OmniCORE

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Family Communications Plan

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Purpose and how to use this plan

When something goes wrong, the first thing most people want to know is whether the people they love are safe. This plan makes sure your household can find that out, and get back together, when the usual ways of keeping in touch are slow, overloaded or gone.

It applies the OmniCORE Readiness Framework to the **Communications** and **Information & Awareness** areas. It works for any kind of disruption: a storm, an earthquake, a long power outage or a network failure.

- **Start with agreements, not equipment.** Most of a communications plan is decisions: who to contact, what to say, where to meet and when to check in. These cost nothing, and they make every piece of equipment more useful.
- **Plan in layers.** Every method of communication can fail. The PACE plan (below) gives you a second, third and fourth way before you need them.
- **Fill in the worksheets.** Annex A is your household's plan on one page. Annex B is your radio channel plan. Annex C is a message card to keep by each radio.
- **Practice.** A plan nobody has tried is a guess. The drills section shows how to test it in an hour.

Principles

1. **Text before you call.** A text message needs far less network capacity than a voice call, and phones often hold a text and send it automatically once a signal returns.
2. **Keep it short.** Say who you are, where you are, whether you're OK, and when you'll next be in touch. Long conversations block channels other people need.
3. **Use an out-of-area contact.** A relative or friend far away is often easier to reach than someone across town, because local networks fill up first. Everyone checks in with that person, who passes news on.
4. **Agree on times.** Radios only work if someone is listening. Fixed check-in times let everyone save batteries between them.
5. **Assume others can hear you.** Phone calls and radio messages can be overheard, and radio "privacy codes" don't make a channel private. Never announce that your home is empty, or what supplies you have.
6. **Have power for your communications.** A radio with a flat battery is no radio. Plan charging for as long as your target tier.

What fails, and when

Networks fail in a fairly predictable order. The timings below are typical, not guaranteed.

When	What typically happens	What it means for your plan
Minutes to hours	Calls fail as everyone phones at once; texts get through slowly; internet services slow down	Text, don't call; keep messages short; check in with the out-of-area contact
Hours to 3 days	Without grid power, home internet stops; mobile towers run on batteries or generators, and some go off the air	Phones work in some places but not others; switch to radio for local contact

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When	What typically happens	What it means for your plan
Days 3–14	Mobile service may become patchy over large areas as backup power runs out; landlines may still work in some places	Short-range radio for the household and neighbors; scheduled check-ins
Weeks and longer	Communication depends on whatever has power: battery and solar radios, amateur radio, notice boards, messengers	Regional radio and community information points; written messages

Cyberattacks, solar storms or a deliberate network shutdown can skip straight to the later rows. That is one more reason to have methods that don't depend on the internet or the phone network.

The PACE plan

PACE stands for **Primary, Alternate, Contingency, Emergency**. Try each method only after the one above it fails, and agree in advance how long to try before moving on.

Level	Method	Works when	Agreement to make
Primary	Mobile phone: text first, then a call	Local mobile service is working, even if busy	Text first. Keep messages short. Set up a household group message now.
Alternate	Out-of-area contact (text, call, or a messaging app over any working internet)	Local networks are overloaded but long-distance service works	Everyone checks in with that person, who passes news on. Agree on a second out-of-area contact in case the first can't be reached.
Contingency	Two-way radio: short-range radios for the household and neighbors; amateur radio for regional reach	Phone and internet service are down	A household channel and a backup channel; fixed check-in times (see below); who holds which radio.
Emergency	A written message at an agreed place, and a meeting point	Everything else has failed	Where the note goes at home; the meeting points; how long to wait there.

How long to try each level. A simple rule: try the primary method for 30 minutes, the alternate until the next check-in time, then go to the contingency. If someone misses two check-in times in a row on every method, go to the emergency level.

Who, where and when

Contacts

- **Household members:** mobile numbers, and where each person usually is during the day (work, school, care).
- **Out-of-area contacts:** two people, ideally in different regions, who agree to take the role. Make sure they have the plan too. An international contact is fine: test that texts and calls reach them.
- **Local help:** emergency services for your country (for example 911 in North America, 112 across Europe and in many other countries, 000 in Australia), your doctor, schools, workplaces and two neighbors.
- **Write it down.** Phones die and contact lists are inside them. Every household member carries a printed card (see Annex A). Children keep one in a school bag.

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Meeting points

Agree on three, from nearest to farthest:

1. **Near home:** somewhere outside you can all reach on foot, such as a neighbor's driveway or a street corner, for a sudden event like a fire.
2. **In the neighborhood:** a public place such as a library, school, place of worship or community center, if you can't get home.
3. **Out of the area:** a relative's or friend's home outside your area (often the **fallback location** in your evacuation plan), if the whole area has to be left.

For each, agree how long to wait and what to do if nobody comes: for example, wait two hours, leave a note, go to the next point.

Check-in times

- **Two fixed windows a day,** for example **09:00 and 21:00 local time, for 15 minutes each.** Everyone with a radio switches it on and listens at those times; the rest of the day radios can stay off to save batteries.
- **Listen first.** Before you transmit, listen for a minute in case someone else is calling.
- **One person runs the check-in.** Usually the person at home or the best-equipped station. They call each person in a fixed order and note who answered.
- **If the main channel is busy or jammed,** move to the backup channel at the same time.

Who decides

Name one person to make the call on regrouping, and a backup if they can't be reached. Agree on the triggers in advance (see "When to regroup").

What to say

Keep every message to four parts:

> **Who · Where · Status · Next**
>
> "Sam. At the school gym. GREEN. Staying here, next check-in 21:00."

Status colors: use only three, so nobody has to interpret them. They work the same way in any language, on a radio, in a text or on a note.

- **GREEN:** safe, no help needed.
- **YELLOW:** safe for now but need something (a ride, medicine, information). Say what.
- **RED:** urgent help needed. Say where, and what's wrong. If life is in danger, contact emergency services first if you possibly can.

Always say or write the color word itself. Don't rely on a colored mark alone: it can be misread in poor light, in black-and-white copies, or by someone who is color-blind.

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On radio:

- Say the name of the person you're calling, then your own: "Alex, this is Sam."
- Wait for them to answer before giving the message.
- Say "over" when you finish speaking and want a reply.
- Spell names and places that could be misheard. The phonetic alphabet (Alpha, Bravo, Charlie…) is in Annex C.
- If you hear an emergency call, stop transmitting and listen.

On a written note: date and time, who wrote it, where they've gone, how they are and when they'll be back or next in touch. Put it in the agreed place, where it's out of sight from the street.

Choosing radios

Radio rules differ from country to country. Use only radios approved for your country, on the bands and power levels allowed there. Radios bought online are not always legal where you live. The table below shows common choices; check with your national regulator before you buy.

Where	License-free or simple-license options	Notes
United States	**FRS** (license-free, low power); **GMRS** (one license covers the licensee's immediate family, no exam); **MURS** (license-free VHF)	GMRS allows more power and repeaters. The FCC issues GMRS licenses for 10 years.
Canada	**FRS**; some GMRS-compatible radios may be used license-free	Check Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada for current rules.
Europe, UK and many other countries	**PMR446** (license-free, 16 analog channels, 0.5 W, built-in antenna only)	Short range, typically a few kilometers or less. Base stations and repeaters are not allowed.
Australia	**UHF CB** (class-licensed, no individual license, 77 usable channels)	Channels 5 and 35 are for emergencies only. Channel 11 is the calling channel. Many repeaters extend range.
New Zealand, Malaysia and some others	**UHF CB** under national rules	Channel uses differ from Australia; check locally.
Everywhere	**Amateur radio** (license and exam required)	The widest choice of equipment, power and range, including regional and worldwide contact. Local clubs teach the exam and run emergency nets.

Calling frequencies for amateur radio. Each region has an agreed 2-meter FM calling frequency where operators listen for contacts: **146.520 MHz** in the US and Canada, **145.500 MHz** in much of Europe, and **146.500 MHz** in Australia. Use it to make contact, then move to another frequency.

Other options worth knowing:

- **Satellite messaging.** Some newer smartphones and dedicated satellite messengers can send short texts or emergency alerts by satellite where mobile service is gone. Check what your phone supports and whether a subscription is needed.

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- **Mesh radios.** Small, low-cost devices that pass text messages from one unit to the next over license-free bands can link a neighborhood without towers. They are new and still evolving: treat them as an addition, not a replacement.
- **Receive-only radios.** A battery or hand-crank broadcast radio, and a shortwave receiver, keep you informed even when you can't transmit. These belong to the Information & Awareness area.

Licenses and emergencies

Get licensed, and follow the rules. Radio licensing keeps channels usable for everyone, including emergency services, and the training behind a license makes you a better operator when it counts. In normal times and in ordinary disruptions, use only the radios, channels and power levels your license, or your country's license-free rules, allow.

The rules themselves make room for real emergencies. In the US, for example:

- Amateur radio rules allow any means of radio communication when it is needed for the immediate safety of human life or the immediate protection of property, and normal communication systems are not available. A station in distress may use any means at its disposal to get help.
- Any GMRS channel may be used for emergency communications, and emergency messages take priority. A GMRS licensee may let anyone operate their station when that is needed to send an emergency message.
- International and many national rules contain similar provisions for stations in distress.

OmniCORE's position. Licensing requirements should be followed and met in all but the most urgent and severe situations. In an extreme, prolonged, high-risk emergency, when lives are at stake and no licensed or license-free means will do, using a GMRS or amateur radio without a license must be considered acceptable. Use the lowest power and the fewest transmissions that do the job, give way to emergency traffic, and get licensed as soon as you are able.

Be aware that this is a judgment you make and answer for. The rules clearly cover immediate danger to life; beyond that, authorities may see it differently, and the laws differ from country to country. The best answer is to get licensed now, so the question never arises.

Building it up by tier

These steps follow the Communications and Information & Awareness criteria in the Readiness Framework. Finish each tier before starting the next.

Tier 0: Foundations (agreements and paper)

- [ ] Fill in Annex A together, as a household.
- [ ] Choose two out-of-area contacts and ask them to take the role. Give them a copy of the plan.
- [ ] Agree on the three meeting points and how long to wait at each.
- [ ] Agree on check-in times and who runs them.
- [ ] Print a contact card for every household member, including children.
- [ ] Set up a household group message on your phones.
- [ ] Sign up for official alerts where you live.

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Tier 1: One week

- [ ] Short-range two-way radios for the household, legal where you live, with spare batteries or a way to charge them.
- [ ] A battery or hand-crank radio that receives emergency broadcasts.
- [ ] Two or more power banks, kept charged.
- [ ] Annex B filled in: household channel, backup channel, and any privacy tone settings.
- [ ] Annex C printed and kept with each radio.
- [ ] **Drill:** a household check-in by radio at an agreed time, with everyone in a different place.

Tier 2: One month

- [ ] A licensed amateur radio operator in the household, or in a partner household nearby.
- [ ] A neighborhood check-in on an agreed channel and schedule, practiced at least once.
- [ ] Charging for radios and phones for 30 days without grid power (a power station with solar panels, or vehicle charging with fuel to match).
- [ ] Contact details for local amateur radio clubs and emergency radio groups.

Tier 3: Three months

- [ ] Reach beyond the neighborhood without phones or internet: amateur radio repeaters, a regional net, or long-distance (HF) radio.
- [ ] **Drill:** a message passed to the out-of-area contact this way, and the reply received.
- [ ] A shortwave receiver for news from beyond your region.
- [ ] Solar charging for three months of radio use.

Tier 4: Six months

- [ ] More than one trained operator in the household or partner households.
- [ ] Spare radios, antennas, cables and batteries, and the skills to repair them.
- [ ] The household can act as a relay for neighbors without radios.

Tier 5: A year or more

- [ ] A community communications network: a regular schedule, a person running each check-in, a message board or runner system for households without radios, and an agreed link to local emergency services or volunteer emergency radio groups.

People with particular needs

- **Children:** a contact card in every school bag; know the school's plan for releasing children in an emergency, and who is authorized to collect them. Teach children to text the out-of-area contact and to follow a teacher's instructions.
- **Older relatives and people living alone:** a named person who checks on them in person if there is no contact by an agreed time.

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- **Deaf or hard-of-hearing members:** text-based methods first; a written card with the plan; visual signals agreed for the meeting points.
- **People who don't read or speak the main household language well:** a contact card in their language, and practice using the radio together.
- **Anyone who relies on a powered medical device:** add their power needs to the household's charging plan, and make sure the out-of-area contact knows to raise the alarm if there's no contact.

Drills

How often	What to do	Time
Monthly	Switch every radio on at a check-in time; check batteries and charging	10 minutes
Twice a year	A full drill: everyone goes to a different place, phones are set aside, and the household checks in by radio, then meets at the neighborhood meeting point	About an hour
Twice a year	Update Annex A: numbers, schools, workplaces, contacts	15 minutes
Once a year	Test reaching the out-of-area contacts by every method you have	30 minutes

Twice-yearly reminders are easy to tie to a fixed date, such as the start of spring and fall.

When to regroup

Agree on these triggers in advance so nobody has to decide under stress. Adjust them to your household and your hazards:

1. **A sudden local event** (fire, gas leak, structural damage): go to the near-home meeting point at once.
2. **Separated during an area-wide disruption, and the way home is unsafe:** go to the neighborhood meeting point and check in.
3. **No contact for 72 hours** with a household member: the named person checks on them in person, if it's safe to travel.
4. **A long disruption** (for example, an outage expected to last more than 7 days with water or heat failing): move to the fallback location, if the route is safe. The Grid-Down Plan sets out the triggers for long power outages.

Annex A: Household communications plan

Fill this in together and keep copies in every go-bag, by the main radio, and with each out-of-area contact. Give each person a wallet-sized copy of the top half.

Household: _____ · **Date updated:** _____

Person	Mobile	Usually during the day (place and phone)	Radio carried	Medical or access needs

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Person	Mobile	Usually during the day (place and phone)	Radio carried	Medical or access needs

Contact	Name	Phone / other	Notes
Out-of-area contact 1			
Out-of-area contact 2			
Neighbor 1			
Neighbor 2			
Emergency services			
Doctor / clinic			
Schools / care			

Meeting point	Place	How long to wait	Then
Near home			
In the neighborhood			
Out of the area (fallback location)			

Check-in times: _____ and _____ (local time), for ____ minutes · **Runs the check-in:** _____ · **Backup:** _____

Who decides on regrouping: _____ · **Backup:** _____

Where we leave a written note at home: _____

Annex B: Radio channel plan

Record the settings so any radio can be set up the same way, by anyone.

Use	Radio type / band	Channel or frequency	Privacy tone (if any)	Notes
Household main				
Household backup				
Neighborhood check-in				
Local repeater (if any)				
Regional net / club				
Emergency or calling channel				

Neighborhood check-in schedule: _____ · **Runs it:** _____

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Annex C: Message card

Print this and keep it with each radio.

Every message: Who · Where · Status (**GREEN** safe / **YELLOW** need something / **RED** urgent help) · Next contact

Calling: "[Name], this is [your name]." Wait for an answer. Say "over" when you want a reply. Listen before you transmit. If you hear an emergency, stop and listen.

Never say on air: that your home is empty, when you'll be away, or what supplies you have.

Phonetic alphabet: Alpha · Bravo · Charlie · Delta · Echo · Foxtrot · Golf · Hotel · India · Juliett · Kilo · Lima · Mike · November · Oscar · Papa · Quebec · Romeo · Sierra · Tango · Uniform · Victor · Whiskey · X-ray · Yankee · Zulu

Numbers: say each digit separately ("two one zero zero" for 21:00).

Sources

- US Federal Emergency Management Agency, Family Emergency Communication Planning Document (Ready.gov)
- US Federal Communications Commission, General Mobile Radio Service (FCC)
- US Code of Federal Regulations, 47 CFR 97.403 and 97.405, amateur radio in emergencies (eCFR), and 47 CFR Part 95 Subpart E, GMRS (eCFR)
- Australian Communications and Media Authority, CB radio emergency channels (ACMA)
- Motorola Solutions, What is PMR446? (Motorola Solutions)
- Radio Society of Great Britain, 144 MHz band plan (RSGB)
- Wireless Institute of Australia, 2 metre band plan (WIA)
- OmniCORE, Readiness Framework and Family Grid-Down Preparedness Plan

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