



Second Century

The Ecosystem of Becoming a Ham

If you were licensed before the FCC created the Volunteer Examiner Coordinator (VEC) system (in 1983) to conduct license exams, your experience was probably similar to mine. I used the gray Ameco Amateur Radio Theory Course book to learn the material, and then made my way to an FCC Field Office to take the exam. In northern New Jersey, that meant taking the PATH train into New York City and walking to the Federal Building at 201 Varick Street. As a high school student, this was very intimidating. But heading home knowing that a new license would be showing up in the next month or 2 was exhilarating.

Today it is quite a bit different. All the questions have been published, many test takers opt for rote memorization, and finding a test location is extremely easy — ARRL alone has nearly 30,000 Volunteer Examiners. This path to licensing is, unfortunately, fraught with failure. There is a significant percentage of people who become licensed and then never progress within amateur radio. The hard work, exhilaration, and even support systems are lacking or altogether missing, and we lose these new licensees shortly after they earn their ticket.

We have recognized that and have been building out mechanisms — an ecosystem — that will reduce that attrition rate. ARRL started by building out a destination, the Learning Center ([learn.arrl.org](https://www.learn.arrl.org)), for members to take curated courses on myriad topics. For our licensing videos, we partnered with YouTube celebrity Dave Casler, KE0OG, to host his training videos. These videos correspond to our *ARRL License Manuals* so that potential hams or hams who are upgrading can actually learn the material to pass their test.

On the publishing side, ARRL produces three levels of training materials for each exam. *The ARRL License Manuals* are really intended to function much like student textbooks aimed at teaching the material. We also publish Q&A guides for each exam, which are easy to carry and refer back to in the weeks and days leading up to exam time to reinforce the questions and answers. ARRL now also publishes the license preparation book series by Gordon West, WB6NOA, which is quite popular with instructor-led classes.

Within the core of this ecosystem is the ARRL VEC. Unlike other VECs, ARRL has full-time support staff who can help the examiners and the potential test takers with any issues they have. Now that the FCC requires payment for licenses, the ARRL VEC's support has extended to helping people navigate creating an account and paying for their newly issued license or renewal. Beyond that, staff is also able to help members with their licensing questions, and navigate the difficulties some people have with the FCC systems.

In the past few years, ARRL has been focused on clubs. Local clubs are an absolute necessity in helping new hams navigate from getting their ticket to becoming radio active. In partnership with ARDC, we are now onto our second

\$500,000 grant program to help clubs grow and accomplish great things with their members. One program that received funding is called MARCONI: Motivating Amateur Radio Clubs to Open New Initiatives. MARCONI is a program of the Meriden Amateur Radio Club in Connecticut, and can be used by any club to involve its members in giving new amateurs the inspiration and motivation to get active in one or more areas of the hobby.

ARRL is also looking to the future by developing live virtual classroom licensing courses for those who would benefit from interacting with an instructor. This will help many newcomers who do not live near an active radio club or where classes are being taught. We're also looking at creating our own virtual MARCONI program, and even expanding it, to cover myriad hands-on exercises to educate and inspire new hams. Watch also for our announcement of a coding competition to get students involved in designing new licensing practice apps, allowing them to contribute to the design and even gaming aspects of how these apps would work.

The future is exciting as we look to take greater advantage of technology to refine and expand the ecosystem that we have built: recruitment, instruction, licensing, and training. We are constantly looking at new ways to attract the next generation of hams, get them licensed, help them get active and involved, and inspire them to upgrade, giving them even greater opportunities in our hobby.

Of course there is plenty of room for you in this space. Be radio active! Keep on top of the new activities and technologies in amateur radio. Be a connector! Keep an eye out for new hams in your town or area, and make sure they're getting to club meetings and that their interest in the hobby is being addressed. And if you're active in a club, look at pursuing a club grant to grow your club or to add new capabilities for all of your members!

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