



WCF ARES® Communicator

Sometimes All Else Does Fail – Dealing with Alternate Communications Outages

April 2026

Fellow ARES® Members,

[This month we welcome Clayton Parrott, Radio Officer, Pinellas Auxiliary Communications Service as our guest editor.]

In February's **ARES® Communicator**, Mike Drake, WA1RYQ, gave us an excellent overview of the PACE (Primary, Alternate, Contingency, Emergency) Planning Process. Most of our supported agencies have alternate and contingency communications plans. Many of our ARES® members have expressed frustration that they are not being called upon to provide radio communications. Newer, more resilient communications systems have precluded relying on amateur radio during most of the recent emergency incidents. The need for us ARES members to set up the old go-kit and grab the microphone has decreased, but it hasn't gone away.

On January 14, 2026, the Verizon cellular network experienced a complete system outage. Fortunately, Verizon was able to restore service within a few hours. Many of our supported agencies have moved to using Starlink as their alternative or contingency communications. While Starlink is very reliable, it is subject to software issues, disruptions by geomagnetic storms, and prolonged dense overcast.

Many alternative communications capabilities are based on having an internet connection either land-based or satellite-based. The internet is subject to disruption. The land-based infrastructure for the internet is subject to damage from wind-blown debris or underground communications vaults being flooded. During the aftermath of Hurricane Idalia, the central office for one of the regional internet service providers (ISP) flooded, disrupting internet service to several counties. One impact was that a county lost its public service trunk radio system for a few hours. Our ARES operators were called upon to provide emergency communications.

Starlink® has become our go-to means for contingency communications. It is more reliable and resilient than traditional satellite internet systems. Heavy rain and high winds can degrade or completely disrupt the Starlink signal. The service may be unavailable at the worst possible time, in the middle of a hurricane landfall. Of course, once the heavy weather subsides the service should return to normal (though it might need a few tweaks to the antenna positioning). LEO (Low Earth Orbit) Satellites such as Star-Link can slow down due to network congestion or overloading. Geographically Stationary (GEO) Satellites, although recently upgraded in speed, are still subject to weather, cloud cover. Additionally, due to their age, GEO satellites rely on older communications protocols (e.g. X.25) which results in much slower traffic when the systems are saturated.

Cellular communications have proven to be very resilient during our most recent

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hurricanes, but as we learned during Hurricane Idalia, the service can be disrupted for a few hours or days. The outage may only affect one carrier, so having multiple service providers available helps. Cellular networks are subject to saturation during times of emergency. First responders can mitigate the effects using First Net or Verizon's Frontline phones that provide priority service. These priority cellular phones are still dependent on existing towers. (Although portable units, often called COWs or Cellular-on-Wheels, can be brought in) these may take hours/days after an event takes place. Keep in mind, Simple Message Service (SMS) text may make it through the network even when voice is saturated.

Radio services such as Digital Mobile Radio (DMR), Next Generation Digital Network (NXDN) are dependent on internet connectivity for wide-area coverage. Repeaters will work in standalone mode, but effectiveness and coverage will be reduced. Also, not everyone has DMR/NXDN equipment.

All the systems we've discussed rely on commercial power. While many of the communications network nodes have backup power, these systems are not designed to operate beyond about 96 hours with refueling or restoration of commercial mains. One classic problem in the communications industry is lack of adequate testing of backup power systems. Most service providers have established procedures to test the backup systems (e.g. generators, battery banks, etc.), but often they are not tested under loads or for more than an hour at a time. Many times, these power sources fail within a short time, and it may take a few hours to a few days to get them back online. About 20 years ago, I was doing Continuity of Operations planning for a federal agency. Their normal practice was to run the diesel generators for 39 minutes every Wednesday morning under load. The system passed the test every week. During a real-world power outage at the facility, the generators started automatically and ran for 35 minutes and shutdown due to overheating. The engines had temperature-controlled louvres on the cooling system. The louvres failed to open.

So, what does all this mean for our intrepid ARES operators. First, we should all be proficient in assisting our agencies with their alternate and contingency communications systems. Remember, we are ARES communicators, not limited to radio operations. Learn about these other communications systems, know how to set them up, how to operate them, and their limitations. We recommend that tabletop exercises and drills be incorporated into regular ARES meetings. Take the opportunity to participate in your supported agency's training program to gain a working knowledge of their operations and communications needs.

Don't give up on your radio skills either. Our VHF and UHF radios can cover a small to medium operating area with minimal transition and disruption. Analog FM voice communications are very reliable, and considerable coverage can be obtained in simplex operation through relays. For this contingency, ARES operators should be proficient in net operations, simplex relay procedures, and basic traffic handling. Basic VHF/UHF FM radios are relatively inexpensive; every ARES operator should carry one when activated. You will be most effective if you can quickly program your radio on the frequencies in use if they are not already stored.

Our available amateur radio digital modes offer the ability to send email, photos, maps, and detailed reports to our supported agencies. Local Remote Mail Servers offer the ability to employ robust store-and-forward messaging for text and images. If your radio is capable or you have a Digital Radio Adapter (DRA) connected, you can send messages and content through Winlink or the Narrowband Emergency Messaging System (NBEMS) (e.g. FLDIGI).

If communications are required outside of the local area, you can use your HF radio for voice, Winlink, or digital peer-to-peer. We recommend that HF operators have a Near Vertical Incidence Skywave (NVIS) antenna, so you can communicate reliably with other stations within the state. Practice setting up your system and using software or modems to communicate. Many ARES groups have recurring training sessions on these

modes. Participate in the nets and practice your skills whenever you can.

As ARES Communicators, our watch words are Ready, Responsive, and Resilient. Be ready to serve however your agency needs you to, respond when activated (and never self-deploy), and be resilient by having many skills that can directly support PACE communications capabilities within your organization.

WCF ARES In Action:

No submissions for this month.

Upcoming ARES Events:

Dates	Event
May 16, 2026, 1300 Eastern	WCF Section ARES Annual Conference, in-person, Hillsborough Public Service Operations Center (PSOC), 9450 E Columbus Dr, Tampa, FL 33619

Call to Action:

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.

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

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Form 4 - ARES Monthly SEC Report

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Success! The following information was submitted by David Rockwell, W4PXE, WCF SEC for **West Central Florida, February, 2026.**

Total number of ARES members:	348
Difference in ARES members from previous month:	N/D
Number of DECs/ECs reporting this month:	6
Total number of DECs/ECs in section:	9
Number of ARES net sessions held:	29
Number of ARES net sessions held with NTS liaison:	15
Number of participants in nets:	569

	Number	Person-Hrs
Exercises this month:	3	55.00
Training events this month:	6	140.00
Public service events this month:	0	0.00
Community service events this month:	0	0.00
Emergency events this month:	0	0.00
SKYWARN events this month:	219	111.00
Meetings this month:	5	94.00
Unclassified events this month:	75	4.50

Call signs of DECs reporting:

W4PXE

Activity Details:

CHARLOTTE COUNTY-----

Held in person dinner meeting with 30 attending.
Weekly Winlink test and practice messages.
Held Winlink training session at EOC.

HARDEE COUNTY-----

Conducted four sessions of the Hardee County ARES Net on Saturday February 2, 9, 16, and 23. Had a total of 24 check-ins for a total net time of 63 minutes. Total volunteer time of 1.3 hours.

PASCO COUNTY-----

Meeting. Meshtastic orientation

PINELLAS COUNTY-----

uring one of our training and maintenance sessions, Pinellas ACS also made a series of presentations to an elementary school group touring the EOC.

POLK COUNTY-----

No special activities this month. DARK START participation included in January report.

SARASOTA COUNTY-----

4 Tuesday AM Meetings total attendance 26 @ 2 hours ea

Official Emergency Stations-----

KM4WXX, Sanford Wyatt, Sarasota County, sanwyatt@gmail.com
Net manager for ARRL WCF Ares uhf/vhf net and Eagle Net.
38 hours.

KR4X, Larry Gispert, Hillsborough County, larry.gispert@verizon.net
O.E.S. Report from KR4X for February 2026
checked in 1 time to the CGCWOA CW Net on 14.052 mhz
checked in 1 time to the WCF ARES EC/OES Net on 3.940 mhz
checked in 3 times to the SFL ARES Net on 3.940 mhz
total 5 hours of activity no miles driven

W3ATR, John Snow, Manatee County, w3atrjls2@gmail.com
CK-in SHARES National & Regional nets
CK-in WCF Nets HF & VHF/UHF
Attended monthly MCESEG & SERC/SRQ ARESmeetings
Prepared a training drill
Attended monthly EOC level 2/3 training
CK-IN Weekly MCESEG Net no scheduled NC duties this month

KO4IHP, Tim Gardner, Sarasota County, tim@gardnertech.net
On 2/7 /26 operated SARG Command station from Twin-Lakes Park in Sarasota as part of the "Dark Start" SET exercise. Mike W0MJL and Ron KE8B operated as backup net controllers for Analog and NXDN.
2/2/26 - Check-in to WCF ARES Net, 1 traffic received, 40 mins.
2/9/26 - Check-in to WCF ARES Net, 1 traffic received, 45 mins.
2/16/26 - Check-in to WCF ARES Net, 1 traffic received, 33 mins.
2/23/26 - Check-in to WCF ARES Net, 1 traffic received, 40 mins.

Thank you for serving as an amateur radio operator in an emergency communications role. When every second counts, your ability to move critical information can quite literally mean the difference between life and death. 73, KO4IHP

N4NOA, Willam Johnson, Hillsborough County, moo.bill@verizon.net
Participated in a testing session on 21 February.

Section Wide ARES HF Net-----

Sessions=1, Stations=21, Time=9 minutes.

Section Emergency Coordinator-----

Served as net control operator for the AREA COMMAND during SET DARK START on 7 February.

Administrative and Other Comments:

CHARLOTTE COUNTY-----

Submitted by James Nelson, W4AII, Charlotte County EC Designee, jim3nelson@yahoo.com.

HARDEE COUNTY-----

Darrell Davis KT4WX participated in Operation Dark Start and was assigned to the Desoto County EOC. Total volunteer time was 3 hours.
Total volunteer time for February was 4.3 hours.
Reported by Darrell Davis, KT4WX, Hardee County EC, kt4wx@arrl.net.

PASCO COUNTY-----

Nothing significant to report.
Submitted by Timothy Cunningham, KM4YGV, Pasco County EC, tdc@earthling.net.

PINELLAS COUNTY-----

For the Dark Start Exercise, Pinellas ACS activated the EOC radio room with 2 operators, 14 members participated from remote locations.
Four training and maintenance sessions were held at the EOC.

Submitted by Will Scott, W7WMS, Pinellas County AEC (EC designee), Will.w7wms@gmail.com.

POLK COUNTY-----

Unclassified events were Winlink check-ins. W held our AAR Thursday, but EC was unable to attend due to a dental issue. We will be continuing to explore a few issues with the set-up in our new radio room.

Submitted by Christine Duez, K4KJN, Polk County EC, cduetz10@yahoo.com

SARASOTA COUNTY-----

ARES members performed maintenance on many systems.

Submitted by Michael Kearney, KG7KIQ, Sarasota County EC, mbk7@comcast.net.

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