

# Emergency Communications – Where Are We Now?



## 1. Background

At the Open Forum conducted in association with the WIA's Annual General Meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2009 it was announced that the WIA had requested our Nominated RTO to identify suitable competencies for radio amateurs providing emergency communications, initially at a basic level.

In the July 2009 issue of *Amateur Radio* the identification of a nationally recognised competency based Training Package for persons who are, or may become, involved in emergency communications activities was discussed.

In the September 2009 issue of *Amateur Radio* under the heading "What about WICEN?" the diversity of what is called WICEN was described and the role of the WIA in relation to WICEN was discussed and submissions expressing a view were requested.

This statement describes the steps that have been taken to date, the responses the WIA received to the question "What about WICEN?" and the conclusions that we have reached to date and also outlines the WIA's present position in relation to the amateur service and emergency communications. We say "present position" for two reasons. The first is because we are still developing and testing our proposals. The second is because we do not see the various issues as being finalised at any foreseeable point in the future, rather we see the whole matter as evolving as emergency management organisations develop new solutions and we gain new experience, and understand better the particular problems and structures that will be adopted and changed to meet those problems in the communities across Australia.

## 2. Why competencies?

We have formed the opinion that a training package to enable radio amateurs to acquire nationally recognised competencies is desirable for a number of compelling reasons. These include:

- Competency standards will provide a base from which other skills and knowledge can be developed and provide a starting point for persons who wish to be involved with emergency service operations.
- Many operators already have these competencies so through recognitions of prior learning processes training delivery times can be reduced
- Such competencies are now increasingly required by emergency services organisations for admission to their communications facilities, and this is an area where in extreme circumstances the radio amateur's communication skills can provide a valuable contribution.

- Appropriate competencies can also increase the emergency preparedness of the general amateur radio community. It will better equip the radio amateur who unexpectedly finds himself or herself having to provide communications in an emergency situation.
- We acknowledge that the ACMA use a ‘community benefit analysis’ of radio communications services as a metric in determining their allocation of the scarce spectrum resource, so if Amateur Radio is used in emergency communications or for community support, it ultimately benefits us all.

We do not see this approach as diluting or inhibiting the work of the many WICEN organisations, which may already require or at least encourage the acquisition by their members of the appropriate nationally recognised competencies, and which require communication protocols at a more specialised level than we envisage for the competencies. Rather, we hope that the steps proposed by the WIA will assist and perhaps even facilitate the work of the WICENs.

### **3. The Emergency Communications Training Package**

Training packages are developed under funding from the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, and all State and Territory Governments have agreed to implement Training Packages as a corner-stone of the Vocational Education and Training system in Australia.

Training Packages specify the skills and knowledge required to perform a specific task relevant to a particular industry and workplace. Increasingly, such training is required by organizations such as Emergency Service Organizations in order to satisfy their workplace safety obligations and their insurance requirements.

Training packages do not prescribe ‘how’ an individual should be trained, but rather gives a broad set of desired outcomes, which are determined by assessment.

Training and Assessment Packages are developed and their delivery is supervised by a Registered Training Organisation, (an RTO). The RTO is responsible for standards compliance and quality, and is periodically audited. The WIA's RTO is Trainsafe Australia, managed by Fred Swainston VK3DAC.

Developing a Training Package from scratch is a long and expensive process, after which there is no guarantee it would be accepted by any organisations outside the WIA. The WIA has therefore accepted the recommendation of its RTO to adopt an existing Training Package currently used by emergency service organizations with quite minor modifications.

There will be two levels of Competency:

Level 1 is Certificate 2 in Public Safety (SES Operations) consisting of 6 core units plus 1 elective unit in “Navigation in an Urban and Rural Environment”, open to all radio amateurs and other emergency service personnel, and

Level 2 is Certificate 3 in Public Safety (Community Safety) consisting of 12 units, open to all radio amateurs with a Standard or Advanced qualification.

Certificate 2 is an appropriate qualification where communications is provided using electronic equipment for and under the control of an emergency service organisation, such as fire, SES, Red Cross and others as required. This qualification meets the need of emergency service providers who have a duty of care to ensure that those involved are qualified to manage the risk of the emergency environment.

Certificate 3 is the qualification for the radio amateur able to provide qualified personnel, equipment, and/or technical support in emergency situations and in the field. This certificate will be finalised after the certificate 2 has been completed and is fully operational.

Both qualification levels will ensure that the radio amateur who cannot or does not wish to give the commitment necessary to participate in many WICEN organisations, perhaps because of time, perhaps because of interest, will nonetheless be better prepared to provide emergency communications should the need arise.

On the other hand, it is recognised that some WICEN organisations may, if they have not already done so, wish to adopt nationally recognized competencies already used by emergency services organisations, in addition to their own emphasis on message handling in their own local level training.

Those who achieve either level of qualification may be referred to as Emergency Communication Operators or ECO’s.

#### **4. WIA Accreditation**

The WIA will offer accreditation for ECO’s who meet certain WIA defined additional criteria as WIA accredited Emergency Communication Operators, or WIAECO’s.

The additional requirements will be in respect of age, health, mobility, hearing and similar requirements. The accreditation period will be 5 years, after which re-registration will be required. To provide some public liability indemnity insurance cover WIAECO’s will have to be WIA members.

The WIA RTO will train a number of Emergency Communications Operator Trainers, and while it must be recognised that not all clubs nor all WIA Assessors will be interested in supporting this scheme, it is hope that a number of clubs and WIA Assessors will support the scheme and volunteer to qualify as Emergency Communication Operator Assessors and provide assessments.

The WIA RTO will be conducting a trial Trainer training event to test and refine the programme.

It is anticipated that a Trainer Training event will be conducted by the WIA RTO in early 2010, and this will be supported by the WIA. Participants will be selected on the basis of existing qualifications, interest and geographic location.

## **5. The WIA's participation in WICEN**

A disappointingly small number of groups and individuals responded to the WIA's request for comment on what should be its role in relation to WICEN.

Nonetheless, the responses that we did receive were all very helpful and constructive, and are much appreciated.

In addition, through meetings of clubs in South Australia and Queensland and meetings with WICEN groups in Victoria and Tasmania, additional views have been obtained.

In particular, the WIA would like to thank Mark VK2XGK, Roger VK7ARN, Dean VK3TX, Jack VK4JRC, George VK2FF, Paul Hoffman VK5PH and Bob VK1ZRE, for their very helpful input to this discussion.

Some of the comments we have received included the following:

1. *"The WIAs role in WICEN must recognize that many of those currently involved do so because the level of autonomy and opportunities follow individual interests e.g. web sites (construction). If these are taken on centrally, there may be an overall negative outcome.....There is scope for a WIA facilitating role but any attempt to direct, resulting in a loss of current WICEN groups autonomy is likely to have a negative outcome."*
2. *"I am currently on a pastoral station 60km south of Meekatharra...in the case of a real emergency it is vital that all operators work to the same set of procedures and protocols...and standards exist on things like power connections to avoid incompatibility....we are trying to establish a pool of operators with the skills and knowledge to provide effective, co-ordinated communications channels between disaster affected areas and the relevant emergency services.....it is particularly important in isolated or sparsely populated areas where traditional state emergency organizations may not have an official presence and a local or passing amateur may be the first on the scene".*
3. *"I have just come through a major bush fire...the (local) rescue service comms was (ineffective) and played a big part in compounding the problems.....What could the Amateur Radio community do here to help? Absolutely nothing. We have no Emcomm policy, we are not organized and we have no direction. The amateur community needs direction from the WIA, quickly.*

4. *“I do believe that the role of WICEN has grown beyond that of providing a bunch of amateurs who can set up a few radios. It would be a gross understatement of the skills that they now provide...I want to see WICEN have more say in its own development and not be shackled in any way.*
5. *In answer to the question of the WIA role in WICEN it has to be accepted that there is no longer any role at all. WICEN should develop into an autonomous specialist volunteer group providing a range of on-call services and consultancy to all emergency services”.*
5. *We need to align the new/refurbished emergency comms organisation, with a comms network plan, part of this plan needs to incorporate digital comms, along with the traditional voice comms etc.*

*IF nothing is done.....it will continue, as in the past. I am hoping to see the WIA at least make some kind of policy, that any organisation can affiliate with, this gives credibility to those organisation who will run their own show, but be associated with the WIA.*

*It will also give the WIA 'bargaining power' at the IARU/ITU/WRC 'table' when it comes to hanging onto bands/freqs etc. Showing a structured group of organisations under the umbrella of the WIA can only help the hobby, as right now its somewhat messy and not coordinated in any real way.....the umbrella of the WIA, this will give credibility to our organisation, and others.*

*There should be no question of the WIA seeking to exert some authority over individual WICEN groups, using 'WICEN' as a generic name for amateurs using their skills, and their privileges, to assist in emergency situations. To do so would generate resentment; it would also be counter-productive.*

*Each group adjusts itself to match the sort of task it thinks it might be called on to do (or would like to do), what the volunteers themselves want, what population density is available to supply its crews, the rapport it has with the local authorities, and so on. It is infinitely variable, and centralizing this aspect is exactly the way not to go.*

*The WIA does have a role, I believe, offering a national forum for discussing WICEN strategies and priorities; one in which all groups can elect to participate and from which each individually might draw some insights.*

*Such a role would be assisted if the WIA maintained an index/ mailing list of WICEN (or equivalently intentioned) groups..... or, even better, provided an interactive web site through which the forum might be conducted.....As well as aiding the participating groups to communicate with one another, it would enable the WIA to keep itself informed on what is going on and be in a position to act if ACMA issues arise.*

*But the question of participating in IARU calls, it seems to me, is different. I cannot see how that liaison can be pursued unless it is through the WIA.....*

*Happy hunting! I dare say this mine-field is at least as perilous as any of the others the Board dares to sail into.*

- 6. I have felt for some time that there is a place for some level of national coordination of the various WICEN bodies, which would lay the groundwork for interstate operations, so that when such assistance is required, it can proceed with minimal impediment.....*

*Areas where I think national WIA involvement would be of benefit to WICEN include...A standardised training program with RTO backing. ....For such a training program to work on a national level, it has to accommodate the requirements of each state's emergency management framework. This may be challenging, but if it can be achieved, it would be well worth the effort.....*

*Inter-WICEN communications It should be possible for an event commander in one state, to call for help from interstate without having to dig around looking for email addresses and phone numbers. As a start, a national WICEN email list with several key members from each state (at least, those states who want to participate) would serve to keep communications channels open so that when help is needed, it's easy to call for.*

*Knowledge sharing. Although each WICEN group operates within its own state-based emergency management framework, the fundamentals of communications in emergency situations don't change from state to state. We already have some informal interactions between some states, with mutual access to one another's member web sites, for example. There may be a role in coordinating this at a national level, to minimise the need to re-invent the wheel.*

*Standardisation. This could be a sensitive one - each state probably has various standards in place. Where these conflict (eg, the old T-connector for DC power), it would be a waste of time to try to force a change on one state or another. But there is potential for an existing standard in one state, to be adopted by others, if there is no conflicting standard. The benefits would be both improved interoperability in cross-border operations, and also intra-state operations where no standard existed before.*

*Legals One of the ongoing issues (in my experience) with interstate operations, is insurance cover for members when they travel interstate. Also, knowledge of things like travel reimbursement (whether available, how its calculated etc) would greatly help if it was documented somewhere so that interstate people could digest it without it having to be chased up during the event.*

*This would of course require some groundwork on the part of each state body, but gathering this stuff in advance and putting it where everybody can see it, would save a lot of time when time is of the essence.*

We have learned a number of things from this discussion. In some places radio amateurs providing emergency communications are part of other organisations, such as a SES. In other places WICEN may exist as a community support organisation, providing communications for community activities such as “fun runs” or the like. In other places WICEN is a group seeking to redefine itself. In others, WICEN or groups within WICEN are a fully integrated part of an emergency organisation.

The description of WICEN as a diversity has certainly been justified.

The WIA present position in relation to WICEN is:

- The WIA cannot and should not assert any power to control the entities that use the name WICEN.
- The WIA must respect the different aims and objectives of the different groups that use the name WICEN.
- The WIA must be sensitive to those WICEN groups that seek a closer involvement in the program described in this statement, or with the WIA and seek to define how this can happen.
- The WIA accepts that it is seen by a number of groups and individuals at least in the immediate future as providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and the better coordination of activities.
- The WIA must continue to discuss and seek to define its role in relation to emergency communications beyond the program described in this statement, to enhance the role of the WIAECO's and the role of the WICEN's.

What has become completely clear is that the reservations of a number of people disappear when the qualifications and accreditation intended to be offered by the WIA are put into perspective, and seen as supportive of existing activities, and not in substitution of those activities (as described in this statement), and certainly at a different level than the skills required by at least some WICEN organisations.

It is also clear that the WIA must take responsibility for at least coordinating international practices and actual international emergency communications.

## **6. The major outstanding issues.**

Emergency communications responsibility is at least a State, and practically, even a regional responsibility.

That raises the issues of the identification of groups and individuals, their relationship with the appropriate emergency management organisations or emergency organisations, the need for liability indemnity insurance and perhaps more importantly, property and personal insurance.

These are the matters that the WIA must seek to address as it continues to evolve the program described in this statement and its relationship with the varied WICENs.