



WCF ARES® Communicator

Winlink – How and Why

January 2026

Fellow ARES® Members,

[Editor's Note: This month we have a guest author, Gary Bishop, K4GHB, from Polk County ARES.]

Winlink Global Radio Email ® is a network of amateur radio and authorized government stations that provide worldwide radio email using radio pathways where the internet is not present¹. Winlink Express (the software program) provides the capability to convert completed forms into data (specifically, Extended Mark-up Language or XML) that is transmitted and then used to populate a corresponding form upon receipt. Information about Winlink Global Radio Email ® can be found at <https://winlink.org/>

The form templates include formats of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Incident Command System (ICS), Weather, Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) and regional forms. Because the system is designed to only send the data fields and populate the forms on the receiver's computer optimal use of bandwidth is achieved.

Messages can be addressed to any email using a store and forward program reminiscent of the dial up software used in the 80's to send email. The radio serves as the modem and the message is sent to a remote hub. As with the old dial up programs, the mailbox must be checked to receive incoming messages.

Messages can also be sent to Smartphones using the SMS email of the recipient. A reply can be sent from the smartphone and received by the sender's station. The respondent in this case is not using a radio and therefore does not have to be a ham.

Winlink users must have a current Amateur Radio License. Winlink Express includes a sophisticated spam blocking system to automatically prevent unsolicited emails. The integrity of the system includes a well-guarded secure login algorithm.

Winlink nets provide a structure for training and practicing Winlink skills. For example, Winlink Wednesday is a national net with typically over 1000 participants. The net is managed by KN4LQN David Chesterfield. Information about Winlink Wednesday can be found at <https://winlinkwednesday.net/>

Starting a local net with your club or ARES group can help members install the software and learn how to send and receive email. News and weather reports can also be received through Winlink Express.

Once members understand what Winlink offers they should be motivated to configure the interface from their computer to their radio. Depending on the availability of Winlink RMS (Radio Message Server) Gateway stations members can use anything from a simple HT to an HF radio to participate in a weekly Winlink net.

Section Cabinet

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Assistant Section Manager

Section Emergency

Coordinator

Section Traffic Manager

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Assistant Section Manager

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Dee Turner, N4GD

Christine Duez K4KJN

William Miller N1CDO

Dan Noah WX4DAN

Winlink runs on PC's using the Windows operating system. Compatible software is available for other operating systems, but they do not typically include the standard forms. For basic text messaging these are accepted on most Winlink nets.

Having members bring their laptops or PCs to a meeting allows a facilitator to help members download and set up the software on their system. Using a Wi-fi connection members can use the Telnet option to send messages to each other during the session. Members can also populate their Winlink contact and distribution lists.

During the meeting it is a good time for members to be informed of the local stations that accept Winlink messages. Typically, these are packet stations but some stations using HF and an NVIS antenna can connect to nearby stations on the HF bands.

Members can review the forms and determine which forms they want to practice with. Our local Winlink net, in Polk County, has a current rotation of the Winlink Check In form, The SITREP forms, the Preliminary Damage Assessment form and the ICS-213 standard message form. For the 5th week in the month the members send text messages to their smartphones.

Using Telnet is a good way to learn the software and how forms are used but members should learn how to interface their radio to be able to send and receive messages during internet outages. The Winlink Check In form includes field that members select to report on the methods they are using to send their check ins.

Due to the variety of radios that can be used for Winlink each member will need to research how to set up their radio. Radios with USB connections will need to have drivers installed for their radios. Users with Windows 11 may need to install a legacy driver to work with their radio. Radios without a USB connection will need a USB sound card interface device and software to use their radio.

Members that are FT-8 operators have already established the connection from their radio to their PC but to send efficiently they will need to acquire VARA (EA5HVK Weak Signal Software). VARA is designed for High Performance Data Transmission and is available for HF, VHF and UHF frequencies. To use VARA for VHF and UHF, an RMS station with VARA needs to be in range. A slow version of VARA is free. The license allows for HF, VHF and UHF frequencies. More information about VARA can be found here: <https://rosmodem.wordpress.com/>

Once members have installed the software, learned the process for composing messages and completed interfacing their computer with their radio they become an asset for your emergency communication system. HF stations will provide more reach in situations where the local Winlink stations are overburdened or offline.

Winlink nets are not held in real time but over an operating window established by the Net Manager. Typically, these are 24-hour periods. Messages are sent to a Net Controller who compiles a list of participants and sends a report of the results of the net to the participants. Teams will probably want to avoid Wednesdays so as not to compete with Winlink Wednesday.

Weekly nets are particularly important for HF stations due to the variable nature of HF propagation Winlink node stations come and go. Fortunately, the program allows the saving of favorite stations that users can select from a drop-down list. A listing of the current RMS Stations is part of the Winlink package. This file is updated based on propagation factors and station information.

Both the forms and the stations tables are updated on a frequent basis. Keeping these files up to date will allow data fields to match on the forms and provide the best probability of success. these files can be downloaded via the internet or

radio. Downloading via radio during an emergency would be an inefficient use of system bandwidth and emergency power. Having a weekly net will prompt users to download these files when the internet is available.

It is important to report the results of the Winlink net during voice nets to promote the activity to new hams and reinforce the importance of the activity, establishing a webpage with step-by-step instructions on how to set up Winlink and the weekly forms schedule provides a reference to interested hams regarding how to get started.

The Net Report is compiled by the Net Controller and sent to an Interested party such as the EC for the county. A distribution list of the net participants can be maintained in the Winlink system and used to send the results back to the participants. In an actual emergency Winlink messages will need to be sent directly to those that need and can act upon the information. Identifying these recipients is an essential part of the planning process and should be part of periodic drills.

Sometimes there are problems or suggestions regarding the forms from our participants. The Winlink managers have a google group that will consider ideas for improvement and implement those deemed as valued added to the system.

[SEC's note: Winlink has become our primary contingency communications method for ARES and AUXCOMM operations. All ARES members should become proficient in Winlink's configuration and use during events and incidents. Thank you to Gary, K4GHB, for his excellent guidance on getting started at your club.]

WCF ARES In Action:



We had about 20 folks attend the December 13th ARES Meeting at the Tampa Bay Hamfest. This was our first in-person ARES meeting in over 2 years. Chuck Johnston, ASEC, updated the group on the planned DARK START exercise in February. Several of our ECs presented their ongoing initiatives in their respective counties. SEC Dave Rockwell gave an overview of the Section and National programs. Next meeting is scheduled for February 21, 2026, via Zoom.

Figure 1 SEC Dave Rockwell, W4PXE leads ARES Meeting (ARRL photo by Darrell Davis, KT4WX)

Upcoming ARES Events:

Dates	Event
Feb. 6-7, 2026	Section-wide Communications Exercise, DARK START .
Feb. 21, 2026, 0900 Eastern	WCF Section ARES Quarterly Meeting, via Zoom.
May 23, 2026 (Tentative), 1300 Eastern	WCF Section ARES Quarterly Meeting, in-person, venue to be determined (we welcome volunteers to host.)

Call to Action:

We are looking for guest authors and guest editors for the main body articles. If you feel confident writing an article, please feel free to send a draft to our SEC. If you would rather provide a topic and key points, you can be a guest editor, and our section ARES team will develop the article. In this case, it will take a little longer to get it published.

Also, we need our ARES team to submit events of interest to all ARES members or specific counties. These could be public service events, community events, or social events. Please submit events at least 60 days prior so we can make sure they are listed in the next published Communicator.

We need pictures and descriptions of ARES events to include in our ARES In Action segment. Show off your ARES team. These can be exercises, drills, or just weekly/monthly meetings. We would really like to see ARES members in action providing COMMs at an event, maintaining equipment, or participating in training. Include member names and call signs, so we can caption the photos correctly and give our members the credit they deserve. Remember to ask their permission to use the photo. We especially like to see members wearing their logo shirts and/or reflective vests. Try not to look like an antenna farm. Also, give us a short description of the event.

ⁱ Quoted from the Winlink website, <https://winlink.org>.

Sincerely,
Dave Rockwell, W4PXE
Section Emergency Coordinator
ARRL® West Central Florida Section
Email: w4pxe@arrl.net





ARES Field Reports

[Logout](#) David Rockwell, W4PXE, WCF SEC

[ARES Home](#) [Submit Form 2](#) [Submit Form 4](#) [List Reports](#) [Summary Reports](#)

Form 4 - ARES Monthly SEC Report

[Print this page](#)

Success! The following information was submitted by David Rockwell, W4PXE, WCF SEC for **West Central Florida, November, 2025.**

Total number of ARES members:	421
Difference in ARES members from previous month:	N/D
Number of DEC/ECs reporting this month:	9
Total number of DEC/ECs in section:	9
Number of ARES net sessions held:	45
Number of ARES net sessions held with NTS liaison:	18
Number of participants in nets:	940

	Number	Person-Hrs
Exercises this month:	1	60.00
Training events this month:	7	162.00
Public service events this month:	1	4.00
Community service events this month:	2	49.00
Emergency events this month:	0	0.00
SKYWARN events this month:	10	177.00
Meetings this month:	17	228.00
Unclassified events this month:	19	106.00

Call signs of DEC/ECs reporting:

W4PXE, W4PXE

Activity Details:

CHARLOTTE COUNTY-----
Conducted drill with county Emergency Management on 11/07/2025.

DESOTO COUNTY-----
Nothing significant to report.

HARDEE COUNTY-----
Conducted three sessions of the Hardee County ARES Net on Monday November 3, 10, and 17.
There was no net held on Monday November 24 in observance of Thanksgiving. Had a total of 17
checkins for a total of 52 minutes of net time. Total volunteer time for nets was 1.2 hours.

HIGHLANDS COUNTY-----

Nothing significant to report.

MANATEE COUNTY-----

The monthly Membership Meeting of the Manatee County Emergency Support Group, Inc. (ARES/RACES) was held at the Manatee County EOC on 11/25/2025. Following introduction of new members and visitors, we reviewed The Cecil Fox, KF4CSM/SK Radio Estate Sale and the first of three Cecil Fox Memorial Go-Kits. We then heard announcements from the EC and all the AECs. The Feature of the Month was titled, "The Roles of non-Credentialed members during an Emergency Activation." The Question of the Month was, "Connecting on Packet, only one station at time?" A monthly EmComm Staff (AEC's, Deputies, and Liaisons) Meeting was held via Zoom on 11/5/2025.

The monthly MCESG, Inc. Board of Directors Meeting was held via Zoom on 11/11/2025.

Two EOC Training Sessions were held in the EOC Planning Room on 11/19/2025 and 11/26/2025.

PINELLAS COUNTY-----

No nets were held during Thanksgiving week. Members participate in a training and maintenance sessions every Wednesday at the county EOC. Eight members participated in the Run for All Children on 11/8.

POLK COUNTY-----

We also held Simplex net. Counting all messages between our 4 quadrants, each with its own NCO, we had 38 contacts with stations trying to reach as many quadrants as possible. Winlink nets had 66 participants and GMRS nets had 105 participants this month.

SARASOTA COUNTY-----

Four weekly Winlink check-ins. Members attended a Red Cross Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon.

PASCO COUNTY-----

Salvation ARMY turkey hand out. 3 members 16-member hours. Coax repair at EOC, 4-member hours.

SEC-----

Attended the Tampa Bay Hamfest in Plant City. Staffed the ARRL booth for 20 hrs. Conducted 1.5 hour Section ARES Forum with 20 attendees.

Official Emergency Stations-----

N4NOA, Hillsborough County, Bill Johnson.

ARES NET QNI

WCFARES 3

HCARES 3

SFARES 15

KO4IHP, Sarasota County, Tim Gardner.

Checked into WCF ARES Net on 3rd, 10th, 17th | Total traffic =3, Total time = 114

Check in to SRQARES via Winlink on 4th, 11th

KM4WXX, Sarasota County, Sanford Wyatt.

et Manager for Ares uhf/vhf and Eagle Net 39 hrs.

KR4X, Hillsborough County, Larry Gispert.

O.E.S. Report from KR4X for November 2025

checked in 4 times for 4 hours to the WCF ARES EC/OES Net on 3.940 mhz

checked in 4 times for 4 hours to SFL ARES Net on 3.940 mhz

checked in 3 times for 3 hours to the CGCWOA CW Net on 14.052 mhz

checked in 1 time for 1 hour to the HCARES/RACES Net on 444.425 mhz NBFM

total of 12 hours of activity with NO miles driven

Administrative and Other Comments:

CHARLOTTE COUNTY-----

Submitted by James Nelson, W4AII, ComtechraLLC@gmail.com.

DESOTO COUNTY-----

Submitted by Doug Christ, KN4YT, kn4yt@yahoo.com.

HARDEE COUNTY-----

Was a slow month and the first hurricane season since 2021, that Hardee County ARES did not have an activation.

Submitted by Darrell Davis, KT4WX, kt4WX@arrl.net.

HIGHLANDS COUNTY-----

Submitted by Jeff Bronsing, KJ4NEO, kj4neo@gmail.com

MANATEE COUNTY-----

November 2025 Membership Metrics;

1) 56 Active Members

2) 41 Qualified (73%) - 17 at Level 1, 18 at Level 2, 6 at Level 3

3) Amateur Licensees: 26 Extra, 4 Adv, 14 Gen, 12 Tech

HAM Radio Classes are planned for February 2026 at Trailer Estates. Enrollment is now open.

The 11th Annual River Regatta in Bradenton is scheduled for February 20th and 21st.

The Admin Site; KM4EC-10 Winlink Packet RMS is experiencing Internet losses due to site firewall. Deployment of the Dual-Mode (Packet/VARA-FM) Winlink Gateway has been pre-empted by the, "MARCI Radio Project."

West Bradenton; The MAN-2 Repeater is now fully operational on 146.820.

Myakka City; The Antenna has been scheduled for installation at the site for a UHF Repeater (MAN-19).

A host of reference documents, training materials and Monthly Membership Proceedings can be found on our website; WWW.MCESG.ORG

For more details, please feel free to contact me anytime by phone or text at (727) 542-4729 or by email at spark003@live.com

73,

Steve Park, W4OEP

Submitted by Steve Park, W4OEP, spark003@live.com.

PINELLAS COUNTY-----

Submitted by Will Scott, W7WMS, will.w7wms@gmail.com.

POLK COUNTY-----

We had an uneventful November and celebrated with a ARES Dinner Party for hams and XYLS.

Submitted by Christine Duez, K4KJN, cduetz10@yahoo.com.

SARASOTA COUNTY-----

Submitted by Michael Kearney, KG7KIQ, mbk7@comcast.net.

PASCO COUNTY-----

Submitted by Timothy Cunningham, KM4YGV, tdc@earthling.net.

*Send comments or questions about this page to [ARES Support](#).
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