

Second Century

Monitoring the Airwaves



“The ARRL Board of Directors met in July, one of their two in-person meetings each year, and at that meeting they approved recommendations from a subcommittee formed over 2 years ago to study the effectiveness of, and recommend changes to, the Official Observer (OO) Program (see page 79). The OO Program is one of the two components of the ARRL Amateur Auxiliary Program, the other being the Local Interference Committees (LICs).”

The principal goal of the OO program is to promote rule compliance. This is done in two ways. First, by notifying amateurs of operating and technical irregularities before they come to the attention of the FCC, and to recognize good operating practices. Second, they serve as the first-line “eyes and ears” for the FCC in identifying repeated, substantive rule violations for referral to ARRL HQ and eventually the FCC.

ARRL has sponsored the OO Program in different forms for more than 90 years. The OO Program’s work with the FCC began in 1982. Senator Barry Goldwater, K7UGA, at ARRL’s request, sponsored legislation that specifically permitted Amateur Radio organizations to provide volunteer monitoring services to the FCC on Amateur Radio frequencies. ARRL implemented the legislation with a formal contract between the FCC and ARRL. Since 1982, there have been a few changes made in the OO Program, but it was developed at a different time; one in which the FCC umbrella included a number of field offices throughout the country, staffed with tenured, competent engineers that could be called upon to help track down, gather, and confirm evidence on the very few “bad actors” in our community. One role of the OOs was to help identify these individuals and help point the FCC in the right direction. Over time, ARRL’s OO Program grew to over 700 volunteers scattered throughout the country, some more active than others, listening, offering advice to individual Amateur Radio operators, and providing information to the FCC.

Times have changed, and so has the FCC. In recent years, budgetary restrictions have forced the Commission to reduce the number of field offices, and with it, much of their cadre of field engineers, limiting the FCC’s ability to collect information on even the most egregious violations. As a result of the closures, however, the FCC needed help with enforcement in the Amateur Radio Service. About 2 years ago, the FCC approached ARRL to discuss providing an appropriate level of enforcement in the Amateur Radio Service, given their staff limitations. They noted that the focus of their limited resources had to be on safety of life radio services, but they recognized that repetitive violations of Part 97 rules had to be addressed on a timely basis. Those discussions formed the basis for the new Volunteer Monitoring Program.

Volunteer Monitors (VMs) under the new Program will perform similar tasks to those performed by the former OOs. In case you’re interested, the name was selected (a) to differentiate it from the old OO nomenclature and (b) we, and the

FCC, believe that it better reflects the actual function of the volunteers. The number of volunteers in the program will be reduced to around 250. They will be individually vetted and selected through a specific process based on interviews, specific skill sets, and geographic location. Each volunteer will be required to complete initial and ongoing training courses to ensure they are up to date on the information required for action by the FCC, who will help in the ongoing educational process. Cases will be processed through ARRL HQ and submitted to the FCC. Repeated and significant violations are expected to be dealt with by the FCC on a timely basis.

Overall, we expect the new VM program to be more focused and responsive in helping FCC to quickly address significant and repeated violations. We expect that faster, more visible FCC enforcement efforts will result. The traditional functions of volunteers in the program, to help individual amateurs to operate efficiently and within the rules, and to encourage compliance will continue. Unfortunately, there are some trade-offs in the transition to the VM Program. There will be fewer volunteers involved. ARRL is grateful for the contributions of all those who have participated over the years and we encourage all active OOs to apply to be VMs. But it is important to understand that not all who apply for the VM Program will be selected. The FCC, as the “served agency” in this program, has specific needs for volunteers in this program, including a particular geographic distribution, and active, centralized management of the program.

It will take some time to get the new program up and running. Interviewing applicants for Volunteer Monitors will take time, as will the creation and administration of training materials. In the meantime, enforcement efforts have not stopped. There have been several recent announcements by the FCC of actions taken, including some of the more prominent pending cases. We are assured that there are others in the pipeline.

The work of the new Volunteer Monitors, like the Official Observers before them, is critically important to ensuring everyone’s enjoyment of Amateur Radio. These volunteers all have performed — and will continue to perform — much-needed tasks, and should be commended for their service.

Barry J. Shelley, N1VXY