



From major earthquakes to hurricanes, volcanic eruptions and widespread flooding, the Caribbean region has experienced it all, sometimes with horrific consequences.

Oftentimes, vital communication systems, such as landline telephones and cellular phones fail, as they too become susceptible to the catastrophic events, leaving vulnerable citizens stranded. The need for supplemental or back-up communication systems, therefore becomes vital.

Director General of the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM), Ronald Jackson, tells JIS News that Jamaica is one of the leading countries in the region in Information Communication Technology (ICT), from a disaster risk management point of view.

“We have the only tier three of the English speaking Caribbean, and we are not going to stop there. We are going to be pushing the envelope in ensuring that we can use telecommunication to advance our work, to save lives and to ensure that we can begin to restore our country after every disaster event,” he said.

Volunteers Needed

To do this, ODPEM needs to build on its corps of volunteers in the Emergency Affiliated Radio Service (EARS). Emergency radios play an important role as a community resource and here in Jamaica, EARS needs volunteers to serve the public in times of national emergencies or disasters.

Senior Telecommunications Engineer at ODPEM, Ruel Corniffe, explains that EARS is a special project developed by the Telecommunications Department, to build emergency telecommunication capacity at the community level; and to support key response agencies with emergency telecommunication services during disasters.

In fact, the project operates under the Mission that: 'From any community in Jamaica or the Caribbean Region, the Emergency Affiliated Radio Service, shall be in a prepared mode to rapidly establish and provide reliable Emergency Telecommunication Services to support National and Regional Emergency/Disaster Operations.'

The National Emergency Affiliated Radio Service was conceptualized and formed by Telecommunications Consultant, Antonio Peterkin, and Mr. Corniffe, who are both members of the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) Information and Communication Systems Advisory Committee.

Mr. Peterkin, who is passionate about EARS, believes that the lack of proper communication management that was evident after the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, should serve as a lesson to Jamaica.



Learning from the Past

Addressing an ODPEM event in December 2012, where emergency radio equipment were handed out to some at-risk communities in St. Catherine, Mr. Peterkin stated that: "We need to learn from the past, and given our increased dependence on the critical infrastructures, including telecommunications, and the speed at which these systems can collapse in a disaster, it makes sense for us not to be naïve, but to note the importance of getting telecommunication capabilities up and running as quickly as possible."

The National Emergency Affiliated Radio Service is a move in that direction. It currently has a network that comprises licensed amateur radio operators, citizens band radio operators, marine radio operators, community emergency response teams and persons who have voluntarily registered their qualifications and equipment for emergency communications duty in the public service when disaster strikes.

However, the number of volunteers has been getting smaller. Factors such as a mandatory requirement for volunteers to know Morse code in order to obtain a licence, as well as ageing and low levels of publicity, have been cited for the declining numbers. As a result, ODPEM is now on a drive for volunteers to join EARS.

The agency says that it needs “persons who recognise how crucial our back-up service is to those agencies that respond in times of emergency and to members of the public we serve.”

In a release, ODPEM says that “every licensed radio operator or any individual with the desire and commitment to serve, whether a member of the Jamaica Amateur Radio Association or not, Citizens Band Radio Association or any local or regional organisation, all are eligible for membership in the Emergency Affiliated Radio Service.”

ODPEM to Provide Training

Mr. Corniffe explains that training will be done by the ODPEM Telecommunications Department, Jamaica Amateur Radio Association and Abacus for Communities. The agency signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the latter two months ago, that will see Abacus conduct studies and research on community level risks, recruit community leadership volunteers and seek funding to undertake programmes and projects.

He further informs that the training programme will include courses in Basic and Advanced Emergency/Disaster Telecommunications; Satellite Communications; Broadband Wireless Systems in The Disaster Zone; Amateur Radio Emergency Communications and Basic Repairs and Troubleshooting of Equipment.

The first phase of the project will seek to recruit, train and equip some 360 emergency telecommunication operators islandwide. Mr. Corniffe explains that when these volunteers are trained, they can be called on to provide service anywhere in the region during times of disaster.

At least one of the issues posing a barrier could soon be addressed by the Minister of Local Government and Community Development, Hon. Noel Arscott, under whose portfolio ODPEM falls.

Speaking on behalf of the Minister at an ODPEM event in December, Senior Director of Hazard Mitigation in the Ministry, Philbert Brown, informed that Minister Arscott has committed to approach his fellow Parliamentarians to discuss the legal requirements now in place regarding the need for persons who operate amateur radios to have knowledge of Morse code in order to obtain licences.



Community Engagement

In the meantime, the Telecommunications Department at ODPEM, under the guidance of Mr. Corniffe, has been conducting basic Community Emergency Telecommunications training in some communities across the island. Some of these communities receive equipment once the training is complete.

Last year, a total of 119 residents from the communities of Browns Hall, Content, Giblatore, Gregory Park, Princessfield, Riversdale, Rivoli, Springvale, Thompson Pen and Waterford in St. Catherine received practical and theoretical training in Basic Emergency Telecommunications and were presented with emergency radios valued at US\$5,260 or J\$474,000. This was made possible through a partnership between ODPEM and HelpAge International.

Rivoli resident, Clive Robinson, was part of the training programme and was happy to

participate. “I have received training and it did a lot for me, namely to serve my community and if possible other communities as well. Having the radio is something very good, because it might be our only means of communication,” he says.

In the meantime, the Telecommunications Department at ODPEM is in the process of developing a training manual. It has also sent an application to the Spectrum Management Authority, for the allocation of special frequencies for the operations of EARS.

The ODPEM is inviting persons who are interested to be part of EARS to contact the Telecommunications Department at 2-4 Haining Road, Kingston 5.