On Being A "Net Control Operator"

ECARS operates on 7.255 MHz from 0730-1400 on week days and from 0800-1200 on weekend days. Net Control Operators control net operations in 1 hour shifts within these windows of time, except that the first 2 shifts on weekdays are 1 hour and 15 minutes long in order to accommodate the start of the radio day at 0730.

The requirements to be a Net Control Operator are to have a valid US or Canadian Amateur radio license suitable for HF operation, be a member in ECARS, and have a desire to be a net control operator. There is no specific process to become a net control operator. Basic familiarity with the operation of the ECARS net and an outgoing personality then become the final requirements. When you are ready, tell the Net Manager. There is an email link to do this at the bottom of this guidance.

The following are links that should be useful to a potential NCS. The ones that you should be most familiar with are the Operations Manual (the first link) and the Deliberate Interference guidance (5th link). The others are for information and assistance. The 2nd and 3rd links provide you the weekly schedule of Net Control operation. If you know any of the operators, talk to them about the experience.

a. Operations Manual:
b. NCS Schedule:
c. Backup NCS Schedule if the ECARS website is down:
d. Partial list of what other operators use for log in management:
e. Guidance on Handling Deliberate Interference:
f. Thoughts on Communicating Clearly:
g. Arrows in the NCS Quiver:

The Net Operations Manual specifies a set of Net Control Operator procedures, which are edited and shown below.

1. Identify the net as the East Coast Amateur Radio Service (ECARS) and that it operates on the frequency of 7.255 MHz.
2. Identify yourself by call sign, name, location and ECARS number.
3. State that you will be Net Control and that ECARS is a directed net and works from a list. Restate this information periodically.
4. At the top of the hour ask for any stations that have a schedule to keep. Then make the regular announcements. For NCS shifts that do not start on the hour, the NCS may make regular announcements at the start of his shift in lieu of at the top of the hour.
5. Ask if anyone has anything for the good of the Net or for Amateur Radio.
6. Develop a check-in list. Call for Check-ins by call sign. Keep the check-in list to a manageable number.
   Net Control Operators who are blind or suffering a physical infirmity which makes writing or typing difficult or impossible have run the net by taking check in call signs, one at a time, and assigning each call sign a number (1, 2, 3, ...) so that by the end of making the check in list he might have assigned 3 or 4 numbers. When he has built the list, all he needs to remember is that his list has 4 members, and then call out for #1 to check in, then #2, and so forth. When the list is run, repeat the process.
7. Periodically develop a check in list for mobile stations only.
8. Recognize stations in the Check-in list in the order in which they were identified, except that mobile stations shall be moved to the top of the Check-in list and recognized first.
   Some Net Control Operators provide this 'head of the list' privilege to QRP and/or Portable stations as well.

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9. When recognizing each station in the check-in list, each station should respond when called with their call sign, name, location and service offered or desired. As appropriate, the NCS may enter the information into his log although logging is NOT required.   Assist the station checking-in with any traffic or contact he might have.
10. If a station is heard to be calling, but cannot be identified by the NCS, ask for relays. Have any station invoking the RELAY Procedural Call make the contact and pass the information to the NCS.
11. Routine exchanges with each check-in may involve signal and audio reports, weather exchanges, current activities, and like information but should be kept reasonably brief. The NCS should manage check-in durations based upon the check-in activity level. During periods of low activity the net may be operated in a more relaxed, informal manner with more time allowed for communications with each check-in. However, lengthy discussions and debugging of technical problems should be done off the net frequency. General rag chewing is never appropriate.

An example NCS Script is available here. It is offered as a point of departure for development of your own preamble for the start of a shift as net control operator.

If you volunteer to become an assigned Net Control Operator, or a fill in Net Control Operator, the Net Manager will add you to the authorized users of the ECARS Slack.com web application (see example image here). This will allow you to exchange information with other net control operators via a private messaging channel. Slack has proven to be very useful to operators and allows them to
- indicate to the current operator that they are present and ready to relieve them at the end of their shift
- note whether they can hear the current operator and whether they will conduct the turnover exchange on the air or via Slack
- note when the off-going operator has passed net control to the on-coming operator
- report band conditions, QRM numbers of check-ins received, etc.
- report short fused problems that will prevent them from being Net Control Operator (e.g. local lightning storms, unresolved antenna or rig problems, unanticipated loss of availability due to a health issue)
- report that they are available to fill an open shift
- indicate to the current operator the correct call sign of someone who is trying to check in but for whom the current operator is not correctly copying the call sign.

There is no specific requirement for the Net Control Operator to keep or maintain a log of check ins although most do. ECARS does not maintain a list of people who check in with us. There is no preferred logger to be used. However, there are a couple of loggers available, free of charge, that were developed specifically for use by ECARS Net Control Operators. These two programs are designed around the work flow of building a check in list, putting mobile stations at the top of the list, calling the list in the order it was built, and making a list of check-ins for the shift. Each of these programs includes an internal database that keeps information about the Net Control Operator, and information about check ins (Call sign, Name, City, State, ECARS number, date last checked in, date data last changed) and brings it up automatically if the Net Manager types his call sign into the prospective check in Call Sign block. One of these programs also accesses information from QRZ, HamQTH, or ECARS, and displays it with each check in and provides an option to automatically plot the location of each check in on a map. Both of these are described in the link at 'd' above.   If you decide that you want either of these, ask the Net Manager, who will provide them to you.

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One of the best ways to learn to be a Net Control Operator is to listen to ECARS and become familiar with some of the operators and how they run the net. You will identify some that do things in ways that you like more than other and you can adopt these into your own methodology. When you're comfortable, contact the Net Manager and volunteer.

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Net Manager