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CAP Communicators Bring 'Chicken Soup' Radio to Pandemic Mission

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“CSI” is a familiar abbreviation designating a TV crime drama franchise, but for Civil Air Patrol communications operators those letters stand for something entirely different -- “Chicken Soup Initiative,” CAP’s COVID-19 response radio network.

The network is the collaborative effort of 2nd Lt. Michele Bremer, deputy head of National Headquarters communications planning and head of communications recruitment and retention, and Maj. Kristin Freeman, Rocky Mountain Region deputy chief of staff for communications.

The network’s goal, Bremer said, is “to engage HF radio operators who might appreciate some extra activity while stay-at-home lifestyles are part of the national pandemic response.” Freeman’s plan is to distribute situation report (SITREP) questions via email and poll HF stations for formatted, coded verbal responses from the cadre of radio operators throughout CAP’s 52 wings.

The initiative launched April 10 with 41 stations reporting. Since then, more than 1,100 contacts from 162 stations have produced more than 600 location- and event-specific SITREPs.

Two observations became apparent in the early days of the HF project:

- Most participating radio operators weren’t necessarily homebound because of the pandemic and instead simply enjoyed the additional activity.
- Properly developed, field-sourced SITREPs provided potential tactical value for stakeholders in CAP’s varying response missions.

As a result, development of a broadly distributed communications team for use beyond the COVID response became a topic of discussion for CAP planners.

“The CSI Net management team saw an opportunity in the challenge of COVID-19 and used it to develop a valuable mission tool in the form of pre-formatted messages,” said Malcolm Kyser, senior program manager for command and control communications. “The CSI net provided an opportunity for a whole new group of operators to demonstrate their abilities in support of the mission.”

The project encourages radio operators with little or no experience in net operations to engage other stations with check-ins, reports and relays while helping ensure information makes its way back up the radio chain. Cadets literally confer with generals as reports travel through the system.

“Pre-formatted messages are part of our radio operations future,” Kyser said. “As we stand up a radio-based data system, we will also need SITREPs at the tactical level to feed information into that system. The SITREPs tested by the CSI net are an example of the kind of messages which will be key to that operational development.”

Meanwhile, Bremer steers the project with National Headquarters while Freeman sets times, channels and the net controller schedule. Other key members contribute statistical and data-mining skills, public affairs services and a great deal of proactive, can-do attitude.

Net controllers hail from 10 wings across the contiguous U.S., Puerto Rico and Alaska. The camaraderie and unity of the CSI team was evident – and noticed – in the chatrooms associated with the online 2020 National Conference.

For more information, contact wing communications officers for times and channels, or write directly to the CSI team; comments and questions are welcome.

