

A.A.® Guidelines

A.A. Answering Services

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

A.A. Guidelines are compiled from the shared experience of A.A. members in various service areas. They also reflect guidance given through the Twelve Traditions and the General Service Conference (U.S. and Canada). 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 AN A.A. ANSWERING SERVICE?

An A.A. answering service offers a local gateway to reach Alcoholics Anonymous. The service receives inquiries from those seeking help and may refer callers to a nearby A.A. group or may have an A.A. member contact them. Most answering services serve groups in one community or county only. In some places, general service districts form the geographical boundaries. Some areas have started state- or province-wide answering services.

The responsibility for an A.A. answering service can vary: an answering service committee may handle matters; an intergroup or central office may manage this service; individual A.A. members may take on the responsibility; or the answering service may be the responsibility of the district or area general service committee.

STARTING AN ANSWERING SERVICE

An answering service may be started by one A.A. group or even by one or two members who feel the need for such a service. General service district committees may also start an answering service. If possible, before making such a decision, the group conscience of all groups involved should be consulted, in order to ensure both financial support and a supply of volunteers to take Twelfth Step calls.

Groups are usually aware that the service is filling a real need and consequently are willing to support it. It is important to be assured in advance of members' support and of their willingness to stick with the answering service until it has a chance to catch on and prove its worth.

Getting Started – A Few Suggestions:

- Check with your area, district and nearby central or intergroup office to make sure this service is not duplicating an already existing A.A. service.
- Start small, and remember “Easy Does It.” It is easier to expand than to reduce services.
- Abide by the group conscience of the groups involved. Take care to separate individual opinions from group conscience.
- Generally, answering services are listed under “Alcoholics Anonymous” or “A.A.” in the local telephone directory. Since many people seek help via an Internet search, consider also getting the answering service number listed on local A.A. websites and on G.S.O.'s A.A. website www.aa.org (contact groupservices@aa.org for the A.A. Answering Service Information Form and for more information).

COMMERCIAL ANSWERING SERVICES

One option is to hire a commercial service, similar to the kind physicians use, which can answer the phone and connect callers to an A.A. group or A.A. contact. If a commercial answering service is hired, it is suggested that one person be appointed to make the arrangements, pay the bills, and handle contacts with the answering service in order to avoid confusing the answering service personnel.

Following is a list of methods for handling Twelfth Step calls:

1. The commercial answering service has a list of members who are available for Twelfth Step calls. After taking the first name and phone number of the caller, the answering service reaches an A.A. member, who then calls the alcoholic seeking help.
2. The Twelfth Step list is arranged according to geographical areas or zip/postal code. When the address of the prospect has been ascertained, an A.A. member in the vicinity is called. Some A.A. experience suggests there should be separate lists of men and women Twelfth Step contacts.
3. Several A.A. members serve on a rotating basis. The commercial service refers calls to them, which they in turn refer to names on their list of A.A. contacts.
4. In some instances, the calls are referred to the nearest group, rather than to an individual member.
5. In some places, groups take responsibility for Twelfth Step calls for one week each on a rotating basis.
6. Some answering services use a diverter or patch system whereby they answer the call but immediately plug in the number of an A.A. volunteer.
7. A screening committee arranges for a different person to receive calls each night from the answering service. That person then refers the calls to A.A. volunteers.

One A.A. answering service committee shared the following information they supplied to a commercial service to explain their needs to its personnel:

When an alcoholic calls for help...

1. Answer by saying, “A.A. answering service.”
2. Try to find out what the caller wants.
3. If the caller is reluctant to give a name or other information, don't insist. Try to cross-connect (patch) the call with an A.A. member.

4. Never argue with callers. Explain that you are an answering service and will try to put them in touch with an A.A. member.
5. Tell callers that many A.A. members are at meetings in the evenings, so they should not expect an immediate call-back.
6. Please remember that alcoholics and members of their families who call for help are sick people; dealing with them can sometimes be frustrating unless this is kept in mind.
7. If you are criticized, tell the caller that you are acting on instructions from the answering service committee. Problems or questions should be referred to this committee.
8. Record each call with the name of the caller (if possible), time, phone number and reason for call. Also note the name and phone number of the A.A. member to whom it was referred.

Paying for Commercial Answering Services

Before contracting a commercial answering service, carefully estimate how much money will be needed and how much will be available. Be sure that the groups will finance the venture. Encourage groups to pledge a regular amount each month. When prorating costs among participating groups, each group can be charged the same amount or groups can be charged on the basis of group size. It may be prudent to add a small amount each month in order to build a reserve for emergencies or expansion of the service.

When district committees are responsible, groups contribute to the district committee and the committee pays the bills.

ALTERNATIVES TO COMMERCIAL ANSWERING SERVICES

In areas that use volunteers only (rather than a commercial answering service), many solutions are available: call forwarding, voicemail, a cell phone passed among volunteers, or a voice-activated prompt system that gives callers options. Some A.A. entities have explored using voice over Internet protocol (VOIP) systems (also known as voice over broadband or virtual phone systems), which can present significant savings compared with traditional phone service. In addition, VOIP systems offer additional features, including auto dialer,

enabled SMS/texting and multiple message choices. Here is one way a VOIP answering service could work: callers hear a recorded message welcoming them to A.A. and asking them to hold on to be connected with a local member. Meanwhile, the system auto dials all the volunteers on the contact list. The first volunteer to answer will receive the call.

For more shared experience on this topic you can contact the group services coordinator at G.S.O. (groupservices@aa.org).

Volunteer Answering Services — A Few Suggestions:

- If you cannot or do not choose to use a commercial service, consider the number of A.A. people available to answer Twelfth Step calls.
- It is suggested that volunteer Twelfth Step contacts should have at least six months' sobriety and should state the days and hours when they will be available for calls.
- Be sure that the list of A.A. volunteers is current and active.
- Consider providing volunteer training and a list of suggested tips and referral numbers.
- If someone is seeking help with a drinking problem from an area beyond the vicinity in which the answering service serves, make sure volunteers have an intergroup central office directory on hand, or refer to the "A.A. Near You" section on aa.org.

A SAMPLING OF SOME OF THE EXPERIENCES THAT WERE SHARED WITH US

"We asked for a show of hands at just one meeting, and seven people indicated they had come to A.A. through the answering service. Is it worth it? We should say it is!"

"We are pleased with our answering service. We have 'twelfth stepped' the operators, and they are gracious and sympathetic. We feel fortunate and grateful."

"From the time our service was started, the attendance at our meetings increased tremendously. We have some volunteers who started with our answering service seven years ago and are still at it, on a rotating basis."