General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous

PROGRESS REPORT

Ad Hoc Committee on

Participation of Online Groups in the US/Canada Service Structure

Questions and more questions....

Participation in much of AA life up to 2020 had largely and logically relied on geographic structural organization, particularly for general service work.

Has AA now outgrown a solely geographic structure?

What new opportunities have arisen?

What are we missing?

What are the challenges?

What are the constantly changing emergent concerns?

Advisory Actions from the 71st General Service Conference

i) *The U.S./Canada General Service Structure recognize online groups and encourage their participation, listing those groups who ask to be listed within the group's preferred district and area, with the default option being the location of the group's primary contact. This supersedes the 1997 Advisory Action that designated online groups as "International Correspondence Meetings."*

ii) **The General Service Board form a committee to explore future possibilities for the participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada General Service structure.**

Committee Composition, Scope and Procedure

TRUSTEES' ADHOC COMMITTEE ON PARTICIPATION OF ONLINE GROUPS IN THE U.S./CANADA GENERAL SERVICE STRUCTURE
COMPOSITION, SCOPE AND PROCEDURES
"Trustees serving on General Service Board committees, as part of their custodial and fiduciary responsibilities, provide oversight for the development of policies and projects and are the principal strategic planners responsible for keeping the organization on firm footing well into the future." – General Service Board Report 02/02/09

COMPOSITION
The chair of the General Service Board appoints the members of the trustees' ad-hoc Committee on Online Groups and the committee chair annually. In addition, a G.S.O. staff member serves as a non-voting secretary.
The chair of the General Service Board determines the balance of trustees, directors, and appointed committee members serving this committee, and may amend the number of voting members from time to time, as indicated by the needs of the committee.
The chair of the General Service Board and the general manager of the General Service Office are ex officio members of the committee.

Committee Composition, Scope and Procedure (con't)

SCOPE

This General Service Board ad hoc committee will explore future possibilities for the participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada General Service structure.

This committee will aid the General Service Board by implementing Advisory Actions of the General Service Conference and bring forth recommendations related to its scope for the General Service Board and the General Service Conference, when appropriate.

The recommendations of this ad hoc committee will be pertinent to assisting groups who ask to be listed within the groups preferred district and area with the default option being the location of the groups primary contact, and participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada General Service Structure.

This committee will review all aspects of service to online/virtual A.A. groups, and the committee will make recommendations for changes and improvements when through careful deliberation it is deemed necessary. The committee recognizes this entire scope will need to draw upon and be enhanced by the shared experience of individuals and online/virtual groups.

Committee Composition, Scope and Procedure (con't)

PROCEDURE

1. To meet as needed at the discretion of the ad hoc committee chairperson.

2. The committee chairperson may appoint subcommittees with a designated chairperson to undertake specific projects, and then to report its recommendations or findings back to the committee. Subcommittees often meet virtually. The committee chair is an ex officio member of all committee subcommittees.

3. When voting the committee will adhere to the principles outlined in Warranty Four of our Twelfth Concept and will use two-thirds as the requirement for substantial unanimity.

4. The committee's housekeeping items will be addressed using a simple majority vote.

"In keeping with the role of trustees serving on General Service Board committees, committees are encouraged to use staff whenever possible to develop projects with oversight and direction provided by the committee. Subcommittees should ONLY be constituted when a higher level of committee input into the development of a project is desired." – General Service Board Report 02/02/09

What The Committee Has Been Doing So Far

Meeting with the Working Group

Meeting with OIAA (Online Intergroup of AA)

Gathering information from other fellowships

Gathering information from other countries

Reviewing submissions made to the Conference

Submissions for Conference consideration: Virtual Areas

The current process for forming a new Delegate Area is outlined as follows in the Service Manual, page 108 and 109

FROM SERVICE MANUAL, APPENDIX F:

NEW DELEGATE AREA

FORMING A NEW DELEGATE AREA

If the A.A. population seems to have grown to the point where the current delegate and other trusted servants can no longer provide adequate service and communication, there may be local interest in forming a new area. In such a case, the area committee or Committees involved may write to G.S.O. and request an application for an additional delegate area.

Submissions for Conference consideration: Virtual Areas con't

This four-page application form requests detailed information about the current area structure:

• How often assemblies are held

• Whether there is an alternate delegate

• How often district meetings are held

• Number of active DCMs and whether they assist the delegate and alternate delegate

• Number of active GSRs in the area

• Geographical and A.A. population information about the area and its pattern of growth over

the past five years, broken down to yearly figures

Submissions for Conference consideration: Virtual Areas con't

The application form is designed to determine problems regarding geography and A.A. population, as well as whether or not the current area service structure is as well developed as it might be to provide support for the delegate.

When such a request came up at the 1961 Conference, a memo from co-founder Bill W. provided background on the subject. Bill wrote (in part): "It should be reemphasized that the Conference is not a political body, demanding a completely rigid formula of representation. What we shall need will always be enough delegates at the Conference to afford a reliable cross section of A.A. plus enough more to make sure of good local communication."

TO: Conference Policy/Admissions Committee
General Service Office
P.O. Box 459
Grand Central Station
New York, NY 10163

APPLICATION FOR ADDITIONAL DELEGATE AREA
Please return to G.S.O. no later than January 1st preceding the General Service Conference

When completing this form, the Area may add response space as needed. Responses should be typed or printed, with clear and concise details. Inclusion of applicable dates is helpful.

Date _____

From: _____
              (Area)

1. Reasons and origin of request for additional delegate area.

2. What measures has the area taken to resolve the area's specific problems short of adding an additional delegate area?

   When?

   What were the results of those measures?

3. Number of groups in current area: _____

4. Describe the process by which the area decided to submit this application.

   a. Number of groups that participated in the request for a new delegate area. _____

       (1) For _____
       (2) Against _____
       (3) No Opinion _____
       (4) Comments of minority opposing new delegate area:

   b. Past Delegates' Comments:

   c. Regional Trustee's Comments:

5. Over the past twelve (12) months:

   a. What was the average number of G.S.R.s present at area assemblies?

   b. How many G.S.R.s were present at the assembly that approved this application?

The "New" New Group Form

G.S.O. NEW GROUP LISTING GUIDELINES / FORM

Thank you for wanting to list your group with the U.S./Canada General Service Office (G.S.O.) It is the practice of the G.S.O. to list groups and not meetings. Listing provides a wider opportunity for communication between your group, G.S.O., and the General Service Structure which will help the alcoholic who still suffers. Before filling out the new group form below, here are a few good things to know:

This form is for the U.S./Canada Service structure. The U.S./Canada structure is just one of many A.A. entities around the world. If your virtual group is based outside the U.S. and Canada, we suggest that you contact the office in that country. If your group is based outside the U.S./Canada or your group has no geographic location, and you wish to communicate with G.S.O. you can contact the G.S.O. International desk.

G.S.O. is often asked, "Will filling out this form ensure my group appears in local meetings lists?" **The answer is no.** This form is only so that communication can flow between your group and the U.S./Canada Service structure (your district, your area, and your G.S.O.) Please contact the local A.A. entity that publishes meeting lists such as your local intergroup/central office, district, or area. Many of them also share information with the Meeting Guide App.

This form asks groups to designate their preferred district and area. The U.S./Canada structure is comprised of 93 geographic areas and each area is made up of a number of districts. In-person (including hybrid) groups generally use geographic proximity to decide their district and area. It varies for virtual groups since they are non-geographic in nature. If a group originated in a locale and feels rooted there the group may want to approach the local district about participating. Recently some areas have created non-geographic districts for virtual groups. If a group does not designate a preferred district and area, the default option will be using the location of the group's primary contact.

Area Registrars are often a crucial first point of contact for A.A. groups. Area registrars develop and maintain records of all groups in their area through Fellowship Connection, a user-friendly interface that facilitates information sharing between areas and G.S.O. Your group's information will be entered into Fellowship Connection and is available to your area delegate and district committee member (DCM). Contact information for your area registrar and other trusted servants can be found on your area's website. List of area websites.

Experience shows it's best if a group has a good start before asking to be listed. Many groups wait until they've been meeting for a month or two before filling out this form. The pamphlet "The A.A. Group" can be a helpful guide to groups and covers four main areas: what an A.A. group is; how a group functions; group relations with others in the community; and how the group fits into the structure of A.A. as a whole.

G.S.O. lists A.A. groups and not meetings. Shared experience is that holding A.A. meetings is one function of a group. An A.A. Group is a meeting that participates in the General Service Structure and provides Twelfth Step services that extend beyond the regular meetings times.

It is good to keep in mind the long form of Tradition Three: "Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence, we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation."

The form asks for a primary contact. Often groups choose their General Service Representative (G.S.R.) as the group's primary contact, but any group member can serve as the primary contact if they can provide a current email address. An email allows G.S.O. to send the group helpful information and

The Quest for Shared Experience: What's Been Gathered

General Service Office Working Group

Tasked with the following Advisory Action:

The U.S./Canada General Service Structure recognize online groups and encourage their participation, listing those groups who ask to be listed within the group's preferred district and area, with the default option being the location of the group's primary contact. This supersedes the 1997 Advisory Action that designated online groups as "International Correspondence Meetings."

The Quest for Shared Experience: What's Been Gathered

General Service Office Working Group (con't)

Implementation:

The first order of business: creating a New Form titled "G.S.O. New Group Listing Guidelines/Form." This new form is both service material and a listing form in one. Discussion points include listing in the U.S./Canada service structure, meeting lists versus listing for communication purposes throughout our service structure, it explains the recent advisory action regarding online groups, has suggestions for how new groups can make a good start, helps inform the discussion of a group versus a meeting and of course the form itself which assists all groups including online groups list with G.S.O.

The Quest for Shared Experience: What's Been Gathered

General Service Office Working Group (con't)

Challenges:

The Working Group has consistently come across the question of geographic service structure with non-geographic groups and how to most effectively help facilitate that conversation. From an international perspective, the office continues to get inquiries from members from other countries wanting to weigh in on our Conference and list with us. The working group has also frequently been asked about how to allow an international member to be a G.S.R. Considering we are a U.S./Canada structure and as far as listing goes, we only have the capacity to list those trusted servants in the U.S. and Canada. The biggest challenge the working group has come across is an advisory action that gives direction but also asks the G.S.O. to list groups in districts and areas we have not even had the chance to communicate in detail with or they themselves are just starting to have conversations about. We are all learning...

The Quest for Shared Experience:
What's Been Gathered

Online Intergroup of AA

From the OIAA WebSite *"The first AA meetings online used Bulletin Boards and were around 1986. Email groups started forming in the early nineties and the development of the worldwide internet rapidly fueled the growth and variety of groups. The first online AA group, Lamp-lighters, was formed in 1990, and has met by email continuously since then. Now there are hundreds of AA groups with thousands of members, connected together through this Online Intergroup. Using various mechanisms such as video conferencing, phone conferencing, message boards, email list-serve, and chatrooms; the AA community is constantly connecting and finding new, creative ways to communicate the experience, strength and hope of recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous.*

The Quest for Shared Experience: What's Been Gathered

Online Intergroup of AA (con't)

Online Intergroup has organized active service committees, with a 12th Step Committee, PI Committee, Web Site Committee and others. While it cannot offer group's participation in the US/Canada General Service structure (and there was some frustration voiced in that regard), it does provide service opportunities.

The Quest for Shared Experience: What's Been Gathered

Other 12 Step Fellowships

The Group Services desk stays in communication with other 12 Step Fellowships both through regular communication, and through the Day of Sharing (held last year on December 7). Some fellowships are in the same position as we are, transitioning and going through growing pains. Others are further along a path forward. Here is some shared experience.   Please note that each of the Fellowships have their own structure – and all of them are different from our AA structure. Many of them for example, have a single World Service/General Service structure, so their experiences and solutions may not be directly applicable to the US/Canada situation. All fellowships were in agreement that the virtual world is part of a permanent reality.

The Quest for Shared Experience:
What's Been Gathered

Other 12 Step Fellowships

Al-Anon Family Groups

Al-Anon recently formed an electronic Area with 640 groups with 920 meetings. There are over 200 GR's (equivalent to G.S.R.'s). A temporary area chairperson was elected and will facilitate the assembly with elections for a delegate, chairperson, and secretary. The virtual groups include zoom, second life, phone, discord, what's app, skype, jitsi. The process was in place for a couple of years and the plan is to have the newly elected delegate to come to the GSC in April for official seating. Each Area is discussing what their process is and how they will connect their local structure and the virtual groups. International groups are allowed to participate currently but where in the International Structure there is willingness to list virtual groups, they are encouraged to create their own areas in their respective country. The group's contact needs to communicate in English, Spanish, or French.

The Quest for Shared Experience: What's Been Gathered

Other 12 Step Fellowships

Narcotics Anonymous

NA has been collecting survey data to find out what is happening in its communities in terms of needs. They want to continue discussing how virtual meetings are connecting to NA by listening at this point, before developing policies and tools. That's very similar to where we are.

The Quest for Shared Experience: What's Been Gathered

Other 12 Step Fellowships

Overeaters Anonymous

OA Has a virtual Region with its own Trustee in its structure. They have had online meetings since the late 1990's. It was decided in 2018 to create a virtual region, with a dedicated trustee (their current trustee lives in Brazil). Virtual groups have the choice to affiliate with a land-based service board or intergroup, rather than a virtual one.

The Quest for Shared Experience: What's Been Gathered

Other 12 Step Fellowships

Cocaine Anonymous

CA's history with online and virtual meetings goes back to the early 1990s. Their groups joined CA's Pacific South Region, even though the Group's membership was spread across the globe. The Online Service Area (OSA) stayed fairly static at about 20 groups until the pandemic.

Within the first three months of the pandemic the OSA grew to approximately 80 Groups. During the pandemic the Board tried to steer away from any decision making that wasn't absolutely necessary, both to avoid creating governance and to allow the situation to play out.

Holland and the UK have both created online Districts, aligned to Areas within which their membership resides.

There is an Online Service Area Manual, and at the next CA World Service Conference, a suggestion to form an Online Services Committee may be put forward.

The Quest for Shared Experience: What's Been Gathered

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

European Service Meeting

The Trustees at Large US and Canada attended the European Service Meeting, October 22-24/21, specifically to see if other countries are incorporating virtual groups into their service structure. Much as we are finding here, many ESM countries are unsure at this point what integration into a structure will look like. One comment that seemed to get general agreement was these questions will answer themselves, a solution will be found and structures will be created to support those solutions. Ireland has agreed to incorporate virtual groups into its structure. Portugal is still seeking a way to do that.

It was noted that the Central European Region – the English-speaking meeting of Continental Europe, who are part of the ESM, have long had both online meetings as well as regional participation in service as virtual groups. Their "First164yp" groups have been meeting using virtual technology for a number of years, and they send 2 representatives to Regional Assemblies.

The Quest for Shared Experience:
What's Been Gathered

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

REDELA(Meeting of the Americas)

The countries in our home zone are in very different places in terms of their discussions about virtual groups (and meetings). Acceptance of them has not been universal, so for some countries, incorporation into the service structure is not an issue that is even on the radar yet. Other countries are, like us, seeking ways to make sure groups' voices are heard. In Brazil, many virtual groups want to become part of the structure, but there is also some resistance to the idea. Their GSB is working to find a way to build discourse. Other countries, such as Uruguay, are finding that virtual groups are participating through contributions, and are beginning to have group representatives. Argentina is, like us, working on a way to have virtual groups in the structure. The US and Canada Trustees at Large meet with their REDELA colleagues monthly, and will be updating as situations change.

DATA

What Do We Have and What Do We Need

Here's what we have:

Currently in the G.S.O. database there are approximately **700** active virtual groups in the U.S./Canada General Service Structure. Virtual is defined as online and phone groups. All of these 595 virtual groups, like any other A.A. group have a district and an area they are listed with. Out of these **700** virtual groups more than **450** have a G.S.R. and **140** out of those 450 also have an Alt. G.S.R.

There are approximately **300** groups in our database that need to be contacted regarding what district/area they would like to be a part of since there is no address associated with them currently. This is because of the practice of listing virtual groups prior to the most recent General Service Conference.

DATA

What Do We Have and What Do
We Need

Here's what we know:
By the numbers:
Current group numbers across Areas

The highest number of groups in any given Area is
2300

The lowest number of groups in any given Area is
159

The average number of groups per Area is
currently **765**

DATA

What Do We Have and What Do We Need

Here's what we know:

As seen, the current number of virtual groups, spread across all 93 Areas, is 700. The Group Services desk reports there has been an increase in virtual listings consistently since the 2021 General Service Conference. It seems based on experience if this pace continues, it seems likely that virtual groups will reach the current "average" number of groups in less than a year.

DATA

What Do We Have and What Do We Need

And here's what we <u>really </u>need:
Information/data from Area Delegates

We have some suggestions which may help create informed discussions locally. We also have a few questions we can send to the area delegates in survey form.

DATA

What Do We Have and What Do We Need

And here's what we <u>really </u>need:
Information/data from Area Delegates

a) Suggestions-
- If you do not already have your "read only" access to Fellowship Connection please contact the member services department memberservices@aa.org to get that.
- Once equipped with the "read only" access please work with your area registrar to become aware of how many virtual groups there are in your area
- Please contact these virtual groups and gather some information regarding participation in the U.S./Canada Service Structure

DATA

What Do We Have and What Do We Need

And here's what we <u>really</u> need:
Information/data from Area Delegates

b) Questions

- What discussions regarding participation of virtual groups in your areas/districts have taken place? What motions around this subject have been made?
- Are your areas/districts welcoming participation of virtual groups?
- What is your are doing as far as participation at district meetings and area assemblies for virtual groups? Hybrid?
- What is the cost to facilitate virtual group participation?
- Does your area have virtual districts?

From submissions for consideration at the General Service Conference

As noted, a number of submissions for agenda items concerning virtual groups came in to the Conference desk in September. Since the 71st General Service Conference passed an advisory action for the GSB to form this ad hoc to explore possibilities, it was felt that bringing these items to Conference at this point in time might work against a full exploration of the issues.
While the Trustees Conference on the General Service Conference did not forward them to the Conference, they were forwarded to this ad hoc committee to inform our discussions, and the committee is grateful for the time and thought that went into the submissions.
Some excerpts follow.

From submissions for consideration at the General Service Conference

"*Hypothetical Scenario 1*: A virtual group consists entirely of A.A. members in Connecticut. If the group decides to be listed as a group in Nebraska, even though all its members live in Connecticut, the 71st G.S.C. Advisory Action indicates that this group would be listed in Nebraska.

Hypothetical Scenario 2: A virtual group consists of seven A.A. members—six from Connecticut and one from Tennessee. The group makes no preference about which District in Area 11 (Connecticut) to join. The one member from Tennessee serves as the group's primary contact and registers the group with the General Service Office. The group is now registered in Tennessee because the address of the group's primary contact serves as the default location

Hypothetical Scenario 3: A virtual group has existed for many years and has thirty different members living in thirty different Areas throughout the United States and Canada. Which District or Area makes sense for them to be part of?"

From submissions for consideration at the General Service Conference

"How does a new Area usually form? How does a new Area form when it is not separating from an already-existing Area? How do various international service structures differ from the U.S./Canada service structure? What is the value of being registered with the General Service Office as a group and why do group records matter? How does an Intergroup/Central Office differ from an Area? What are the different reasons members belonged to virtual groups prior to the Covid-19 pandemic? What is a linguistic District and how do the needs of virtual groups differ? What are some of the ways that different Areas are autonomous in how they are structured, and how might that be relevant for a virtual Area? **What exactly makes an A.A. group an A.A. group, anyway?**"

From submissions for consideration at the General Service Conference

"(international group) started on June 10th, 2019, on the WeChat platform as an English-speaking group. We moved to the Zoom platform in January 2020 with one meeting which focuses on the step, tradition, and concept of Alcoholics Anonymous. Today we have 2 other meetings. ... We are a group which has homegroup members, active in service, from 16 countries across the globe. We are not limited by one geographical location and have no physical address. Therefore, we are not eligible to participate in the existing service structures based on national or language guidelines. We are self-supporting through our own contributions."

Moving forward

Yes, we still have far more questions than answers. This committee will continue with its exploration and research into future possibilities for the participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada General Service structure. While many of the ideas that have come forward concern virtual areas, is there some broader, bigger, visionary thinking that we are missing? Perhaps the online groups might want to form their own service structure, not attached to any geography? (Something along the lines of what our Board Chair called, "Intergalactic AA")

We will continue to report to the Board and to the Conference as we work together, in unity and with respect, to chart new territory in carrying the message of Alcoholics Anonymous. We cannot do that without you, and we thank you for your part in it.