

# “I Am Safe” Welfare Messages

With the help of ham radio, members of the public can find comfort during emergencies by sending well-being messages to loved ones.

## David Wilma, KG7LEA

Seattle, Washington, has a network of more than 135 neighborhood hubs (read the January 2020 “Public Service” column by John T. Young, K7JY, for more information) where neighbors can gather during emergencies to share information and resources after the disruption of normal services. Hams are beneficial at each hub, exchanging messages with the city, other hubs, and other response groups; distributing public service information, and providing situational awareness.

Welfare messages via radio are of a lower priority than response and recovery traffic but are of the greatest importance to residents. Members of the Seattle Emergency Communication Hubs and hams developed the “I Am Safe” welfare messaging process that utilizes Winlink Global Radio Email®, the National Traffic System (NTS), and Radio Relay International (RRI).

The Winlink Express radiogram template was improved to meet the needs of the Seattle hubs. A working group was organized by Hub Captain Cindi Barker, KD7KSH; Bill Thomassen, N6NBN; Amateur Radio Emergency Service® (ARES®) members; ARRL Western Washington Section Manager Monte Simpson, AF7PQ, and RRI Affiliated Programs Manager Steve Hansen, KB1TCE. Steve worked with the Winlink Development Team, while Oliver Dully, K6OLI, and Greg Kruckewitt, KG6SJT, worked on the message templates. The result was an RRI quick welfare message template that includes 14 short messages proposed by the Northwest Washington chapter of the American Red Cross. An offline clone of this template can be used by volunteers assisting Winlink operators to create messages for Winlink. The existing RRI welfare radiogram was upgraded to fit this new procedure.

## Organization and Process

First, a sender approaches hub volunteers for assistance, then fills out a paper intake form with their

“I Am Safe” message		
Date:	10 JULY 2023	Time: 0905
YOUR Name:	LUCAS FRANCISCO	
Whom would you like to contact?	LOUISE PHENIMESTER	
Email address?	PREPYU@GMAIL.COM	
Phone number?		
Circle one:	If cell phone, do you know their carrier?	
Cell phone	Landline	
Street address:		
City, State, Zip		
Number(s):	(see back side)	25 total word limit for entire message
Additional text	ALL ARE SAFE AND STAYING WITH FRIENDS. WILL CALL WHEN I CAN. I LOVE YOU	
Jun 2023	Entered <input type="checkbox"/>	

Sample intake message completed by a sender at a neighborhood emergency communications hub.

name, the known address of their out-of-area contact, and a message. The volunteer reviews it for completeness and legibility (an important step identified in beta testing) before the sender leaves.

Intake forms are sorted according to their address types — email addresses, cell phone numbers with their carrier name, landline numbers, cell phone numbers without carriers, and postal addresses. The forms go to a volunteer digitizer who creates a message using one of the two templates. These templates work in any browser and contribute information for files to be imported into Winlink. A thumb drive with the files goes to the hub’s Winlink operator for upload into a Winlink message. Volunteers and hub operators work out the best process for sending the messages.

## Message Types

Emails are the easiest to send because information from the intake form can go into a Winlink message with the sender’s name in the subject field and can be sent via a local remote message server gateway. The RRI quick welfare message template simplifies this. Seattle Auxiliary Communications Service (ACS) maintains eight gateways using VARA FM on UHF.

Cell phone messages can be routed through the carrier's domain to appear on the addressee's phone or device. The sender's name appears in the subject field to distinguish the message from spam. The RRI quick welfare message template has a carrier selection feature that automatically populates the email address. A list of carrier domains is also included in the written instructions at each hub.

If the sender has only a postal address, a landline, or a cell phone without a carrier, the message is sent via the Winlink RRI welfare radiogram template. The sender can select one of 14 pre-written messages, or they can compose their own using 25 characters or less. The template populates the message with the Winlink/RRI gateway region tactical address and the radiogram. The regional liaison operator picks up the messages and forwards them through traffic network stations.

### Testing, Testing, and More Testing

At Field Day 2022 in Seattle, visitors completed test messages that were forwarded to real addresses across the country via Winlink and the NTS, as well as to emails and devices. This familiarized traffic handlers with the process and led to the development of the quick welfare template.

Ten stations were utilized during a full-scale exercise in March 2023. Several dozen operators were given messages and the written procedure, then entered data from paper forms into Winlink messages that went to a simulated addressee. This confirmed the proof of concept, identified enhancements to the templates, and fine-tuned the procedure, which resides at every hub and is distributed to ACS and ARES volunteers for their go-boxes.

### Lessons Learned

It's not necessary to train operators in this process because they'll follow the written procedure. But you should brief them on equipment they may be unfamiliar with. It might be more effective for them to use their own laptops with software installed and properly configured for the radio. However, this method preserves the use of the same call sign in messages and a single digital record of traffic.

If the hub operator doesn't have Winlink capability, paper intake forms and thumb drives can be hand-carried to stations that do. Hams at home can be an important resource. Seattle ACS maintains a roster of

Sample Winlink RRI quick welfare message.

home HF stations that can forward Winlink traffic if local remote message server gateways are unavailable. The new RRI Winlink templates allow data to be saved. These text files are bundled into a zip file at the hub, attached to a Winlink message, and sent peer to peer via VHF and UHF to the HF station. The message includes instructions for populating templates and forwarding traffic to distant gateways.

Any message using the Roman alphabet can be sent via Winlink. Messages in other alphabets can be scanned and attached as images, as long as the email address is in Roman characters.

### Template Access

The "I Am Safe" message serves the response and recovery mission of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Preparedness Goal. Residents and their families will find comfort during a difficult time with the help of amateur radio.

The templates are in the Winlink Template Manager and on thumb drives in every hub box, along with the written procedure. The procedure is also available at <https://radiorelay.org>.

All images by the author.

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