frequency guide from a document into an actual capability, and it is the most concretely useful thing on this list for a new Technician who owns an HT and has never programmed it properly.

Exercises: The standard channel plan, radio configuration, and — as a by-product — a complete inventory of what equipment the membership actually owns.

How to run it: Group session. Schedule it after the frequency guide reaches v1.0, and run it again annually.

11. Go-Kit Build Day *half day · clubhouse · hands-on*

Members assemble and test deployable kits side by side against an agreed equipment list. The output is not a kit — it is a kit that has been switched on and proved. A kit that has never been powered up in the same room as somebody who could fix it is not a kit, it is a box.

Exercises: Deployment readiness, standardization, power and antenna practice.

How to run it: Group session. Needs an agreed strawman equipment list first, which is currently an open action item.

12. Antenna in Twenty Minutes *90 min · clubhouse grounds · hands-on*

A timed, repeatable drill: from a closed bag to a working wire antenna on the air. Run it several times so it gets faster. It is competitive enough to be fun, and it is the single capability an emergency manager finds most impressive, because it is the one their own staff cannot do.

Exercises: Field antenna deployment, mast and wire work, speed under mild pressure.

How to run it: Group session. Also the best Field Day documentation material the club can produce.

13. Fox Hunt *half day · countywide · fun*

A hidden transmitter and teams with directional antennas. It is the most purely enjoyable thing on this list and it has a real operational payoff: interference hunting is a service that repeater owners and, occasionally, public safety agencies genuinely need. Families can come.

Exercises: Direction finding, mobile operation, teamwork, county geography.

How to run it: Group activity. Low planning overhead and a good one to run when attendance needs a lift.

14. Mesh Networking Session *90 min · clubhouse · hands-on*

Meshtastic and MeshCore for low-bandwidth text over LoRa, and AREDN for high-bandwidth links. Neither replaces amateur radio, and that is worth saying in the room — but a mesh that carries text messages between a shelter and an EOC when nothing else is working is exactly the kind of general communications knowledge this program is supposed to bring to the table.

Exercises: Alternative data paths, node configuration, understanding what these technologies can and cannot do.

How to run it: Group session. Interest already exists in the club, which is half the battle.

Tier 3 — Deployment Exercises: Leave the Building

Training sessions build skills. Deployment exercises find out whether the skills survive contact with a parking lot, a cold morning, and a deadline. These are half-day activities, four to six times a year, and they are what an emergency manager is actually asking about when they ask what the club can do.

15. The Drive Test *half day · countywide · teams of two*

The frequency guide lists every repeater within twenty-five miles along with a straight-line distance, and it says plainly that straight-line distance predicts nothing. Split the list geographically, send two or three teams out with HTs and mobiles, and find out what actually works from Gloucester County. Several machines on the list are flagged as offline or status unknown — this settles them.

Exercises: Real coverage knowledge, mobile operation, and the difference between a documented repeater and a usable one.

How to run it: Group activity, teams of two. Directly produces the verification data the frequency guide needs to reach v1.0. This is the highest-value deployment exercise on the list right now.

16. Countywide Simplex Coverage Test *half day · countywide · everyone*

Everyone goes to a different part of the county and finds out who can hear whom on the ARES simplex frequency with no repeater in the path. Record it. The result is a map of what the group can do when the repeaters are down, which is a question nobody can currently answer and every served agency will eventually ask.

Exercises: Simplex operation, relay and net control without infrastructure, honest coverage data.

How to run it: Group activity. Pairs well with the drive test — same day, same crews, two datasets.

17. Parking Lot Deploy *half day · clubhouse or a site · timed*

Arrive with nothing set up. Establish a working station — voice on VHF, Winlink on the air, power independent of the building — and time every milestone. Photograph it with timestamps. The output is a single line that means more to an emergency manager than any amount of explanation: from arrival to full operational capability in X minutes with Y people.

Exercises: Rapid deployment, power systems, antenna work, and the documentation that makes it provable.

How to run it: Group exercise. Assign someone as documentarian whose only job is photography and the timeline — a good role for a newer member not yet confident at a station.

18. Two-Site Peer-to-Peer Relay *half day · two locations · teams*

Two teams, two sites, no internet and no repeater between them. Pass a stack of ICS-213 and ICS-213RR messages by Winlink peer-to-peer, with a third site relaying if the direct path fails. Score it on messages delivered accurately, not messages sent.

Exercises: P2P Winlink, relay operation, message accuracy under time pressure, path problem-solving.

How to run it: Group exercise. The natural graduation exercise after the Winlink training series.

19. Power-Out Exercise *half day · clubhouse · everyone*

Run an entire session — net, Winlink traffic, logging, the lot — with the clubhouse mains breaker off. Batteries, solar and generators only. Things will fail, and finding out which things fail while sitting in a familiar building is considerably better than finding out at a hospital.

Exercises: Emergency power, runtime estimation, equipment draw, and the discovery of everything that was quietly plugged into the wall.

How to run it: Group exercise. The SET requires at least one net session on emergency power, so this doubles as SET preparation.

20. Shelter Simulation *half day · clubhouse or a partner site · roles*

Set up as though the clubhouse were a shelter: a station, a log, a liaison position, and somebody playing the shelter manager handing over requests that have to become formal traffic. Add injects — a request for a resource that does not exist, a message with a missing address, a station that goes off the air. The skill being practiced is translating what a harried non-radio person says into a correctly addressed ICS-213.

Exercises: Liaison work, formal traffic origination, working with a served agency representative, operating under interruption.

How to run it: Group exercise with assigned roles. Strong candidate for a joint activity with the Red Cross once the relationship is re-established.

21. Hospital Familiarization Walk-Through *2 hours · partner facility · small group*

Not an exercise — a visit. Where would a station go, what is the RF environment like, where is the power, what does the facility's own emergency plan say about communications, and who would the operator report to. Every hospital operator should have walked the space before they ever have to work in it, and a visit is a low-commitment ask that often opens the door to a real exercise later.

Exercises: Site knowledge, relationship building, and the practical details that no plan captures.

How to run it: Small group, arranged with the facility's emergency preparedness staff. Requires the facility's own volunteer onboarding for anyone going airside.

Tier 4 — The Big Events

Two or three a year. These are the ones people remember, the ones that produce material for a served agency briefing, and the ones worth four months of planning.

22. ARRL Field Day *June · all weekend · everyone*

Already on the calendar. The change worth making is to treat it as a documented deployment exercise as well as a contest — timestamped photographs of the site going from empty to operational, a Winlink ICS-213 sent and confirmed from the field, and power independence photographed rather than assumed. The output is a two-page capability brief, not a score summary.

Exercises: Everything at once, plus the documentation that makes it usable afterward.

How to run it: Club event. Assign a documentarian in advance; the photographs nobody planned are never the right photographs.

23. Winter Field Day *January · one weekend · anyone willing*

The same idea in bad weather, which is the point — disasters do not wait for June. Smaller turnout, dramatically more honest results about what your equipment and your gloves can actually do.

Exercises: Cold-weather deployment, battery performance in the cold, and a realistic view of your own kit.

How to run it: Club event, smaller scale than Field Day. Genuinely instructive.

24. Simulated Emergency Test *October · one weekend · everyone*

The annual nationwide exercise, and the one that counts at Section level. Nets activate, stations deploy, messages originate on behalf of served agencies, and at least one net session runs on emergency power. Results are reported to the Section and become part of the club's public record.

Exercises: The whole capability set, under a scenario, with a reporting requirement at the end.

How to run it: Club event, coordinated with the Section. Full participation, not a token check-in.

25. A Full-Scale Exercise of Our Own *twice yearly · multiple sites · four-month runway*

A written scenario, several sites, injects delivered during play, evaluators recruited from local emergency management, and a published After-Action Report. This is the activity that most changes how an agency sees the club — partly because of what it demonstrates, and mostly because almost no volunteer group actually does it. The planning runway matters: a date locked four months out, the scenario written at three, injects and evaluators at two, and a rehearsal at one.

Exercises: Command structure, multi-site coordination, formal traffic at volume, and the discipline of writing down what went wrong.

How to run it: Club exercise with outside evaluators. Rotate who leads it — running one teaches the ICS structure more thoroughly than any course.

26. Joint Exercise with a Served Agency *annual · partner site · by invitation*

The destination for everything else on this list. A scenario developed jointly with the agency around a communications failure they actually worry about, a tabletop first, then a live exercise with real forms moving over real radio paths. Both the hospital work and the Red Cross relationship lead here.

Exercises: Everything, plus the only thing that ultimately matters — whether the agency would call.

How to run it: Joint. Built through the tabletop-first sequence rather than proposed cold.

27. Public Service Events *several per year · around the county · all levels*

Parades, races, walks and rides. Low stress, real traffic, visible to the public, and the single best first assignment for a brand-new member — they get on the air with a purpose, work alongside experienced operators, and feel useful on day one. Red Cross event standby assignments accept volunteers with minimal training, which makes them an unusually low barrier to a first real deployment.

Exercises: Net discipline, tactical traffic, working a position for a whole shift, and Task Book sign-offs.

How to run it: Club activity. Needs somebody to find the events and say yes to them, which is a standing job rather than a project.

Putting It on a Calendar

Nobody runs twenty-seven activities. The point of the catalog is choice. What follows is one workable shape for a year — roughly two clubhouse sessions a month, a deployment exercise each quarter, and three anchor events.

	Clubhouse Saturdays	Deployment / Big event
January	Code plug and programming day · ICS forms practice	Winter Field Day
February	Winlink Part 1 · Winlink Part 2	—
March	APRS 101 · go-kit build day	Drive test
April	Winlink radio-only · antenna in twenty minutes	Parking lot deploy
May	APRS 102 · Field Day preparation	—
June	Field Day preparation	ARRL Field Day
July	Mesh networking session	Fox hunt
August	VarAC and HF digital · ICS forms practice	Countywide simplex test
September	SET preparation · power-out dry run	Hospital walk-through
October	After-action review	Simulated Emergency Test
November	Two-site P2P practice	Shelter simulation
December	Training records review · next year's calendar	—

Running underneath all of it, every week and requiring nothing of the calendar: Winlink Thursdays, the GCARC Winlink check-in, and a Sunday net with one structured element in it. Those three are what make the program continuous rather than episodic, and they are the three that can start before anyone agrees to any of the rest.

How to Run One So It Works

The Four-Month Runway

This applies to the large exercises, not the Saturday sessions. The sequence below comes from groups that run two full-scale exercises a year without exhausting themselves.

When	Do this
Four months out	Pick the date and announce it as fixed. Secure the locations. Get editable ICS forms — 201, 205 and 206 at minimum.

When	Do this
Three months out	Write the scenario using the ICS-201 format. Decide which capabilities are being tested and write objectives against them. Recruit the leadership roles.
Two months out	Run any training the exercise assumes people already have. Write the message injects — both tactical and formal. Build the master event list. Recruit evaluators from outside the club.
One month out	Hold a rehearsal, on the radio, and find the holes. Fix what you can; write down what you cannot.
Within a week after	Publish the After-Action Report, including what went badly. Candid self-criticism in a published report is what convinces officials the group is serious.

Things That Make the Difference

- **Rotate who runs it.** Supervising an exercise teaches the ICS structure more thoroughly than taking the course does, and it develops the leaders the club says it is looking for.
- **Write the messages in advance.** Participants who are asked to invent their own traffic produce vague traffic and learn nothing. Hand them a stack of realistic message injects.
- **Include injects.** A station that goes off the air, a request for something that does not exist, a change of location mid-exercise. Plans survive until they meet an inject.
- **Recruit outside evaluators.** Someone from a served agency watching the exercise changes both the seriousness of the effort and the relationship afterward.
- **Give everyone a defined job.** A new Technician can log messages, run as a courier, or document the timeline. Unassigned volunteers leave early and do not come back.
- **Feed people.** Every account of a successful exercise program mentions the meal afterward. The debrief over lunch is where the honest findings surface.

Counting What Happened

Every activity should produce a record: who attended, what was exercised, what failed, and what changed as a result. This is not administrative overhead — it is the raw material for Task Book sign-offs, for the annual Section report, and for the conversation with a hospital or emergency manager that begins with them asking what the club has actually done.

The practical minimum is a one-page after-action note per deployment exercise and an attendance list per training session, held by whoever is tracking training. Anything more elaborate will be abandoned by March.

Where to Start

Six things, in order, none of which require a budget or a vote.

	Do this	Why first
1	Add one structured element to next Sunday's ARES net.	Costs nothing, needs nobody's permission, and turns an existing activity into a training event this week.
2	Announce Winlink Thursdays to the whole membership.	The best individual training available anywhere, free, and it starts the moment somebody decides to do it.
3	Schedule Winlink Part 1 and Part 2 two weeks apart.	The lesson plans are written. Two weeks apart, not two months — momentum is the whole point.
4	Pick a date for the drive test.	Produces the verification data the frequency guide needs, gets people out of the building, and is genuinely enjoyable.
5	Stand up the GCARC Winlink check-in.	One person, one address, fifteen minutes a week — and in six months it has built both a habit and a coverage map.
6	Put a twelve-month calendar on the wall.	Half of what kills these programs is that nobody knows what is happening next month.

THE SHORT VERSION

Something small every week, something moderate every month, something large two or three times a year.

Advertise all of it to the whole club, not to an emergency communications list — the team forms from whoever shows up.

Give every participant a defined job, write the messages in advance, and write down what went wrong afterward.

Almost everything in this document is free, and the first four items can start before the next meeting.

Sources

EmComm Training Organization — Winlink Thursdays and the semi-annual drills (emcomm-training.org). ARRL — Simulated Emergency Test guidance and the SET Player Handbook. ARRL Northern Florida Section — *How To Energize Your ARES / EmComm Group With Full Scale Exercises*. Washington State ARES — 5th Saturday Exercise program. South Carolina ARES and Iowa ARES — Winlink Wednesday and Winlink Saturday check-in programs. DeKalb ARES — published activity log. Washington County ARES/RACES and Williamson County ARES — Winlink training resources and Red Cross joint exercises.