

State of Illinois declares July 2-8 As Air Force MARS week

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Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner (center) presents an Official Proclamation declaring July 2 – 8, 2017, as Air Force Military Auxiliary Radio Systems Week to Dave Stapchuk (right), Chief of AF MARS and Mark Allen (left), AF MARS National Director of Operations, June 27 at the State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois. (Courtesy photo/released)

JOINT BASE SAN ANTONIO-LACKLAND, Texas -- MARS is not only the fourth planet from our sun, it's also the name for the Department of Defense's contingency communications program.

Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner hosted members of the 38th Cyberspace Readiness Squadron at his State Capitol office June 27, 2017 to sign a proclamation declaring the week of July 2 - 8 as Air Force Military Auxiliary Radio System (MARS) Week. In his proclamation, Governor Rauner called upon all Illinoisans to recognize the unwavering efforts of Illinois MARS volunteers in support of the DoD mission to the United States of America, and expressed his appreciation on behalf of the citizens of the State of Illinois for the long history of AF MARS.

The primary mission for the MARS program is to provide High-Frequency radio communications for the DoD and Services in contingency situations through the use of volunteer amateur radio operators. Air Force MARS is one-half

of the DoD's MARS program, with the U.S. Army providing the other half.

With the ever-increasing threats to our nation's critical infrastructure and cyber capabilities, the MARS program has refocused its efforts on its core mission of providing highly reliable contingency communications to the DoD, explained Dave Stapchuk, 38th CYRS Air Force MARS Chief. To that end, MARS now participates in quarterly DoD-level communication exercises focused on "very bad day" scenarios. During these exercises MARS members gather and distribute situational awareness information requested by the DoD, such as county and relevant local infrastructure status.

MARS members also deliver critical support to the Armed Forces daily by providing high-frequency phone patches as a backup to DoD-operated communication systems. In 2016 MARS operators conducted more than 2,000 official phone patches for DoD aircrews, ranging from declaring in-flight emergencies, to routine calls such as radio checks, updating flight plans, receiving updated weather reports and requesting ground support upon arrival.

The MARS program began in 1925 as the Army Amateur Radio Service, whose mission was to enlist the talents of volunteer amateur radio operators to train soldiers in the new radio technology. AARS became the Military Affiliate Radio System in 1948 with the creation of the Air Force as a separate service, which further went on to stand up the Air Force's MARS program in 1952. Today the MARS program consists of approximately 2,400 volunteer amateur radio operators between the Army and Air Force.

MARS volunteers are all FCC-licensed amateur radio operators who receive training in military messaging communication formats and protocols. They are authorized to operate on military frequencies and provide their services at no cost to the government. MARS members must maintain a minimum number of on-air hours per quarter to remain certified.

"Without the dedication and support of the MARS volunteers in Illinois and across the nation it would be difficult and expensive to emulate this highly reliable contingency communications capability," said Stapchuk.

Governor Rauner's proclamation was received by Stapchuk as well as Air Force MARS National Director of Operations, Mark Allen. They thanked the Governor for his and the citizens of Illinois' ongoing support, then presented Rauner with a military challenge coin from the 38th CYRS commander.

The 38th CYRS, under the command of Lt. Col. Sol Snedeker and located at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, is responsible for supporting and enabling two distinct cyberspace missions for the Air Force: Long-Haul Communications and Common Communications and Information (C&I) mission systems, which includes the AF MARS program. It falls underneath the 38th Cyberspace Engineering Installation Group, 688th Cyberspace Wing, 24th Air Force, Joint Base San Antonio – Lackland, Texas.