

NTS Guidance NTS-003

National Traffic System Guidance

for Message Origination and Delivery

Prepared By:
NTS Staff Chairs

Rob Griffin K6YR Pacific Area
Steve Phillips K6JT Central Area
Marcia Forde KW1U Eastern Area

Approved By: Rob Griffin
Rob Griffin K6YR
Chair PAS

Approved By: Marcia Forde
Marcia Forde KW1U
Chair EAS

Approved By: Steve Phillips
Steve Phillips K6JT
Chair CAS

Checked By: Dave Struebel
David Struebel WB2FTX
Eastern ADC EAS

Distribution Authorized to National Traffic System Participants of all areas.

REV	DESCRIPTION	REL *	NAME	DATE
-	Initial Draft Contributing Reviewers: R. Griffin K6YR, M. Forde KW1U, D. Struebel WB2FTX Total Page Count: 12	D	S.R. Phillips	3/14/14

* A document stays in the Developmental release state until it is approved by all those listed on the cover sheet. It then becomes Approved and placed under revision control.

* Rel =Release	D Developmental
	A Approved

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1 Scope

1.1 General

This guidance paper deals with two topics that have been brought to the attention of the NTS Area Staff Chairs:

1. Messages Addressed to Silent Keys (Primarily License Renewal and Birthday Greetings)
2. Multiple Greeting Messages to New Licensees

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide guidance to both message originating stations and message delivery stations. Suggestions are made for “sound practices” in keeping with the *Public Service Communications Manual* and its Appendix B, *NTS Methods and Practices Guide*.

In no case is this guidance to be considered directives. The information provided is intended to assist National Traffic System participants in dealing with messages that are potentially addressed to Silent Keys and messages intended to welcome new amateur radio licensees to the hobby that may be addressed from multiple sources to the same recipient.

Guidance is also provided for possible sources of new messages that may be generated by all participants to enhance their NTS experience and help keep the system supplied with volume routine message traffic that has inherent value and provides training, particularly for section and local delivery net operators.

2 Applicable Documents

ARRL	Public Service Communications Manual (PSCM) http://www.arrl.org/public-service-communications-manual
ARRL	NTS Methods and Practices Guide (MPG) (Appendix B of the PSCM) http://www.arrl.org/appendix-b-nts-methods-and-practices-guidelines
NTSD Area Coordinators	Chapter 6 of the NTS MPG (MPG6) (NTS Digital) http://wx4j.com/MPG6_NTSD_RADIOEMAIL.htm

3 Messages to Silent Keys

While it is true that new licenses are being earned by a number of people of all ages, there are still a large number of active amateur radio operators that have been licensed for 20, 30, 40, or even more than 50 years. With the "competition" for young people's time from so many sources (video games, smart phones, computers, Internet, etc.), and the proliferation of Internet E-mail and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, the majority of new hams seem to be older these days. The average age of many NTS participants is even higher, with daytime nets largely staffed by those over 60, and the evening CW nets with long-time operators who entered the hobby when Morse was still a license requirement.

Thus, the likelihood of finding a Silent Key recipient of a License Renewal reminder or even Birthday Greeting to a club or organization member is becoming higher each passing year.

3.1 Message Originators

There are those in NTS who are not happy with the amount of volume routine messages being generated by some stations. The NTS Staff Chairs fully support these message originators within established limits and encourage all NTS members to also generate traffic to keep the system active. It is quite boring to check into a net regularly only to find there is no traffic at all to handle. Generating messages yourself will go a long way to keeping things interesting as well as reducing the work that must be done by the existing stations, many of whom spend their time doing so because they believe they are materially aiding NTS.

The Staff Chairs thank the message originators for their hard work and dedication. While some of the field operators think it is an easy task, it is not. It takes a lot of time and effort coming up with valid addresses and, even more difficult these days, active telephone numbers.

All NTS members are encouraged to participate in the message origination process. Some possible sources, courtesy of James Wades, WB8SIW, include:

- "Thank you for joining our club/association."
- "Thank you for renewing your membership in....."
- "Thank you for the QSO or participating in such-and-such a contest"
- "Thank you for applying for such and such an award. Your application is being processed."
- "Congratulations on obtaining your such-and-such award."
- Birthday or anniversary greetings to friends and relatives

3.2 Work Done by K2HAT to Find Silent Keys

Most NTS operators are probably not aware of the work being done by Lee Hatfield, K2HAT, who for many years has been spending several hours each day looking through online obituaries and sending those Obit's and Death Notices to the ARRL, QRZ.com, and recently to Hamcall.net, so that other NTS Message handlers would not have to call a Silent Key's relatives and bother them.

Thanks is not enough to give to Lee – he deserves a medal in our view. With Lee's efforts, it is a fairly quick matter (seconds, once the site has loaded) to enter the call letters into QRZ.com of a potential message recipient to see if there is a notice that the call is for a silent key. Of course, that will not catch

all silent keys, since not all obituaries are posted online, and some do not mention the amateur radio callsign of the deceased. But it is a start, and a valuable service to the NTS community.

It should also be mentioned that some sections and regions keep their own list of Silent Keys. Contact your Section Traffic Manager (STM) to find out if there is a list for your section.

3.3 Message Types at Highest Risk

There are two main types of messages that carry the highest risk of reaching a silent key. License renewal notices have the highest probability since a license term is 10 years, and birthday greetings to a fellow club or organization member has a smaller probability since 1 year is the interval between these greetings.

General messages sent to random recipients not known to the originator also have a chance of finding a silent key. For recent licensees (less than a year or so), this is a small probability, but for older calls, it may also pose a problem.

Loren, N1IQI, has for many years taken it upon himself to provide reminders to those whose licenses are about to expire so they can take action and remain on the air without interruption. He spends many hours each week researching these and formulating messages. These are valuable to many licensees who are only marginally active and do not often look at their license to see the expiration date. Anecdotes from several delivering stations about how they were able to help someone renew have been received by the staff chairs.

But as with most things, when something goes wrong there is much more likely to be a complaint than a good report when everything goes right. Loren has been contacted about what appears to be an increasing number of silent keys exiting the hobby. He has agreed to consult the Social Security Death Index and QRZ.com to determine, to the best he can, that a renewal notice will not go out to a silent key. The next section provides more information about these, and other sources of information.

Most other types of messages, such as welcomes to new licensees, welcomes to new club or organization members, congratulations for receiving some award, or thanks for an interesting article in a publication have such low probability of finding a silent key that it is not necessary to check them.

It is **recommended** as a sound practice that birthday greetings messages to a club or organization member not personally known to the sender at least check the callsign on QRZ.com to see if a notice has been posted for the call as a silent key before sending the message. This can be done before trying to find a phone number and should only take a few moments – less than a phone number search.

For messages sent out to random callsigns with whom the originator has no personal connection (e.g., having had a QSO with them) it is **recommended** to at least check QRZ.com before looking up the phone number, to assure the call is not listed as a silent key. This is especially important for older callsigns issued more than a year ago.

3.4 Sources of Information

Most active NTS operators are familiar with QRZ.com (<http://www.qrz.com/>) and regularly use it to look up information. If a silent key was reported to them along with proof, such as an obituary or Social Security Death Index listing, it will say the call is for a Silent Key (try W1NJM to see what happens). The hamcall.net website also shows silent keys if they were notified with the same type of proof (largely through K2HAT efforts).

Note that if checking for a license expiration, it is best to check the FCC database (using <http://www.arrl.org/>) since QRZ.com has been known to lag behind in these updates.

Access to the Social Security Death Index (SSDI), which is managed by the government, is obtained generally through genealogy sites. Many of these ask for a paid membership to use them. Two that provide free access to the SSDI (but not necessarily an exhaustive search) are:

<http://www.genealogybank.com/gbnk/ssdi>

and <https://familysearch.org/hr/search>

The first one may ask for an email address and name after some types of search to get detailed information on a deceased person found. This is still a free service, although you may receive an email from them from time to time. When the link above is accessed, a screen such as the one shown below appears:

Search U.S. SSDI Records (1936-Today)

Last Name ?

First Name ?

Middle Initial ?

Date Information

Born Between year and year

Died Between year and year

Last Known Residence

City County State

OR ZIP Code

OR Non-U.S. Location

Social Security Number Details

State SSN Issued Social Security Number

[SSDI Search Tips](#)

[Clear Form](#)

Figure 1 SSDI Search Screen from Genealogybank.com

Entering just the names and city from QRZ.com will often suffice. The QRZ detailed information has year of birth as well, if not suppressed by the licensee, which may be entered on the screen shown above.

The second site has a simpler screen, illustrated in the following figure. This one is not quite as direct to the SSDI, but may still prove useful to a delivering station who is concerned about trying to deliver a message to the family of a silent key. Clicking the “Death” life event allows the entry of a death location, shown in the figure. Both of them will often come up with many possibilities if the ranges are not restricted sufficiently. Sorting through these will take additional time.

Discover Your Family History
Our records span billions of names across hundreds of collections—including birth, marriage, death, probate, land, military, IGI extracted, and more.

First Names Last Names

Restrict records by:
Location | Type | Batch Number | Film Number

Country State or Province

Search with a life event:
Birth | Marriage | Residence | Death | Any

Death Place Death Year (Range) From To

Search with a relationship:
Spouse | Parents | Other Person

Match all terms exactly

Figure 2 Search Screen from Familysearch.org

Note that it sometimes takes a few months for a death to be registered in the SSDI, so checking there is not always going to find a recent silent key.

3.5 How YOU Can Help

If you have some available time, and would like to help try to prevent fellow NTS operators from having the painful experience of trying to deliver a message to a silent key, then please contact your STM or the NTS Area Staff Chair for your area listed on the cover page (email callsign@arrl.net). Your Area Staff Chair will contact the major message originators and advise that help is available in filtering out silent key addressees if they wish to make use of it, and put you in touch with those you may be interested in.

The idea is for the message originators to send a list of calls to be checked and after checking, a response sent back about any who showed up as a silent key.

3.6 Suggestions and Tips for Delivering Stations

It is **recommended**, as sound practice, for a delivering station to at least check QRZ.com to verify address information and that the recipient is not listed as a silent key. It is also **recommended** that a reverse-lookup be done on the phone number using a free site such as <http://www.whitepages.com/> or <http://www.411.com/> to verify the number is correct.

The following procedure is used by Jutti, K6FRG, when a license renewal notification is received. Thanks to Jutti for sharing it...

1. I go to the FCC ULS website to make sure they haven't already renewed. If they have I service it back "already renewed." I look there first because I've found QRZ has a lag time in showing the renewals on their website.
2. If they haven't renewed I go to www.qrz.com and see if they are listed as a SK. If they are not I look to see if their "details" page gives their birth year. This makes the next step easier.
3. I then go to <https://familysearch.org/hr/search>. Unlike most genealogy websites, this one is free to use. I do a search of the social security death index. One caveat, if the person has passed away recently they might not be listed there yet. Right now I am using 2004 - 2014 as the range for date of death.
4. I then do a search for an obituary. This is not 100% reliable as not everyone has a published obituary.
5. Then I take a look via <http://my.peoplesmart.com/>. This website charges a fee if you want all the data but if you enter the person's name, city, and state you will find that sometimes they give the year the person died.
6. If I can't find any info and have to make the call, I simply call and ask for the person without stating why. If they say the person is deceased I apologize, offer condolences, and end the call.

That last point is actually a good procedure for delivering any type of message where there is a chance the recipient may be a silent key. Once it is determined they are not, then go ahead and introduce yourself as an amateur radio operator with a message to deliver to the person.

Because so many people have been accosted by telemarketers for so long, they may screen all calls with an answering machine. If an answering machine is reached, for book traffic it is permissible to state you are an amateur radio operator with a message for so-and-so and read the message into the answering machine. Then leave your name, call letters, and a callback number in case there are any questions. If the recipient is a silent key, having such a message on the answering machine is not as likely to pose a problem for the family since they can simply ignore it, just as they would a telemarketing call. In any event, the message was delivered.

If it is a personal type of message rather than a general book type, then a follow-up phone call is suggested to make sure it was received and to determine if a return reply is desired. It is also beneficial to speak with a new licensee to see if they need some assistance. The message handling instructions may provide additional guidance for further action.

If you do come across a silent key, apologize for bothering the family member, offer condolences and listen if they want to tell you more. If they ask, and you are able, provide any other type of assistance they may request, such as helping dispose of equipment (contact a local club about that) or answer any questions they might pose.

We want to leave the best possible impression of amateur radio that we can. After all, that silent key was once a fellow amateur radio operator and deserves the same respect as we would want for ourselves. His/her family also deserves our assistance and respect, just as much as we would help out the deceased with some operational problems on the air while he/she was still alive.

Following the guidance given in this document will take a little more time, but as a traffic handler, we already give of our time as a public service. Adding a little more caution can provide peace of mind and possibly avoid a regrettable experience.

4 Multiple Greeting Messages to New Licensees

The NTS Area Chairs consider greeting messages to new licensees to be an important type of ham-to-ham communication. Delivering stations have the opportunity to not only expose the new licensee to the NTS, but also offer advice and assistance in setting up a station to get the new operator active on the air.

But in response to reports that some recipients of these messages were less than happy to receive them, particularly multiple greetings from different stations, the Area Chairs contacted all the major message originators in their jurisdiction to get more information and determine if some sort of sharing arrangement might be possible to reduce the number of greetings sent to a single recipient.

The originating operators were most helpful in providing information and weighing various possible options for dividing up the greeting destination call areas and sections. After considering all the pros and cons of any changes, it was determined that simply having the stations in the U.S. coordinate their activities was sufficient. To make any other arrangements would disrupt an already complex work flow for them and potentially result in missing new licensees. It was also quite evident that they all considered what they were doing as useful and important and a help to NTS. In no case was anyone sending out messages solely to increase a traffic count, as some field operators have asserted.

Many of you know that Peter, DL4FN, has been sending some greetings to new hams from Germany in addition to the U.S. group. Research showed that his efforts, while praiseworthy, were not as exhaustive as those made by the U.S. group, and generally followed a few days later. Thus, it was decided to coordinate only among the U.S. group such that at most a single message would go out from them and potentially another one with different text could arrive later from Peter.

As with all phone calls, the telemarketers have made it difficult for us to reach some recipients and for them to respond cordially. That was perceived as the major objection to having multiple messages – the response of the recipient to additional messages was often not favorable.

If you receive an additional greeting going to a station you previously delivered one to, and that operator was less than enthusiastic to receive even the first one, it is permissible to not deliver the second and originate a service message back with text something to the effect of:

ARL SIXTY SEVEN (Number) (Call)
SIMILAR MESSAGE ALREADY DLVD TO
THIS ADDRESSEE

Of course, the same delivering station may not receive both messages since they are separated by a few days, but this does provide a way to avoid disturbing a new licensee unnecessarily.

5 Document Specifics

This document composed with Microsoft Word 97-compliant settings. Left and right margins are set at 1". Font is Arial, 10 point.

5.1 Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
NTS	National Traffic System
QRZ.com	Website at http://www.grz.com/ that provides information on licensees all over the world
SSDI	Social Security Death Index
STM	Section Traffic Manager