

How do I start a mesh network where there are none?

Starting from zero is actually common - most community networks were started by one person who got tired of being alone on the mesh and decided to fix that. Here's how to bootstrap effectively.

This advice applies to both Meshtastic and MeshCore networks. Pick one protocol for your local mesh first, since the two do not interoperate (see the protocol comparison page) - everyone you recruit should run the same one.

The Minimal Viable Network

You need at least 2 nodes to have a network. Your first goal: find one other person willing to put up a node. Just one. A two-node network proves the concept and gives you something to demo to the next recruit.

Finding your second node:

- A family member or close friend in a different part of town
- A neighbor on higher ground than you
- Someone from the local ham radio club who agreed to try it out
- A coworker or friend interested in emergency preparedness

Once you have two nodes that can communicate, you have a live demo you can show to anyone.

Growing Past Two Nodes: 5 Tactics That Work

Common tactics that community organizers report working:

1. **Build a demo kit** - A pre-configured node on a tripod with an external antenna that you can bring to any meetup and have running in 5 minutes.
2. **Present at a local ham club meeting** - Request 10 minutes on the agenda. Demo is everything: bring a second node on the far end of the room.
3. **Post in local neighborhood apps** - You can frame it around preparedness, but be honest about what the mesh is: a supplemental, experimental comms tool, not a guaranteed emergency system. LoRa mesh is best-effort and unmonitored, so don't market it as a reliable emergency service - overselling its reliability can lead neighbors to depend on it when it may not deliver. For example: "I'm setting up a local mesh network for experimenting with off-grid text messaging. Anyone interested in participating?"
4. **Attend CERT training** - CERT graduates are motivated, community-oriented, and already thinking about emergency communications.
5. **Offer a "hardware night"** - Host a 2-hour session where you help 2-3 people set up their first node. Hands-on beats slides every time.

What Not to Do

- **Don't wait for critical mass** - Deploy your first node now. The mesh doesn't need to be large to be useful; it needs to exist to grow.
- **Don't over-engineer the first version** - An entry-level Heltec WiFi LoRa 32 V3 (around \$20-30) with its stock antenna works. Optimize hardware after you have community, not before.
- **Don't gatekeep** - The easier it is to join, the faster you grow. Simplify your onboarding documentation and be patient with beginners.

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