

'Old' amateur radio technology still modern way to communicate after emergency

By Don Coble
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ORANGE PARK — Amateur radio operators know that in a pinch a pair of Slinkys can be stretched between two trees as an antenna. But in the aftermath of a disaster, natural or otherwise, that kind of creativity often can bring some relief and comfort to the most-desperate situations.

Members of the Clay County Amateur

Radio Operating Club and Orange Park Amateur Radio Club hosted their "Introduction to Amateur Radio" last weekend at Orange Park High. Now that hurricane season is here, the group sponsored an open house to show their equipment and experience is ready for the worst.

"It may be old technology, but it's very necessary," said Scott Roberts, a coordinator with the local Amateur Radio Emergency Service.



Action News JAX meteorologist Corey Simma explores ham radios with Scott Roberts.

During recent hurricanes in Florida, emergency offices relied on the older technology to coordinate rescue and relief.

Radio operators usually are capable to communicating when landlines and cell phone towers are down. As long as there's a power source, most often a gas-powered generator or batteries, and an antenna, they are able to relay much-needed information. Most of the time, they have retractable antennas that can tower well above the highest pile of debris. When nothing else is available, operators have used Slinkys to send and receive HF, VHF and UHF radio frequencies.

"We had a radio at every shelter in Clay County after Hurricane Irma," Roberts said. "We were able to share information with everyone else when there wasn't any way to communicate."

The North Florida Chapter also sent members to Puerto Rico for three weeks in

the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, and they dispatched nearly a dozen members to the Panhandle following Hurricane Michael.

"It was hard to believe the destruction in the Panhandle," Roberts said. "There wasn't anything left. Nothing. It was complete devastation. They didn't have any cell towers, so they were isolated. We came in and set up posts. We were able to talk to members back in Duval County, and they were on the phone to the state's [Emergency Operations Center]. They were able to get help where help was needed most."

The group also helped following hurricanes Matthew and Hermine, Roberts said.

The field days gave radio enthusiasts a chance to test their equipment and "show people what we do," Roberts said. They talked to ham radio operators from 49 of 50 states, three Canadian provinces and the International Space Station.

There also was one operator who worked solely in Morse code.

While cell phones and computer links play a prominent role in communicating now, there still are 740,000 ham operators in the U.S. and more than 1.75 million worldwide.

And they're anything but amateurs.

"We are professional at being amateurs," Roberts said.

The open house was designed to attract interest. Anyone interested in becoming a licensed amateur radio operator can take a free two-day course at Orange Park Medical Center on July 12-13.