

# A.A.® Guidelines **Central or Intergroup Offices**

from G.S.O., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

The A.A. Guidelines below are compiled from the shared experience of A.A. members throughout the U.S. and Canada. They also reflect guidance given through the Twelve Traditions and the General Service Conference. In keeping with our Tradition of autonomy except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole, most decisions are made by the group conscience of the members involved. The purpose of these Guidelines is to assist in reaching an *informed* group conscience.

## WHAT IS A CENTRAL OFFICE?

A central office (or intergroup) is an A.A. service office that involves partnership among groups in a community—just as A.A. groups themselves are partnerships of individuals. A central office is established to carry out certain functions common to all the groups—functions which are best handled by a centralized office—and it is usually maintained, supervised, and supported by these groups in their general interest. It exists to aid the groups in their common purpose of carrying the A.A. message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

## FUNCTIONS OF A CENTRAL OFFICE

The A.A. experience has demonstrated that central offices are helpful, particularly in populous areas. There are nearly 1000 central/intergroup offices throughout the world, performing vital A.A. services. These constitute a network of service outlets and A.A. contacts to help carry the A.A. message.

Sometimes, however, central office ventures have bogged down in disputes over money, authority, and like matters—thus becoming less effective in carrying the A.A. message. It's not always clear why these troubles have come up, but often it's been because the proper functions of a central office were not clearly explained or understood, or there was some disregard of the principles in A.A.'s Twelve Traditions. So the following suggestions have been made to outline the basic services a central office might offer:

- 1) *A.A. Inquiries*—By providing an Alcoholics Anonymous listing in the local telephone directory, the central office may receive inquiries from those seeking help. They will refer the caller to a nearby A.A. group, where sponsorship may be arranged, or have a twelfth stepper contact them. Many local A.A. offices now have their own Web site.
- 2) *Office Facilities*—The central office can maintain a conveniently located office in which paid workers and/or volunteers coordinate local A.A. services.
- 3) *Meeting Lists and Other Literature* — At regular intervals, the central office may publish and distribute up-to-date lists of meetings and other information about local A.A. services. Many intergroup/central offices sell A.A. Conference-approved literature for the convenience of local groups.
- 4) *Information Exchange*—The service office may function as a clearinghouse for the circulation and exchange of information among all the A.A. groups in the community. In this same connection, a logical function of the central office is to provide “program

exchange” meetings, where group program chairpersons meet regularly to exchange meetings with other groups.

5) *Local Committees on Public Information (P.I.) and Cooperation With the Professional Community (C.P.C.) in cooperation with district and area P.I. and C.P.C. committees*—The central office is an ideal contact with those in the community seeking information about A.A. Thus, A.A.'s relations with the public and professionals in the alcoholism field are often handled through the cooperation of general service committees and central offices. To avoid duplication of efforts and other difficulties, good communication between all parts of A.A. is paramount. A.A. Guidelines and Workbooks on P.I. and C.P.C. are available from G.S.O.

6) *A.A. in Correctional and Treatment Facilities*—The central office can maintain contact with local groups in correctional facilities and treatment facilities, offering literature and prerelease A.A. contacts and arranging for A.A. speakers and visitors to meetings. When there is a correctional or treatment facility committee for this purpose, the service office may assist it through close cooperation with local hospitals and prisons.

Central offices handling institutional contacts are also urged to send for G.S.O. material, Guidelines on Correctional Facilities Committees and Guidelines on Treatment Facilities Committees and the Correctional Facilities and Treatment Facilities Workbooks.

7) *Local A.A. Events*—An A.A. central office is a logical body to manage the details of an annual dinner, picnic, or convention, if the participating groups wish it.

8) *A.A. Bulletin or Newsletter*—The preparation of a publication for periodic distribution to A.A. groups is often a function of the central office.

9) *Special Needs Services*—Many central offices carry information on groups that are wheelchair accessible, or signed for deaf members. Some offices have TDD/TTY equipment for communicating with deaf alcoholics.

## MAKING A GOOD BEGINNING

Like many well-meant ventures in A.A., central offices sometimes suffer because they are conceived and established without advance planning. The unhappy and damaging experiences of such ventures indicate that a few questions should be raised before a central office is opened.

One question should concern actual need. Is there a sufficient

number of groups in the community to justify opening a central office? Are they able and willing to support it financially? Have they been consulted as to whether such an office could serve their needs? Will they cooperate with it and support its aims and purposes? (If, after such consideration, an office seems impractical, a telephone answering service may fill the needs. G.S.O. has Guidelines on A.A. Answering Services.)

Questions should also be raised about proposed locations for the central office and the personnel and equipment needed. It's sometimes tempting to consider moderately priced or free facilities supplied by agencies or organizations working in the field of alcoholism or in other fields. But it's better to forgo this short-term advantage if there's any likelihood that A.A. would lose its independent status in the bargain or appear—in the public mind at least—to be sponsored or controlled by the other organization.

The question also comes up whether to buy property or a building. A.A. traditionally does not own property, "lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose." Experience also indicates that it is not fair or wise to commit future A.A. members to financial obligations for which they have not initially assumed responsibility, so renting a facility has proved best.

It may also appear attractive to consolidate the central office with the facilities and operations of a club. But the risks and pitfalls involved in this are almost too numerous to mention here. One reason for discouraging this is the possibility that the problems of operating the club and the service office will become intertwined, to the detriment of each activity. An even more important point is the need for keeping a clear separation between club operations and A.A. group activities; any strong identification with a club may impair a central office's ability to serve the groups.

A central location for the office is usually desirable, if finances permit. It's also well to take in possible future needs at the same time the original quarters are being considered; sometimes it's possible to rent facilities in buildings where adjoining rooms may become available later. Sufficient room should be provided for copying, mailings, committee meetings, and consultation with newcomers.

Since a central office is intended to provide services for all A.A. groups in a community, experience indicates that it is best for the office not to give or rent space to any one group for meetings. The decision, however, is really up to each office, acting autonomously.

## GETTING UNDER WAY

Once some of these preliminary matters have been satisfactorily disposed of, the road is clear for the formal organizational work. Here's a suggested plan that has worked well.

Each group in the community is asked to send both a representative and an alternate representative to a special meeting to form a central office committee (also called a steering committee in some places). In large communities, it is sometimes necessary to divide the group into zones, with a zone representative serving several groups. Once formed, the committee takes over the responsibility

for the project and outlines its aims and purposes for approval by the participant groups. Such an outline might cover these points:

- 1) Listing of all groups in the community that want to participate.
- 2) A reminder that financial support is voluntary and not a condition of membership (in keeping with A.A. tradition).
- 3) A clear explanation that responsibility for the maintenance of the service office rests with the groups. Therefore, each group should name a central office representative and an alternate to serve a specified term as the connecting link between the group and its central office.
- 4) A summary of the functions of the central office and an explanation of how it will be staffed and operated.
- 5) A discussion of how the service office will handle such vital matters as inquiries from newcomers, relations with the press, and similar duties.
- 6) Assurance that the service center will be operated in keeping with A.A.'s Twelve Traditions.

## GROUP REPRESENTATION AT A CENTRAL OFFICE

Service centers usually have no authority on their own account; they derive it from the participating groups. Intergroup/central offices are essentially A.A. service entities, "directly responsible to those they serve," as described in Tradition Nine. Local group representatives reflect the groups' conscience in the service center operations.

In most communities, a central office committee or steering committee is set up to handle the administrative activities of the service office. The steering committee holds regularly scheduled meetings and deals with general policy and plans. Periodically, the steering committee reports to group representatives on central office problems and accomplishments. It is extremely important to keep a two-way flow of information going between the central office and groups.

## STAFFING THE INTERGROUP

Most A.A. central offices now employ at least one paid full-time secretary or manager, as well as A.A. volunteers—members who respond to Twelfth Step calls at the office, answer the telephone, and often carry out other service office duties. Large offices may also have paid clerical workers on the staff to assist the full-time person.

Although the principles involving certain paid employees of A.A. service centers are now widely known in A.A., it is still helpful to review the appropriate A.A. Tradition at the time of opening a new service office. As it states in Tradition Eight: "Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers." It should be clear from this that the paid secretary functions as a paid employee of the central office—not as an A.A. member—during duty hours and is hired largely on the basis of professional skill.

Regarding compensation for paid workers, Bill W. writes in "Twelve Concepts for World Service" as follows: "We believe that each paid executive, staff member, or consultant should be recompensed in

reasonable relation to the value of his or her similar services or abilities in the commercial world." Also, Social Security and certain insurance benefits are provided, as well as sick leave and vacations.

It is suggested that the central office full-time secretary also be accorded a vote as well as a voice on the steering committee. This policy is successfully followed by A.A. World Services, Inc.: The staff coordinator—a paid employee as well as an A.A. member—also serves as a director and thus has a vote on policy matters.

## **SUPERVISION—MAKING THE OFFICE SERVE**

It's plain that the success of the central office requires community-wide agreement on matters concerning administrative responsibility and authority. The steering committee should reach an early consensus on this; if necessary, they should explain it in the bylaws or some other set of guidelines. For, while it's difficult to establish hard-and-fast rules and then live by them, it's at least reasonable to clarify such matters as the functions of the office and the extent of the paid secretary's authority and duties.

Some decisions can be entrusted to the paid secretary. In other cases, it may be wiser for the steering committee to maintain full oversight of many matters. In any case, it's important that problems get an early review by someone who is authorized to deal with them and can solve them as quickly as possible. Otherwise, the service office operations are bound to suffer.

Special attention might be given to the following matters in the operation of the office:

1) *Fair distribution of Twelfth Step calls.* However tempting it may be to assign follow-up calls to those individuals and groups that seem especially willing, the Twelfth Step work is something all the groups in the community should be encouraged to share. But it's also important that calls are distributed according to the location of the group; that is, newcomers should usually be put in touch with the group nearest to them.

2) *After closing hours,* A.A. volunteers or a telephone answering service—carefully chosen—should handle incoming calls. (See Guidelines on A.A. Answering Services.)

3) *Authority and responsibility* should be related. It is unfair to assign certain responsibilities to a paid secretary or volunteer without giving commensurate authority.

## **FACING FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

***Incorporation:*** By its very nature, a service office involves making financial commitments quite different from those usually encountered in the operation of an A.A. group. Office facilities have to be leased; a secretary must be hired and paid; office supplies must be purchased; the telephone bill has to be paid regularly. To adequately take care of these responsibilities, it is generally wise to incorporate separately special facilities, such as a service office, which require money or management.

Since group purposes, local conditions, and state laws vary, it is suggested a local lawyer be consulted regarding such incorpora-

tion. At the same time, the following points might be emphasized: If possible, eliminate the name "Alcoholics Anonymous" from the corporate title. (This name is the sole property of A.A. as a whole.) Limit the activities of the corporation to the one locality only. Expenses create a need for financial responsibility that should be recognized at the outset; if properly understood and dealt with, it never need become a source of trouble.

### ***Suggested methods of financing a central office:***

1) *Group Collections.* A.A. groups participating in the financial support of the service office may choose to make their contributions by setting aside fixed sums from their regular collections. Many groups pledge a fixed amount, which is paid periodically. This assures the central office of a regular income, and certainly helps it to plan the best means of meeting its own obligations.

Occasionally there are groups that do not support a central office. In these cases, the spirit of contributing voluntarily, that prevails throughout A.A., applies. If groups can't or choose not to pay their share of the costs, they shouldn't be denied the services of the office.

2) *Special Contributions.* Some groups provide a special collection box or basket in a convenient place during meeting times, inviting members to contribute. In that same vein, A.A. members may make individual contributions, on a pledge or voluntary basis, directly to the service office. Also, many A.A.s make contributions to their central office in celebration of their A.A. birthday or anniversary.

3) *Sale of Literature.* Many service offices publish their own meeting lists; others also produce introductory pamphlets explaining A.A. These can be sold at a slight profit to help defray office expenses. It is also possible to buy books from G.S.O. for resale at the retail price, the profit going to support the central office. The Conference-approved literature catalog describes various discounts.

4) *Special Events.* Some service offices hold yearly banquets, conventions, and similar events, using the "profits" for support of the office.

For help in financial planning, the 1977 General Service Conference recommended that "a suggested prudent reserve . . . preferably be one to 12 months' operating expense, depending on local needs."

## **CENTRAL OFFICES AND G.S.O.**

The common experience has shown that A.A.'s worldwide unity is best served if A.A. groups maintain their own separate contacts with G.S.O. Direct group contact with G.S.O. doesn't take the place of services provided by a local service office, but helps G.S.O. to keep in closer touch with all groups.

There are, however, some important areas of interest in which close contact between the central offices and G.S.O. is not only desirable but necessary. Some central offices, for example, like to be provided with New Group Information Forms so that newly formed groups can be immediately listed with G.S.O. These forms, as well as forms for changing group information, are available from G.S.O. on request.

Groups should not assume that if they list themselves with a central

office they are automatically listed at G.S.O. New groups are encouraged to send a Group Information Form directly to the General Service Office, P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163.

For its own part, G.S.O. also seeks to keep central offices well informed. As a regular policy, the G.S.O. newsletter, *Box 4-5-9*, as well as A.A. Directories, are sent to each central office. G.S.O. also keeps a record of all central offices and is interested in assisting them wherever possible. The staff member on the Group Services assignment is the liaison with central offices and intergroups.

## NEWSLETTERS OR BULLETINS

Newsletters or bulletins published by central offices may include not only office news and events, but similar information about the groups and committees served by these offices (such as meeting times, openings of new groups, or changes of group meeting locations or officers). Frequently, material from A.A. literature is reprinted and discussed, and articles on subjects of interest to A.A.s also are published. Experience indicates that, as in most A.A. service activities, it is prudent to make a committee (rather than one or two individuals) responsible for the format, planning, and content of the bulletin.

Many local publications quote from A.A. literature such as the Big Book, the Twelve and Twelve, *The A.A. Service Manual*, and Conference-approved pamphlets. Any A.A. newsletter, bulletin, or meeting list is more than welcome to use this material. Please be sure to include the proper credit line in your publications, in order to insure that the copyrights of A.A. literature are protected.

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### More suggestions you might consider, based on local experience with A.A. newsletters and bulletins.

- Scheduling a “theme issue,” centering on some aspect of the A.A. program and using excerpts from Conference-approved material (with proper credit) relating to the theme.
- Asking for and publishing letters from your A.A. readers.
- Carrying highlights of minutes from various committee meetings—

central office steering committee, institutions, public information, etc.

- Including committee financial reports and records of group contributions.
- Running occasional appropriate cartoons. (If these are from the A.A. Grapevine or Conference-approved pamphlets, please remember that illustrations, too, are copyrighted, and the proper credit should accompany any of these that are used.)
- Running a “Calendar of Events” feature.
- Conducting a subscription campaign (perhaps making announcements at group meetings), to build paid readership.

## COMMUNICATION

Communication is the key to working together—Central Office or Intergroup Office and General Service Area Committee or the District Committee and the General Service Office of A.A. In 1990 the General Service Conference stressed the importance of communication and recommended that delegates establish and maintain contact with offices in their areas to share Conference information and assure that central/intergroup offices have a voice in the Fellowship through their existing service structure.

Try to find out what is going on by getting together from time to time with corresponding committees in your area. It is important to share ideas and discuss activities so as to avoid duplication of effort. It is not important who does the work (the General Service Committee or the Central Office or Intergroup Committee in your area) but that the work gets done—that help is there for the next alcoholic who needs us and our Fellowship.

Central offices and general service area committees are complementary, rather than competitive, A.A. operations. Both exist to help insure A.A. unity and to fulfill A.A.'s primary purpose of carrying the message.

There is a great deal of work for intergroup or central office committees concerned with public information, cooperation with the professional community, correctional and treatment facilities.

In 1986, the first A.A.W.S./Intergroup/Central Office Seminar was held to discuss questions on literature distribution, pricing and discounts, and to share ways to work together. Seminars are now held each year.

## GOOD LUCK AND SMOOTH SAILING

We hope these suggestions will help make your central office venture a vital and fruitful addition to the A.A. activity in your area. These are suggestions only, and it's the spirit and cooperation behind the central office idea that will make it work.

If you are starting a new office please write to G.S.O.; your office will be added to the mailing list and you will receive a Central Office Kit and some literature. Your office will be included in the U.S. and Canadian Directories so that you may share A.A. experience with others and be available for any alcoholic seeking help.