

Communication Technology on NOLS Courses

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Position Statement

It is the position of the National Outdoor Leadership School that electronic communication technology will be utilized on field courses as one of our available methods for requesting emergency assistance. Currently all NOLS field courses carry some type of electronic communication device (exceptions may include some Leave No Trace courses). There is not one specific type of device used at NOLS. The type of device used varies from course to course and school to school. Factors that influence the type of device are the devices' effectiveness, their inherent limitations and affordability. Electronic communication devices in use at NOLS include satellite telephones, cellular telephones, EPIRB's (Electronic Position Indicating Radio Beacon), VHF marine band and aircraft radios, HF radios and land line telephones.

Explanation of Factors

Effectiveness Terrain, weather, remoteness, and battery power are some factors that may limit the effectiveness of a particular device and will factor into what device is used. We will not carry devices that are impractical due to limits on effectiveness.

Limitations In addition to functional limitations as described above communication devices are not safety equipment. They may enhance our ability to request emergency assistance but they do not prevent incidents nor do they necessarily speed emergency assistance. Emergency assistance is still subject to variables beyond our control such as weather, availability of resources and mechanical problems. Our students and their families must be informed of these limitations.

Affordability Financial implications and practicality will influence our choice of devices and the number of a particular device we use. Satellite phones may be the most effective, but are also the most costly. Radios and cell phones may be less effective (in some cases) but more affordable.

Use and Management

The issue for NOLS is not if we will use technology, but how we will use it and what this will mean to the wilderness experience we provide through participation on a NOLS course. Use and management of VHF ground to air radios and EPIRBs is still dictated by limits on the systems – these devices are regulated to be for life and limb emergencies only. Cellular and satellite phones are free from most regulatory restrictions and open up additional management and philosophical debates.

Satellite phones, cell phones and some radio systems provide potential advantages to NOLS by allowing fairly reliable two-way communications between the instructors in the field and NOLS management at the base. This creates the potential for greater communication capabilities between the field and base than we have experienced with VHF ground to air radios or EPIRBs. Since instructors can call directly to their supervisors, our norm that electronic communication will only be used to respond to life or limb emergencies may be relaxed. This presents a significant paradigm shift for NOLS. We have always embraced the remoteness of NOLS courses and developed emergency response and management systems in consideration of this remoteness and our inability to communicate directly to support bases. We have also prided ourselves on the self-reliance of our expeditions in emergency situations. The use of more reliable two-way communication devices with fewer restrictions has reduced the sense of remoteness, has changed our definition of self-reliance and has presented us with a new challenge to preserve the remote experience.

It is important that as we acquire more satellite telephones, as cellular coverage increases in reliability and with continued use of certain radio systems (marine band and HF) that we establish some common protocols for the use of this technology to preserve the values of remoteness and self reliance consistent with reasonable management of wilderness risks.

A. The following is considered the primary use:

- Notification from the field to school management of the need for emergency assistance in a matter of life or limb.

B. Additional appropriate uses are:

- To seek medical advice on a patient's condition if the NOLS Field Treatment Protocols, field staff training and other resources available are insufficient.
- As a tool to manage evacuation procedures once an evacuation is deemed necessary.
- To report lost students (24 – 36 hours overdue or if other factors create greater urgency) or runaway students.
- To notify branch support staff that major logistical changes are necessary (e.g.: change of roadheads)
- To discuss difficult student behavioral problems that cannot be handled with the NOLS document titled "Strategies for Managing Student Problems."

Disciplined use of urgency codes when notifying support bases of emergency situations and setting clear expectations for return calls is necessary. Because the use of telephones is familiar, conveying vital information can be hindered because people are too casual. If a call becomes disconnected or there is interference (which there often is) the emergency message may not get through. If a follow-up call is necessary, a concerted effort must be made to follow through on the return call otherwise no commitment should be made.

Emergency notification systems at each school must be established so that appropriate staff members (evacuation coordinators) are handling incoming calls.

There is one emergency communication system supplied by NOLS for each course. The device(s) are carried by the instructors. The system used by NOLS is adequate for our needs. Additional devices or capability such as personal phones is not necessary for our emergency response systems.

Students do not carry electronic communication devices during independent student group travel (ISGT) with the exception of Australia semesters.

Use of FRS radios (short distance line of sight radios) to communicate between subgroups of a NOLS course e.g.: between individual boats, pods of boats, or rope teams on a glacier is acceptable. These radios have limited value in steep mountainous terrain.

Because of the proliferation of cell phones and the increasing availability of satellite phones for the general public (rental programs) information on the proper use of these devices should be included in classes on emergency procedures. Field staff should use our devices and procedures to educate our students in the wise use of this technology.

The following use of portable phones is not considered a risk management issue per the NOLS Risk Management Committee, but these positions are included here for purposes of accessibility to NOLS staff members.

Students are not permitted to take personal cell or satellite phones on NOLS courses. A key element to a NOLS education is time spent in Wilderness. The benefits of this include; being closer to nature, time away from society and civilization, and being in a environment where natural forces predominate and students have the opportunity to develop good judgement and practice self reliance. To achieve these aspects of a NOLS course, we seek to limit the opportunities for distraction that personal cell phones would create. NOLS provides sufficient communication equipment for each course, has established appropriate emergency procedures, and staff are well trained in wilderness medicine. NOLS instructors will coordinate emergencies if and when they arise.

Field staff are allowed the option of taking personal cell or satellite phones on courses. Due to the nature of the work environment for NOLS instructors, who often spend multiple weeks or months in remote locations each year, the conservative use of personal portable phones is permissible. Staff members who choose to bring a portable phone must consider this decision carefully with co-workers and program supervisors and discuss the potential negative aspects of taking one. Staff use of portable phones has high potential to create a distraction for the individual as well as the other expedition members. Staff must be discreet when using a phone. Phones must be turned off when not calling out (no incoming calls) and calls should be made out of sight and hearing of students. Staff must not allow phone use to interfere with the wilderness values being sought by students and other staff.