

Getting New Licensees on the Air: Evolution of a Licensing Class

As published in ARRL *Radio Waves*, Fall 2015

Located on an island in the San Francisco Bay, the city of Alameda and its population of over 75,000 has to be self-sufficient in case of an emergency. It needs topnotch citizen emergency response teams (CERT).

The city's first CERT teams, sponsored by the Alameda Fire Department, soon realized that having some licensed Radio Amateurs operating FRS radios was insufficient for its growing needs, mainly due to the poor performance of the radios, their short range, and disappointing NiMh battery life. The Alameda CERT Executive Committee (ACEC) knew they had to swell their amateur ranks and take advantage of the reliable HTs ham radio operators could use.

Step one was to offer a licensing path, initially with a series of six weekly training classes.

While the course success rate was very high, it was obvious

that merely having a ticket wasn't enough, so Alameda CERT's Get on the Air class was born



Going beyond the typical "HamCram" licensing session, GOTA classes focused on using VHF /UHF communications and included reviews of two-way radios; technical orientation for the radios; operating protocols and types of messaging for simplex and repeater operations; and hands-on exercise.

Not only did GOTA classes lead to the desired increase in the number of effective radio operators, those operators were better prepared. To maintain high standards,

all newly licensed CERT operators are now required to participate in the GOTA class before they can be recognized as full-fledged radio communicators. They are also encouraged to participate in a weekly net, which most eagerly do.

Given the success rate of this approach, the ACEC decided to completely abandon the use of FRS equipment, a radical step made feasible thanks to Amateur Radio and a fresh outlook on training.

Former Alameda CERT member David Haycock, KI6AWR (he has since relocated), developed the GOTA curriculum, which focuses on practical skills to get new licensees comfortable on the air. The syllabus covers the topics of simplex and repeaters, programming radios and simplex and repeater protocols. Haycock shared his course outline with the ARRL.

More Notes on Get on the Air Class for New Licensees

Developed by David Haycock, KI6AWR with members of the Amateur Radio Club of Alameda for the Alameda CERT Team

The original class was scheduled as a weekly class over a four week period. Each class was a little over 2 hours so that was a total instruction time (and hands on practice of course) of 8 hours.

Recently we have put on shorter GOTA classes, a result of the increased time pressures that people experience

these days. The shortened class (mini camp) was offered as an afternoon class and was about 3 hours in length.

As you can see from the schedule it is something that can fit into a morning or afternoon session at the weekend. Because the shorter class provides less exposure, we invite new users to attend an informal workshop that is held monthly at the club. That allows them to consult with experienced operators, particularly with issues about problems they have had.

My personal opinion is that there should be two small (3 hour) classes. One for newbies which would be about 3 hours in length, and then a "refresher class which would probably be around 2 hours. Up until now we have only run the shortened class for newbies and those who need a refresher have attended that. For those that are really rusty that works out well, but it doesn't really move the ball forward (so to speak). I have found that it is best not to have the two classes on the same day, or even the same week. I think it is best to separate them by at least a month to allow students time to try out what they have learned, and then come back with questions which we can address on the spot at the later class. If you schedule the second class too soon then they may not have had time to try and use what they learned in the first class.

Other things that we have learned in the class: It is good to have some presentation material to get things rolling and for reference, but you should encourage an interactive class with lots of questions and opportunities for hands on with real radios. We encouraged people to bring their own radios and had a few spare radios for those that didn't have one on hand. We also had a very comprehensive set of cheat sheets that we created for each of the popular radio types to assist with problems in the class (we also provided them as handouts for students).

Note: Haycock has relocated to Gig Harbor, Washington. Please feel free to contact him at ki6awr@arrl.net if you have any questions.