

Santa Clara County Communications Outage Unofficial Event Report

Prepared for Cupertino OES
21 April 2009

1. Introduction and Background

This report is a summary of the notes taken by Jim Oberhofer KN6PE, Emergency Coordinator for the City of Cupertino ARES/RACES, during the South County Communications Outage debrief held at the SCC RACES quarterly meeting on 16-May-09.

This summary is written for the purpose of recording the experiences, insights, observations, and comments from various city and county ARES / RACES members who participated in or responded to the South County Communications Outage. The intended audience of this report is for Cupertino OES.

NOTE: This summary is not an official report of the event, and has not been reviewed by any member of the Gilroy, Morgan Hill, or South County ARES/RACES team or any Emergency Management Agency for accuracy or correctness. See the County or City After Action Reports for the official report.

Acronyms

- ARES: Amateur Radio Emergency Service; 1 or 2 organizations to which amateur radio operators belong for public service; ARES is sponsored by the American Radio Relay League (www.arrl.org)
- ATT: AT&T, one of several communications service provider in Santa Clara County.
- EOC: Emergency Operations Center
- MACS: Mutual Aid Communicators. Amateur Radio responders who are qualified for mutual aid assignment within Santa Clara County.
- RACES: Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service; sponsored by the FCC and directly affiliated with local governmental emergency services.
- SCC: Santa Clara County
- SJM: San Jose Mercury

2. Type/location of Event / Drill / Exercise

- Event Type: Loss of Communications
- Event Identifier: n/a
- Event Name: South County Communications Outage
- Location: Cities of Morgan Hill, Gilroy

3. Description of Event / Drill / Exercise

On Thursday 9-April-2009, Santa Clara County officials declared a local emergency after someone intentionally cut an underground fiber optic cable in south San Jose, causing a widespread phone service outage in southern Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties that included disruption to 911 emergency phone service.

The outage affected some cell phones, Internet access, and about 52,200 Verizon household land lines in Morgan Hill, Gilroy and Santa Cruz County, according to the Santa Clara County OES. The cell phone networks affected were Verizon, Nextel, Sprint and some AT&T.

Full network service was restored by 6:00am Friday 10-April-2009.

4. Chronological Summary of Event / Drill / Exercise

The following is an incomplete description of the event based on (i) published newspaper timelines and (ii) SCC RACES email notifications, and (iii) personal recollection of the responders. If it was not said during the debrief or was in news reports, it is not written below. Times are approximate. See the official After Action Reports for details. All events listed are as they were reported; this is not a complete list.

Local Time	Reported event
9-May-09	
0130	SJM: Fiber-optic cables are cut in two underground locations in San Jose
0200	Gilroy 9-1-1 detected as down, extra police staff brought in
0330	SJM: A cable in San Carlos, owned by Sprint Nextel, was also reported as cut.
0630	Morgan Hill RACES activated; Police knocking on home doors of volunteers for activation
0715	SCC: 1 st RACES responder in County EOC, Emergency Net is activated
0830	Morgan Hill: request to County for Mutual Aid Communicators
0900	SCC EOC Staffed
0900	Gilroy: EOC activated
0930	Gilroy: EOC Briefing, understands the extent of the event
0930	Morgan Hill: first MACs on scene
1030	ATT: The cut has been located off of Monterrey Highway in Blossom Hill. Crews are onsite assessing the damage to plan how the restoration will proceed
1158	ATT: 3 of the 4 cables are completely severed and the 4th is partially severed. There is slack on one side only and all cables must be fusion spliced.
1200	SCC: gets a sense of the Gilroy/Morgan Hill event
1300	Gilroy: request to County for Mutual Aid Communicators
1420	SJM: SJ Police: Sabotage caused phone outage in Santa Clara, Santa Cruz counties.
1420	ATT: Best case ETR for completing splicing of these 3 cables is 8PM PDT. It has been determined that the most critical services are on the 3 48-fiber cables. The 360-fiber cable previously believed to be partially severed was completely severed and is now spliced.
10-May-09	
0100	SJM: All service reported as restored to fixed and mobile customers of AT&T, Verizon and Sprint Nextel.
0600	ATT: network is fully restored

5. Not included

6. Interacting Systems, Agencies, and Programs:

Include mutual aid systems (law enforcement, fire/rescue, medical, etc.); cooperating entities (utilities, American Red Cross, Sheriffs Office, City Departments, etc.); telecommunications and media interactions.

Recorded notes from the SCC-EC Debrief

The following are observations and comments made by County RACES staff, local city RACES staff, and MACs participating in the event.

In General

1. Someone observed that in the military, the first attack is to take out Command and Control (includes communications). While the city was responding to the telephone outage, there was a sense that this was not the complete event, and EOC staff was waiting for the “other shoe to drop”.
2. Banks did not open. Some opened to one person at a time to make a withdrawal. Apparently, the intent was to reduce the risk of a hold-up since there would be no way to contract the Police.
3. General uneasiness knowing that, in our telecom/connected society, that none of the phone worked.

Gilroy Event comments

4. Operated under a RACES Activation.
5. EC arrived at the radio room with his own radios from home. When up and running, contacted County.
6. Emergency Manager wanted to know who they could talk to and how.
7. Armed guards were stationed outside the EOC.
8. Used packet, but had problems with tactical calls; received a list of county facilities to check. This apparently was previously performed as part of the City's response.
9. Instructions were sent to the local schools to send home messages to the parents on what to do, but the schools wanted bilingual messages to be sent home. Unclear from the briefing whether any messages were carried home.
10. County hospital asked for hams.

Morgan Hill Event comments

11. Operated under a RACES Activation.
12. Police went door to door of volunteer homes to make the notification of the emergency
13. County message form worked fine
14. Needed RACES health & welfare checks more often
15. Food was brought in

Public Safety

16. MACs were deployed to assignments around the city to act as communication points for the public for public safety (intersections, fire stations, hospitals, etc.). However, the public was not aware of the extent of the problem.
17. CERT signs were deployed with responders but were considered ineffective; people did not know who MACs were, what they were doing, or how we could help.
18. Signage was critical. There was nothing evident that would lead the public to assume that MACs were communicators and could relay for help.
19. Public Communications: Gilroy 1610 AM radio stations identified locations that were staffed communication sites; Channel 46 (Hispanic) did a piece on the incident, City Channel 17 made announcements. No assessment as to how effective these were.
20. General conclusion: the public was clueless about the problem, what it meant to them, or what to do.

County Operations

21. SCC did not know what the city operations were doing until early afternoon of the event.

Use of Volunteers

22. MACs were deployed to the affected areas at the request of Morgan Hill and Gilroy. MACs were tracked from their home locations to their assignments, with periodic Health and Welfare checks by County Resource Net Control.
23. MACs were assigned to various locations, some at Fire Stations: the thinking was that people needed help would go to fire stations.
24. One MAC was assigned to a Fire Station, but was told to stay in his car. MAC presence at Fire Stations was in the event the Fire Crews left, then the MACs would take walk-up requests for help.
25. Training was important, and worked well.
26. Gilroy covers more areas. Public Safety (or DPW) put up signs on the freeway exits, then put MACs there as communications focal point if public needed to call for help.

7. Improvements, Conclusions, Recommendations:

As applicable, include a description of actions taken, assignments, associated costs or budget, timetable for completion or correction, and follow-up responsibility.

The following is the author's summary of the key Improvements, Conclusions, and Recommendations.

What worked?

1. MAC Training; deploying, tracking, and managing Mutual Aid Communicators worked out well.
2. Good net control handling both at County and at the Cities.
3. Use of South County Repeater for command chat between Morgan Hill and Gilroy
4. MAC response was enthusiastic and welcomed by the city EOC staff; plenty of good visibility for their efforts; positive press reports.

What didn't work / needs improvement?

1. Signage. Nothing available to help the public know that MACs were communications points
2. Volunteer notification. This was resource intensive given that the phones were out.

Recommendations

3. Signage. Need to pre-plan this type of event (big signs readable by a passing car, Orange, large print, multi-purpose, i.e.: "Emergency Communications Here"). Communications outages will also occur during infrastructure events.
4. Vests. There was discussion on the nature of identifying ourselves; putting RACES on our vests is meaningless to the public. Consider COMM or COMMUNICATIONS to clearly ID our function. Same for FIRST AID responders, etc).
5. Investigate alternate ways of making first responder, volunteer, and community notifications of non-evident events when phones are inoperative.
6. Suggestion: Carry a book in your go-kit... an assignment could get boring.
7. Banks were inoperative... credit cards did not work. Carry money; put change and bills in your Go Kit.

<< end >>