

GLOUCESTER COUNTY AMATEUR RADIO CLUB

W2MMD · Mullica Hill, New Jersey

The Training Ladder

Certification Levels in ARES, AUXCOMM,

and the Served Agency Programs

*What each level means, what training it takes,
and how to get it done*

Public Service and Emergency Communications Working Group
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Why There Is a Ladder at All

Amateur radio operators sometimes assume that the reason emergency managers and hospitals do not call on them is that those agencies do not understand what amateur radio can do. The documented experience of groups around the country says otherwise. Agencies understand radio perfectly well. What they will not do is put an untrained, unverified volunteer inside an incident — not because the volunteer lacks skill, but because the agency has no way to know what that volunteer has been taught, and no framework for supervising someone who has not been through the same training their own people have.

The training ladder is the answer to that problem. It is a shared language. When you tell an emergency manager that you hold IS-100, IS-200, IS-700, and IS-800, you are not reciting course numbers — you are telling them that you understand span of control, that you know what an Incident Action Plan is, that you will not self-deploy, and that you know who you report to. Those four courses are the same ones their firefighters and EMTs take. That is the entire point.

Everything above that baseline works the same way. Each rung adds a capability the agency can name, verify, and assign. The ladder is not about status inside the radio club. It is about being usable to someone else.

THE PRINCIPLE

Agencies are not uninterested in amateur radio. They are uninterested in untrained volunteers.

A group that arrives with course certificates, a signed Task Book, and a demonstrated capability gets a fundamentally different reception than a group that arrives with handheld radios and good intentions.

A word on pace. Nobody climbs this ladder in a weekend, and nobody needs to climb all of it. Most members will settle at Level 1 or Level 2 and be genuinely valuable there — that is where the shift work gets done, and a program with ten solid Level 1 operators is worth more than one with a single credentialed leader and nobody to lead. The upper rungs exist so that the group has people who can plan, supervise, and sit at the table when an agency is building its communications plan.

The Ladder at a Glance

The table below is the whole structure on one page. The sections that follow describe each rung in detail, including what every course actually covers and how to obtain it.

Level	What you are	Core requirement	Typical time
Entry	Registered volunteer	FEMA SID, ARES registration, Task Book opened	An evening
Level 1 Basic	Field operator — works a position under supervision	FEMA Core Four, ARRL Basic EmComm, SKYWARN	2–4 months
Level 2 Intermediate	Capable operator — handles formal traffic and digital modes unsupervised	Level 1 plus ARRL Intermediate, Winlink and ICS forms proficiency	6–12 months
Level 3 Advanced	Net control, team lead, shift supervisor	Level 2 plus FEMA Professional Development Series, IS-288, ICS-300	12–24 months
Level 4 AUXCOMM	Credentialed auxiliary communicator recognized by emergency management	TRG-AUXCOMM classroom course plus a completed Position Task Book	Course availability dependent
Level 5 COMU	Works inside the ICS Communications Unit as RADO, COMT, or COML	State-sponsored COMU courses and task books	Multi-year

READ THIS BEFORE YOU WORRY ABOUT THE TOP OF THE TABLE

Levels 4 and 5 are not amateur radio credentials. They are emergency management credentials that amateur radio operators can earn. They require classroom courses that the state schedules, not online courses you can take tonight.

That means the honest plan for most people is: get to Level 1 in the next few months, get to Level 2 over the next year, and be positioned so that when an AUXCOMM class is announced in New Jersey you already hold every prerequisite and can register the day it opens.

Entry — Getting on the Roster

Before any coursework, three administrative steps put you into the system. None of them cost anything and all three can be done in one sitting. Until they are done, training you complete is not attached to anything.

FEMA Student Identification Number (SID)

Every FEMA course completion in the United States is filed against a Student Identification Number. It is free, it takes about five minutes, and it is permanent — you keep the same SID for life, across employers and organizations. Without one you cannot take a FEMA exam, so this is genuinely the first thing to do.

How to get it: Register online at the FEMA Student Identification System (cdp.dhs.gov/femasid). Self-service, no approval step, no waiting period. Write the number down somewhere you will still have it in five years.

ARES Registration

Registration with the Amateur Radio Emergency Service is handled through the Gloucester County Emergency Coordinator, under the Southern New Jersey Section. Registration is what makes you a member of the organization rather than an interested bystander — it puts you on the roster the EC works from, on the notification list, and into the reporting that the Section files with ARRL. It does not obligate you to respond to anything.

How to get it: Contact the Gloucester County Emergency Coordinator directly, or ask at any EmComm Saturday session at the clubhouse and someone will make the introduction. ARRL membership is not required to register with ARES, though some ARRL training benefits are members-only.

Open a Task Book

The ARES Standardized Training Task Book (July 2024, version 3.0) is the record that follows you. It lists the training and the demonstrated skills required at each of the three ARES levels, with places for an evaluator to sign off when you have actually done a thing rather than merely read about it. It is recognized across ARES organizations nationwide, so progress recorded in Gloucester County means something if you move to another section.

Open it early even though you will not fill much of it in at first. Its real value is that it tells you exactly what is expected next, which removes the most common reason people stall — not knowing what to do after the online courses run out.

How to get it: Downloadable free from the ARRL ARES resources page. The EC or the group's training coordinator issues and tracks it locally. Sign-offs come from exercises, nets, and public service events — see "How to Actually Get This Done" near the end of this document.

A NOTE FOR BRAND-NEW LICENSEES

Nothing at the Entry or Level 1 rung requires operating experience, expensive equipment, or knowing anybody in the club. A Technician licensed last month can create a SID the same day and start IS-100 that evening.

The FEMA material is not technically demanding and has nothing to do with radio theory. It is about how incidents are organized. You are on exactly equal footing with a fifty-year operator in that classroom.

Level 1 — Basic: The Field Operator

A Level 1 operator can be handed a position at a shelter, a hospital lobby, a staging area, or a net control station and be trusted to work it under supervision. They know how the incident is organized, they know their place in it, they can pass traffic accurately, and — critically — they know what not to do. This is the rung that the overwhelming majority of actual emergency and public service work gets done from.

Every served agency this group has worked with, and effectively every ARES organization in the country, treats the four FEMA courses below as the non-negotiable floor. The ARRL 2025 ARES Plan requires them for all participation levels. Colorado wrote the same requirement into state law. North Carolina's experience is blunt: groups without this training are not activated during declared disasters.

The FEMA Core Four

All four are free, online, self-paced, and offered by the FEMA Emergency Management Institute. Each ends in a multiple-choice exam that you can retake. Certificates arrive by email and should be sent to the group's training coordinator for central filing.

IS-100.c — Introduction to the Incident Command System *(2–3 hours)*

The foundation course. It explains what the Incident Command System is, why a common organizational structure matters when agencies who have never worked together are suddenly thrown into the same event, and how the command structure is built — Incident Commander, the general staff, and the functional sections of Operations, Planning, Logistics, and Finance/Administration. It covers span of control, common terminology, the idea that the structure expands and contracts to fit the incident, and the discipline of working through a single chain of command. Almost everything else in this document assumes this course.

How to get it: Free online at training.fema.gov. Good candidate for a group work-through at the clubhouse — the material rewards discussion.

IS-200.c — ICS for Single Resources and Initial Action Incidents *(3–4 hours)*

Takes the framework from IS-100 and applies it to the incidents you will actually see: the smaller, shorter events that make up the vast majority of activations. It covers leadership and management at the single-resource level, delegation of authority, the initial briefing and transfer of command, the beginnings of the planning process, and how to organize resources at an incident that has not grown large enough to need a full command structure. This is where ICS stops being a diagram and starts being something you use.

How to get it: Free online at training.fema.gov. Do it soon after IS-100 while the terminology is fresh.

IS-700.b — An Introduction to the National Incident Management System *(2–3 hours)*

NIMS is the national framework that ICS sits inside. This course covers resource management — how personnel and equipment are typed, requested, tracked, and demobilized — plus command and coordination structures above the incident level such as Emergency Operations Centers, Multiagency Coordination Groups, and Joint

Information Systems. For a volunteer communicator, the most useful part is understanding how an EOC relates to an incident in the field, because that is frequently exactly where you will be sitting.

How to get it: Free online at training.fema.gov. Note that IS-700 is a prerequisite for the ARRL Basic EmComm course, so take it before signing up for that.

IS-800.d — National Response Framework, An Introduction (3 hours)

The widest view of the four. It describes how the whole national response system is organized, introduces the Emergency Support Functions — with ESF #2, Communications, being the one that directly concerns this group — and explains the roles of local, state, tribal, and federal government along with the private sector and voluntary organizations. It explains why the response to a large disaster looks the way it does, and where a volunteer communications organization fits within it.

How to get it: Free online at training.fema.gov. Often the driest of the four; a group session with discussion makes it far more tolerable than doing it alone.

Amateur Radio Emergency Communications

Basic EmComm — ARRL Introduction to Emergency Communications (8–12 hours)

Formerly numbered EC-001, this is the amateur-radio-specific layer on top of the ICS and NIMS framework. It covers the role and limits of the amateur volunteer, how an ARES or AUXCOMM group is organized, net operation and discipline, message handling and accuracy, working with served agencies, personal preparation and deployment readiness, safety, and the behavior expected of someone representing the service inside another organization's operation. It is the course that translates "I know how to use a radio" into "I know how to be useful to somebody else on a radio." Prerequisites are IS-100 and IS-700.

How to get it: Online through ARRL's Learning Center, self-paced. Free to registered ARES members. Very well suited to self-study, though the message-handling sections benefit from practice on the air afterward.

Weather Spotting

SKYWARN — NWS Basic Spotter Training (2 hours)

The National Weather Service trains volunteer spotters to recognize and report severe weather using standard criteria and terminology — what actually constitutes reportable hail, wind damage, flooding, or rotation, and how to report it so the forecast office can use it. This group already runs a Sunday night SKYWARN net, which makes the training immediately applicable rather than theoretical. It also builds the relationship with the NWS Mount Holly office, which is itself a served agency relationship.

How to get it: Free from the NWS Mount Holly office, offered as periodic in-person sessions and online. Watch the Mount Holly announcements each spring. A group can also request a session, which makes an excellent EmComm Saturday program.

WHAT LEVEL 1 GETS YOU

Roughly twenty hours of coursework, all of it free and nearly all of it available online tonight.

At the end you hold the same baseline credential set as the professional responders you would be working alongside, and you are assignable to a real position at a real event.

Level 2 — Intermediate: The Capable Operator

Level 2 is where a volunteer stops needing supervision. The distinction is not that a Level 2 operator knows more radio theory — it is that they can be given an objective rather than an instruction. Handed a laptop, a radio, and a stack of blank forms at a hospital during a phone outage, a Level 2 operator can set up, establish a path, move formal traffic in the format the agency actually uses, keep a log that will survive review, and hand the position off cleanly at shift change.

This rung is less about courses and more about demonstrated skill. There is one formal course, and then there is proficiency that has to be built by doing.

Coursework

Intermediate EmComm — ARRL Intermediate Emergency Communications (10–15 hours)

Builds on the Basic course with deeper treatment of the areas where volunteers most often fall short in practice. It covers tactical and formal message handling in more detail, net control operation, working within an ICS structure as a communications resource, interoperability between amateur and non-amateur systems, deployment logistics, and the documentation an operator is expected to produce. Where the Basic course teaches you to participate, the Intermediate course teaches you to be responsible for something.

How to get it: Online through ARRL's Learning Center. Self-paced. Basic EmComm and the Core Four are the assumed starting point.

Demonstrated Proficiency — Digital Messaging and ICS Forms

This is the capability that distinguishes a group agencies call from a group that merely exists. An emergency manager or a hospital already has people who can talk on radios. What they do not have is a way to move a structured, written, auditable request when the phones, the fax, and the internet are all down at once. That is the gap amateur radio fills, and Winlink is how it is filled.

The Level 2 standard is not "has used Winlink." It is the ability to originate, transmit, receive, and acknowledge the specific forms agencies work from, over both a gateway and a direct station-to-station path with no internet involved anywhere. Specifically:

- **ICS-213, General Message** — the standard form for formal traffic between ICS positions. Fill it out correctly, send it, confirm receipt, and file the copy.
- **ICS-213RR, Resource Request** — how an incident asks for people, equipment, or supplies. The form an agency most wants to see move when it matters.
- **Hospital Data Reporting Form** — bed capacity, resource status, and patient information between a facility and emergency management. Directly relevant to this group's hospital work.
- **Shelter status reporting** — the equivalent for Red Cross operations.
- **ICS-309, Communications Log** — the running record of every message handled at a position. Unglamorous and the first thing anyone asks for afterward.

- **Peer-to-peer, radio-only operation** — passing all of the above station to station with no gateway and no internet path. This is the capability that matters when infrastructure is actually down, and the one most often skipped in practice because gateway mode is easier.

How to get it: Group work sessions, not self-study. The clubhouse Winlink station exists specifically for this, and the two-session Winlink training on the calendar covers hardware setup first and operation second. Monthly practice traffic and the semi-annual EmComm Training Organization national drills keep the skill alive. Reading about Winlink teaches nobody anything.

Task Book Level 2 Sign-Offs

The Task Book's second level requires demonstrated performance witnessed by an evaluator — serving as net control, deploying to a public service event, completing an exercise assignment, handling traffic accurately under observation. These cannot be self-certified, which is exactly what makes them worth something to an agency.

How to get it: Public service events, the Sunday night nets when run as structured exercises rather than check-ins, the annual Simulated Emergency Test in October, and joint exercises with served agencies. Sign-offs come from participating, which is why the group's exercise calendar is a training document as much as an operational one.

WHAT LEVEL 2 GETS YOU

The ability to be given an objective instead of an instruction — which is the only kind of volunteer an agency can afford to place somewhere and then stop thinking about.

It is also the rung where the group's actual selling point lives. Digital message handling over a path that does not depend on the phone system is the capability agencies cannot staff themselves.

Level 3 — Advanced: The Leader

Level 3 operators run things. They serve as net control for a complex event, supervise a shift, lead a deployed team, act as liaison to a served agency, or plan an exercise. The skill being certified here is management under pressure, not operating, and the coursework reflects that — it shifts away from radio entirely and toward exercise design, damage assessment, public information, and the logistics of running a volunteer organization inside somebody else's incident.

The FEMA Professional Development Series

Seven free online courses that together form FEMA's foundational curriculum for emergency management personnel. They are required for ARES Advanced level. None are difficult individually; the challenge is simply working through seven of them, which is why steady pace beats ambition here.

Course	Title	What it covers
IS-120	An Introduction to Exercises	How exercises are designed, conducted, and evaluated — discussion-based versus operations-based, objectives, and the after-action process. Directly applicable to running a tabletop with a hospital or a county agency.
IS-230	Fundamentals of Emergency Management	The whole emergency management cycle: mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery. How programs are organized and funded, and who does what at each level of government.
IS-235	Emergency Planning	How emergency operations plans are actually written — the planning process, hazard analysis, plan structure, and how annexes and appendices fit together. Useful background for writing the group's own scenario plans.
IS-240	Leadership and Influence	Working through people without formal authority, which describes a volunteer coordinator's situation exactly. Team building, motivation, and influence without a chain of command to lean on.
IS-241	Decision Making and Problem Solving	Structured decision processes under time pressure and incomplete information, and the common failure modes that lead groups to bad decisions.
IS-242	Effective Communication	Written and oral communication, listening, and audience awareness. Not radio communication — organizational communication, including briefings and reports.
IS-244	Developing and Managing Volunteers	How volunteer programs are recruited, trained, supervised, recognized, and retained. Arguably the single most relevant course in the series for anyone running a group like this one.

How to get them: All seven are free and online at training.fema.gov. Self-study is realistic here — unlike the Core Four, these do not gain much from group sessions. A practical pace is one course a month, which completes the series in well under a year.

Additional Level 3 Coursework

IS-288 — The Role of Voluntary Organizations in Emergency Management *(2 hours)*

Covers how voluntary agencies — the Red Cross, the faith-based and community organizations, and the volunteer groups that appear after a disaster whether anyone asked them to or not — fit into the official response structure, and how Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster coordination works. Highly relevant to a group whose likeliest served agencies are a hospital system and the Red Cross rather than a government EOC.

How to get it: Free online at training.fema.gov. Short and worth doing early rather than last.

ICS-300 — Intermediate ICS for Expanding Incidents *(3 days, classroom)*

The first course on this ladder that cannot be taken online. It covers incidents that grow beyond initial response — unified command, the full operational planning cycle and the Planning P, developing an Incident Action Plan, organizing a larger incident's resources, and formal transfer of command. It is taught in a classroom with group exercises because the planning cycle only makes sense when you work through it with other people playing the other positions.

How to get it: Offered by the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management and by county emergency management agencies, usually several times a year and usually free. Watch the NJ OEM training calendar. Registration typically requires the Core Four already in hand, so have your certificates ready.

ICS-400 — Advanced ICS for Command and General Staff *(2 days, classroom)*

For complex incidents requiring the full command and general staff structure, area command, and multiagency coordination. Genuinely beyond what most volunteer communicators need, and included here for completeness — it matters mainly for someone heading toward a Communications Unit Leader role or a senior position in a county organization.

How to get it: Classroom only, through NJ OEM or a county agency. ICS-300 is a prerequisite. Realistically a later-career step, not a near-term goal.

Advanced EmComm — ARRL Advanced Emergency Communications *(varies)*

The third course in the ARRL sequence, aimed at those managing communications resources rather than operating them. Also relevant at this level is EC-016, Public Service and Emergency Communications Management, which covers running a volunteer emergency communications program — recruiting, training, agency relationships, and program administration. Either is appropriate for someone moving into a coordinator or liaison role.

How to get it: Online through ARRL's Learning Center. Self-paced.

WHAT LEVEL 3 GETS YOU

The qualifications to run a shift, a net, an exercise, or a served agency relationship — and to be the person an agency's own staff talks to rather than the person they assign somewhere.

A program needs only a handful of people at this level. It cannot function without any.

Level 4 — AUXCOMM: The Credentialed Auxiliary Communicator

AUXCOMM is the point at which a volunteer stops being an amateur radio operator who helps out and becomes a recognized auxiliary communications resource within the emergency management structure. It is administered by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, not by any amateur radio organization, and that is precisely the source of its value: an AUXCOMM-trained volunteer has been taught to the government's standard, by the government, and the credential is understood by emergency managers who have never heard of ARES.

Where the ARRL courses teach an amateur how to support an agency, AUXCOMM teaches an auxiliary communicator how to work inside the Communications Unit alongside paid staff — how the Communications Unit is structured, how the ICS-205 Incident Radio Communications Plan is built and used, how interoperability actually works across disciplines and agencies, and what the auxiliary role's authority and limits are. It is the single highest-value credential on this ladder for the purpose of getting through an agency's door.

THE PRACTICAL CONSTRAINT

AUXCOMM is a classroom course delivered on a schedule set by state emergency management and CISA. It is not available on demand and not available online.

The realistic strategy is preparation, not pursuit: complete every prerequisite, get on the notification lists, and be able to register the day a class is announced in New Jersey or a reachable neighboring state. Classes fill, and they fill with people who were already ready.

TRG-AUXCOMM — Auxiliary Communications Course *(20–24 hours, classroom)*

Typically delivered over three days. Covers the auxiliary communicator's role within the ICS Communications Unit; the structure and function of that unit; developing and reading the ICS-205 Incident Radio Communications Plan; interoperability among amateur, public safety, and government systems including the national interoperability channels; the National Interoperability Field Operations Guide and the Auxiliary Communications Field Operations Guide as working references; resource management and typing of communications assets; operational security and the legal framework the auxiliary operates under; and the professional conduct expected of someone embedded in an agency's operation. Prerequisites are typically the FEMA Core Four plus a demonstrated background in amateur or auxiliary communications.

How to get it: Offered by state emergency management agencies and CISA Emergency Communications Division coordinators. Monitor the NJ OEM training calendar, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency calendar, FEMA Region 2 announcements, and CISA training bulletins. The Section Emergency Coordinator and the county EC generally hear about offerings first, which is a good reason to be registered and known to them.

The AUXCOMM Position Task Book

Completing the course does not by itself make someone a qualified AUXCOMM resource. As with every ICS position, qualification comes through a Position Task Book — a document listing the tasks that must be performed and observed. The AUXCOMM task book generally requires participation in at least two exercises or

real incidents, with performance evaluated and signed by two different qualified evaluators, and final certification by the authority having jurisdiction.

This is the part that most often stalls. The course is the easy half; finding qualified exercises with qualified evaluators is the hard half, and it is a direct argument for the group building real exercise relationships with served agencies rather than waiting for one to appear. Every joint exercise with a hospital or a county agency is a potential task book opportunity for somebody.

How to get it: Issued at course completion. Signed off through documented exercises and activations. The group's own exercise program — tabletops and live exercises with served agencies, and the annual Simulated Emergency Test — is the most reliable local source of qualifying opportunities.

State-Level Variation

Recognition of AUXCOMM is a state and local matter. Some states have built formal credentialing programs around it with identification cards, background checks, and defined activation procedures; others recognize the training without a formal program. New Jersey's arrangements should be confirmed with the Section Emergency Coordinator rather than assumed, and anyone pursuing the credential should expect to satisfy whatever additional state or county requirements apply on top of the federal course.

Level 5 — COMU: Inside the Communications Unit

The Communications Unit is a formal part of the ICS Logistics Section, and its positions are professional ones — usually filled by public safety communications staff. They are open to qualified auxiliary personnel, and an amateur who reaches this level is no longer supporting the communications function from outside; they are part of it.

The recognized positions, in the order most people encounter them:

Position	Title	Role
AUXC	Auxiliary Communicator	The credentialed auxiliary position described at Level 4. The normal entry point for amateur operators into the Communications Unit.
RADO	Radio Operator	Operates communications equipment at an incident under the direction of the Communications Unit. The most accessible COMU position and often the first one an auxiliary fills.
COMT	Communications Unit Technician	Installs, configures, maintains, and repairs the incident's communications equipment — programming radios, deploying caches, troubleshooting systems, assessing coverage. The position that most directly uses the technical depth amateurs tend to already have.
INCM	Incident Communications Center Manager	Runs the incident communications center and supervises the operators working in it.
COML	Communications Unit Leader	Leads the entire Communications Unit. Responsible for the ICS-205 Incident Radio Communications Plan, for the communications architecture of the incident, and for everyone working the function. Approximately five days of classroom instruction plus an extensive task book.
THSP	Technical Specialist	A general ICS category used to bring specific expertise into an incident. Frequently the route by which an amateur with a distinctive capability — HF, Winlink, mesh networking, antenna work — gets formally assigned.

How to get these: All are state-sponsored classroom courses with position task books, taught through NJ OEM or the state interoperability coordinator's office, with ICS-300 generally required before entry. These are multi-year commitments and they are appropriate for one or two people in a group this size, not for the membership at large.

Why COMT Is Worth One Person's Effort

Of the COMU positions, the Communications Unit Technician is the one where an amateur's existing skills transfer most directly and where the value to an agency is most obvious. Emergency managers regularly find themselves with radios that need programming, a coverage problem nobody can explain, a cache of equipment that will not talk to another agency's cache, or an antenna that needs to go up somewhere awkward. Those are problems that amateurs solve routinely and that agencies frequently cannot staff.

One honest limit is worth stating plainly: programming public safety P25 systems requires manufacturer software, system keys, and authorization that a volunteer generally will not hold, and the COMT credential does not confer them. The value an amateur COMT brings is in the surrounding work — coverage assessment,

interoperability planning, cache deployment, antenna and RF problem solving, and building the ICS-205 — not in touching the agency's trunked system.

ICS-205 Capability

Independent of any credential, the ability to write an Incident Radio Communications Plan is a skill worth developing in two or three members. The ICS-205 documents every frequency assignment for an incident — channel names, functions, frequencies and tones, and which division or group uses what. Incident commanders need it, most amateurs have never built one, and the Auxiliary Communications Field Operations Guide contains everything needed to learn. It is a capability that can be demonstrated to an agency before anyone in the group holds a single COMU credential.

Agency-Specific Training: The Parallel Ladder

Everything above is portable — the certificates mean the same thing in any county in the country. Alongside it runs a second, entirely separate set of requirements that each served agency imposes on anyone operating inside its facilities, and these are not portable at all. Completing the whole federal ladder does not admit you to a hospital. The hospital's own requirements do that.

Plan for both tracks from the start. The federal ladder is the one you control; the agency track runs on the agency's schedule and the agency's paperwork, and it frequently takes longer than anyone expects.

Hospitals

Hospitals are the most demanding of the likely served agencies, and for good reason — anyone inside a clinical facility is inside a regulated environment with patients in it. Expect most or all of the following before being permitted to operate on site:

- **HIPAA privacy training.** Any volunteer who may overhear or handle information about patients must complete the facility's privacy training. Amateur operators pass exactly the kind of traffic — bed counts, patient movement, casualty numbers — where this matters, and the obligation is legal, not procedural. Expect this to be non-negotiable and facility-specific.
- **Volunteer onboarding.** Application, background check, and often a health screening including immunization records and a tuberculosis test. Badging follows. This is the step that takes weeks, which is why it must start long before an activation rather than during one.
- **Facility orientation.** Site-specific safety, emergency codes, evacuation routes, infection control, and where a volunteer may and may not go. Hospital emergency codes vary by facility and are announced over the public address system — knowing them is a basic safety matter.
- **Hospital Incident Command System (HICS).** Hospitals use a healthcare-specific adaptation of ICS with its own position titles, job action sheets, and forms. Someone who knows standard ICS will recognize the structure immediately but should not assume the vocabulary transfers unchanged.
- **Facility-specific communications procedures.** Where the radio equipment lives, who authorizes its use, what gets reported to whom, and how the amateur position fits into the hospital's own emergency operations plan. Learned on site, from the facility.

How to get it: Entirely through the facility's own emergency preparedness and volunteer services offices, on their schedule and in their systems. It cannot be self-studied or substituted. Start early — the background check and health screening alone can run several weeks.

American Red Cross

Red Cross operations require registration as a Red Cross volunteer, which includes a background check and the organization's own online training modules covering its structure, disaster services, and volunteer expectations. Beyond the basics, the Red Cross runs Disaster Training Institute events annually in New Jersey, and its Disaster Services Emergency Communications program has its own training and its own frequencies.

The useful discovery about Red Cross work is that event standby assignments — first aid stations at community events, small-scale shelter support — accept brand-new volunteers with minimal training. That makes it one of

the few genuinely low-barrier entry points on this entire document, and a good first assignment for someone who has finished the Core Four and wants to do something real.

How to get it: Register directly with the Red Cross as a volunteer; training modules follow automatically in their system. The Section's ASEC for Red Cross liaison is the natural point of contact for connecting amateur radio volunteers to the right part of the organization.

County and Municipal Emergency Management

Requirements vary widely by jurisdiction. Some counties require registration as a RACES member with a formal appointment, some require county-issued identification with a background check, and some require attendance at county-run orientation or ICS courses even when the volunteer already holds the equivalent FEMA certificates. Assume nothing transfers automatically and ask.

The two tracks side by side. The table below shows what runs in parallel:

	Federal / amateur ladder	Agency-specific track
Who sets it	FEMA, CISA, ARRL, NWS	The individual hospital, chapter, or county
Portable?	Yes — recognized nationwide	No — valid at that agency only
Cost	Free for nearly everything on this ladder	Usually free, but may include screening costs
Timing	You control the pace	The agency controls the pace; allow weeks
Examples	IS-100, Basic EmComm, AUXCOMM	HIPAA, badging, facility orientation, HICS

How to Actually Get This Done

The courses on this ladder are not hard. Very nearly all of the failure in volunteer training programs happens for an entirely different reason: people start alone, stall somewhere in the middle, and quietly stop. The structure below exists to prevent that.

What Works as Self-Study

Some of this material genuinely does not need a room full of people. The FEMA Professional Development Series, IS-288, and the ARRL online courses are well suited to working through alone at whatever pace fits around everything else. They are reading-and-exam courses, they are available at any hour, and discussion adds relatively little.

The one discipline that matters for self-study is telling somebody your target date. Reporting a completion to the training coordinator, and having the coordinator ask about it if it does not arrive, is the difference between a course finished and a course permanently at sixty percent.

What Needs a Group

Other material should not be attempted alone, for reasons that have nothing to do with difficulty.

- **The Core Four**, especially IS-100 and IS-800. The material is abstract until somebody in the room says "that is exactly what happened at the fire last year." Working through these together in one or two Saturday sessions also produces something the solo route never does — a cohort who went through it at the same time.
- **Winlink and ICS forms**. This is hands-on or it is nothing. Every practical problem in digital messaging is a configuration problem, a cabling problem, or an audio-level problem, and none of those are solved by reading. The clubhouse station and a Saturday afternoon solve all of them.
- **Task Book sign-offs**. By definition these require an evaluator watching you do something, so they require an event to do it at.
- **Go kit building**. Assembling and testing a deployable station alongside people who have already built one is faster by an order of magnitude than working it out alone from forum posts.

WHY HOMEWORK DOES NOT WORK

Every group that has tried to build capability by telling members to go take some courses has gotten the same result: a handful of self-starters finish, everyone else intends to, and a year later the roster looks exactly as it did.

Scheduled sessions at the clubhouse work because they convert a task with no deadline into an appointment on a Saturday. Show up, work through it with other people, leave with a certificate. The social element is not a nicety — it is the mechanism.

Classroom Courses and How to Catch Them

ICS-300, ICS-400, TRG-AUXCOMM, and every COMU course are classroom-only and scheduled by agencies that do not announce far in advance. Catching one requires standing readiness rather than searching:

- Hold every prerequisite in advance, with certificates filed and retrievable in an afternoon.
- Monitor the NJ OEM training calendar, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency calendar, FEMA Region 2 announcements, and CISA bulletins.
- Stay known to the Section Emergency Coordinator and the county EC. They frequently hear about offerings before they are published, and seats go to people they already know are ready.
- Be prepared to travel and to take time off. These run on weekdays more often than not.

Keeping Track

A training coordinator holding a simple roster — who has completed what, with the certificate on file, and what each person is working on next — is worth more to this program than any single course on this ladder. Without it, nobody can answer the one question an agency will actually ask, which is "how many trained people can you give me?" With it, that question takes thirty seconds and the answer is credible.

The role does not require technical depth. It requires someone organized who will follow up, which makes it one of the better leadership opportunities in the group for a newer member.

Where to Start

If you have read this far and want to begin, the entire first step is three things, and none of them takes a weekend.

	Do this	Takes
1	Create a FEMA Student Identification Number at cdp.dhs.gov/femasid . Free, permanent, no approval step.	5 minutes
2	Take IS-100.c online at training.fema.gov — or better, come to the next EmComm Saturday at the clubhouse and work through it with everyone else.	2–3 hours
3	Tell the Emergency Coordinator or the training coordinator that you want to register with ARES and open a Task Book.	One conversation

That is the entry to the ladder. From there, IS-200, IS-700, and IS-800 complete the Core Four, the ARRL Basic EmComm course adds the amateur radio layer, and SKYWARN training connects to a net this group already runs every Sunday. Somewhere in the middle of that you will have gone from a licensed operator to someone an agency can actually use, which is the whole object of the exercise.

THE SHORT VERSION

Level 1 is reachable by anyone, free, and mostly doable online in a few months. It is also where most of the real work gets done.

Level 2 takes a year and is built by practicing, not by reading.

Levels 3 through 5 matter for the few people who will lead — and the group needs only a few.

Whatever level you reach, the hospital or agency you work with will have its own training on top of it. Start that paperwork early.