

■ Intergroup/Central Office: Then and Now

Established and supported by local groups to carry out the functions of a centralized office, intergroups have provided thousands of desperate alcoholics with their first contact with Alcoholics Anonymous, either over the phone, in person, or, increasingly, online. With 469 intergroups/central offices listed with G.S.O. in the U.S./Canada alone (and nearly 700 worldwide), A.A. is so easily “searchable” these days that we often forget that, at one time, it played a little hard to get. Back in the early days, “A.A. wasn’t that easy to find,” wrote one oldtimer. “A carefully selected group of priests, judges and policemen knew about A.A.; our phone number wasn’t listed, and it could be gotten only by dialing Information.” This was a deliberate attempt to ensure that anyone wanting to get sober was sincere enough to make a real effort. But gauging the level of someone else’s desire to quit drinking was an often subjective judgment that the Third Tradition fortunately did away with.

In the very beginning, there was the Central Committee in Cleveland, Ohio, where by October 1939 a group of seven members convened on a regular basis to coordinate efforts regarding hospitalizations and sponsorship, doing crucial work at a time when the slip of just one member or the dissolution of just one group seemed to threaten the very existence of A.A. itself.

What Bill W. called “A.A.’s first organized service center” — the forerunner of today’s intergroup — sprang up in the Chicago suburb of Evanston. Around 1940, an A.A. member named Sylvia used the proceeds of her monthly alimony check to rent an apartment and establish a phone line. In 1941, after publication of the Jack Alexander article about A.A. in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Sylvia’s apartment began to resemble, according to Bill, “a sort of Chicago Grand Central,” with so many phone calls that Sylvia had to enlist the aid of Grace Coultice, a non-alcoholic secretary. Eventually, Sylvia and Grace upgraded to an office in the Loop (only a few blocks from where the current Chicago Area Service Office now has its offices), where they welcomed, Bill wrote, “a stream of applicants for Twelfth Step attention, hospitalization, or other help.”

Most early intergroup offices were nowhere near as elaborate as this: they were simply phone lines listed as belonging to A.A. but that were in fact connected to members’ homes. But Sylvia’s office inspired the opening of numerous early intergroup/central offices all over the Midwest, notably ones in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and



Minneapolis, Minnesota.

On the East Coast, New York Inter-Group essentially started when the doors of the 24th Street Clubhouse at 334½ West 24th Street opened in June 1940 and began serving the members of Alcoholics Anonymous in the metropolitan area. By 1942, the Club, as it was called, began to serve as more than a meeting place and to function as a de facto central committee for over 20 A.A. groups, with two paid clubhouse secretaries who answered phones and manned the desk 12 to 14 hours a day. These were some of A.A.’s first “special workers,” as articulated in Tradition Eight, who were paid to make A.A. Twelfth Step work possible, as opposed to individual A.A. members who, on a voluntary basis, carry the message as part of their own Twelfth Step efforts. Eventually, in 1946, New York Inter-Group was established, moving away from the clubhouse (it was difficult to carry on the work of intergroup in a social atmosphere that included an endless poker game and, at one point, a restaurant) to a space on West 75th Street.

By the time of the first General Service Conference in April 1951, at least 16 intergroup/central offices were serving local groups. Since they predated the formation of the general service structure and performed a different A.A. function, they were not a part of the A.A. structure (except in Chicago, where the area service office and area committee are essentially one). At times over the years, there has been an overlapping of services, but, for the most part, intergroups and general service have come to work in harmony.

Matthew C., office manager of the Ventura County Central Office (VCCO), is the epitome of a contemporary

Box 4-5-9 is published quarterly by the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115, copyright © 2017 by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.

Mail address: P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station
New York, NY 10163

G.S.O.'s A.A. Website: www.aa.org

Subscriptions: Individual, \$3.50 per year; group, \$6.00 for each unit of 10 per year. Check—made payable to A.A.W.S., Inc.—should accompany order. To have issues delivered directly to your inbox, register your email on the A.A. Digital Subscription Service on G.S.O.'s website.

intergroup/central office manager, dealing with all the rewards and challenges that this entails. The image of A.A. volunteers answering phone calls from suffering alcoholics, or A.A. members seeking a meeting or information, is still a relatively accurate one. “We rotate shifts of volunteers — we have at least one in the office at all times, and 60 to 70 willing to have calls forwarded to their homes after hours,” Matthew says. They get about 500 to 600 calls a month at VCCO, but this is down from previous years because of the Internet, which has proved, for better or worse, a game-changer for intergroup/central offices. Since so many people are bypassing phone calls and going to the VCCO website, the beta test site that Matthew is rolling out is geared heavily toward newcomers, opening with a banner that reads, “New to A.A.? Have Questions?” and a home page that addresses the most commonly occurring questions.

Matthew feels that there is a “certain comfort” about being able to explore the answers to questions individuals may have about their drinking without having to speak to someone, but there is also something that may be lost: “that one-on-one connection with another person. So, the website does encourage people to call, 24/7.” When they do call, miracles can occur. Like so many of the intergroup/central office workers, Matthew has war stories. Once, an alcoholic attempting to detox himself called VCCO, certain that he was having a heart attack. “He was in bad shape,” Matthew says, “and after a long conversation we convinced him to call EMS and get to an emergency room.” Several years later, that same alcoholic — sober now — walked into the office and thanked them.

In Chicago, office manager Katie M. describes a very successful web presence for the Chicago Area Service Office (CASO). The website averages over 100,000 visits per month, and, out of these, roughly 26 percent are coming to the site for the first time.

Katie describes CASO as “an anchor” for the greater Chicago area and Cook County. “We have a bookstore, and all of our standing committees — like corrections, H&I, Grapevine, etc. — meet here in the evening, and other districts come down here to participate, so we connect people to the service structure.”

CASO does receive roughly 700 phone calls a month,

Katie adds, but she senses that they are somewhat different from the intergroup calls of the past. “The majority of the calls are not necessarily people wanting to go to a first meeting, or to talk about their drinking problems. We get calls from social workers, for instance, who are trying to help alcoholics connect with a meeting, often a bridging-the-gap kind of thing.”

Like many intergroup/central office managers, Katie is concerned about the finances of the office. Like all intergroups, CASO acts as a clearinghouse for information about local groups and meetings and is directly responsible to the groups it serves. In turn, these groups provide volunteers for Twelfth Step work (i.e., answering the phones), supervise office policies and procedures via their intergroup reps, and offer financial support. CASO has a strong prudent reserve, but Katie is always looking for measures to cut costs, particularly since contributions from the groups have been declining. “Only 23 percent of the groups support the office,” Katie says, “and individual contributions [which can be up to \$3,000 annually] make up only 5 to 10 percent.” And e-commerce affects the way they can do business. “People can get the Big Book cheaper and faster from non-A.A. online stores than they can coming down here to the bookstore and purchasing it from us.”

One answer to this problem is outreach to the groups. Katie M. sends out an appeal letter every November, and intergroup reps discuss the need for financing at every area assembly. Pauline D., office manager of the Northern Virginia Intergroup (NVI), agrees on how crucial outreach is: “We had a terrible year a couple of years ago,” she says. So, we did a major outreach, letting people know just how intergroup works and how it is financed. We asked all of our intergroup reps to bring word back to their groups that intergroup needed their help. We really pushed Birthday Plans in November. And we had the intergroup chair visit each of the 14 districts we serve and talk about our mission. And that seemed to work very well for us.”

(Pauline and NVI are hosting the 32nd Annual Intergroup/Central Office/AAWS/AAGV Seminar, October 6-8 this year. This annual seminar provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and shared experience for those on A.A.'s front line. Attendees are intergroup/

■ Reminder: Résumés for Trustee Election due Jan. 1, 2018

Two new Class B (alcoholic) trustees from the Pacific and Eastern Canada regions will be elected at the General Service Conference in April 2018. Résumés must be received at G.S.O. no later than January 1, 2018, and must be submitted by delegates only.

The new Pacific regional trustee will succeed Joel C., of San Diego; the new Eastern Canada trustee will follow Richard B., of Terrebonne, Québec.

Please submit your candidate's résumé to the Secretary, trustees' Nominating Committee, General Service Office.

central office managers, intergroup representatives, G.S.O. and Grapevine staff, and members of the A.A.W.S. and Grapevine Boards.)

Jennifer R., office manager of Miami-Dade Intergroup — an office with a long history, dating back to the 1940s — has seen the number of groups in the area decline. Phone calls to the hotline average only two or three a day, perhaps as a result of the website or the Meeting Finder app that many people use today. With so many groups closed and others facing increased rent, contributions to Miami-Dade Intergroup are down. Both Jennifer and another employee are part-time; despite this, they are incredibly productive, producing and distributing meeting directories, managing the website, selling A.A. Conference-approved literature, providing service materials, preparing a monthly newsletter, and making sure the phones are answered 24/7 by A.A. volunteers. Jennifer speaks Spanish, and one of her many jobs is cooperation with the Spanish-speaking intergroups, which do not have a separate office, but pass the phone from one group to another, one month at a time.

Young people coming into A.A. need to be educated about intergroup, Jennifer says, and need to learn to volunteer. An A.A. without intergroup would not be A.A., really. “If we are not here, if someone calls for help and there is no one to pick up the phone, then A.A. has failed them.”

Coco T., executive secretary of New York Inter-Group (NYIG), agrees that a thriving intergroup is incredibly important to the A.A. community it serves — in the case of NYIG, a community that includes 1,438 active groups registered with the NYIG office and 3,642 meetings in the meeting book. It’s no wonder that NYIG’s Seventh Avenue offices are open 365 days a year from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., with phone volunteers available from 9 a.m. to 2 a.m. “We don’t miss any opportunity to share our experience, strength and hope with other alcoholics,” Coco says, especially since the web has changed the intergroup paradigm. Up until August 2016, when their new A.A. meeting finder appeared on the website, NYIG averaged 4,500 to 4,800 calls a month. At that point, the calls were almost immediately reduced to 3,000 to 3,200 per month.

It’s a mixed blessing, of course. More and more people are able to find meetings quickly and efficiently, but, says Coco, the loss of 20 to 30 phone calls a day “is physically very noticeable. When alcoholics actually call on the phone for help, they get the benefit of the A.A. volunteer who may have been taking phone calls for five years and can really connect with another alcoholic. Now we get hundreds of emails asking us to make contact with a person about their drinking. It’s a challenge to answer these, and also removes the value of that one-to-one connection, the immediate Twelfth Step element.”

To provide human connection, Coco helps ensure that the NYIG office is a welcoming place. “There’s a library and an archives area where people can and do come from all over for a cup of coffee and to read a book and look at some historic items. You can check out a book if you want. No one is ever turned away. Even in an electronic age, we are committed to providing hard copies of every flyer we produce — not everyone, particularly homeless people, has access to the Internet.”

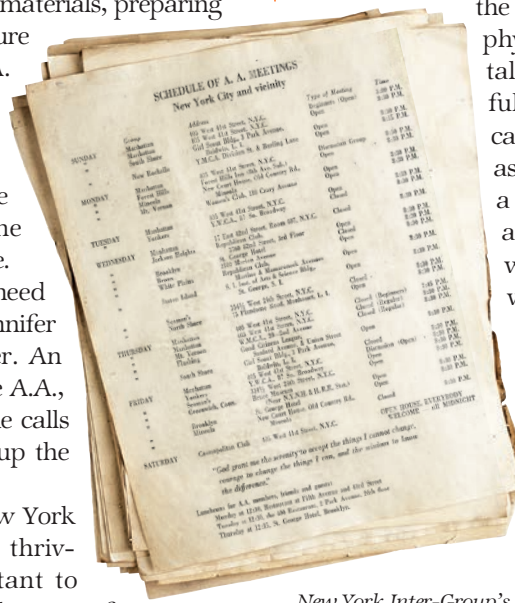
And the connection benefits not just the alcoholics reaching out to NYIG, but those 635 to 700 alcoholics with over one year of continuous sobriety who volunteer there. “You can’t stop these volunteers,” Coco says. “Even if there’s six feet of snow outside, they’ll be here.” She tells the story of one 90-year-old volunteer — a physician who knew Bill W., and used to talk about how he had tried, unsuccessfully, to get Bill to stop smoking — who came in once a week, year after year, even as his health failed, showing up dressed in a suit and tie. “He was a man of elegance and grace,” Coco says. “He used to tell his wife, ‘I have to go help people.’ His life’s work was to carry the message.”

The Area 87 Central Service Office in Montréal, Québec (which is hosting the 2018 Intergroup/Central Office/AAWS/AAGV Seminar), carries the message to both English- and French-speaking alcoholics. According to executive assistant Ginette W., their help line receives roughly 500 to 600 English-language calls monthly, with perhaps three times that many in French. “We are officially bilingual, but we also

have a Spanish-speaking presence,” Ginette adds. “There are about 12 Spanish-speaking groups locally that have their own intergroup, but we host them at our office and make literature available in Spanish.”

Like most intergroup/central offices, some of the phone calls the Area 87 Central Service Office receives are from alcoholics who are lonely and simply want to talk, which can be a drain on resources. “We never cut these calls off,” says Ginette, “but we work to direct these people to meetings, where real, face-to-face recovery can begin. We also have a group of volunteers who are willing to talk on the phone from their homes, which frees up our other workers.”

Replenishing the pool of volunteers is a constant concern. “We have to keep reminding groups that things don’t happen by magic in A.A.: there is hard work in carrying the message. Our area’s 27 districts have 550 groups, and we reach out to all of them via our newsletter and through intergroup reps going to meetings. We also make a point of educating groups about why we need money, not how much. We need to pay for literature, for phones, for the website. The A.A. message of recovery is free; for intergroup to pass it on costs money.”



New York Inter-Group’s first meeting schedule — 1946.

Area 87 Central Service Office has a brand new website that features a special portal dedicated to newcomers. Ginette puts it simply: “We need to be where the people are. And, these days, people are on their computers and smartphones. So that is where intergroup has to go.”

Many of those who have never had occasion to call intergroup (or who look up meetings on websites in strange towns without quite thinking of who is maintaining that website) wonder why they should support intergroup/central office with their financial donations. While cooperating closely with G.S.O. and local general service district and area committees, it is not unusual for intergroup/central offices to seem apart from the general service structure. However, as noted in *The A.A. Service Manual* (page S42), “Many areas find that a liaison between the intergroup/central office and the area committee is very helpful in maintaining good relations and communication. In some areas the liaison has a vote at the assembly; in others, a voice but no vote.” And further, the General Service Office publishes Guidelines and other service material that share the accumulated experience of intergroups and central offices in the United States/

Canada and worldwide. These define an intergroup as “an A.A. service office that involves partnership among groups in a community — just as A.A. groups themselves are partnerships of individuals. It is established to carry out functions which are best handled by a centralized office.... It exists to aid the groups in their common purpose of carrying the Alcoholics Anonymous message to the alcoholic who still suffers.”

According to Coco T., the NYIG office pays \$10,000 a month in rent alone — a relatively modest fee, considering Manhattan real estate prices, but not a stroll in the park either. When asked what the future might hold for intergroups, she replies, “We answer to the Fellowship; we are responsible to the groups. Ultimately, our future depends on them. I owe my life to Alcoholics Anonymous, and I would hope intergroup is always there.”

As Matthew C. at VCCO sees it, the idea of intergroup is the idea of A.A. itself: “A suffering alcoholic talks to someone who is feeling the way they are feeling, who understands and has been through the humiliation they have experienced, who helps them know that they are not alone after all.”

■ Living Cyber

At A.A.’s 10th International Convention in San Diego in 1995, a group of people who called themselves the Living Cyber Committee gathered in a hospitality suite. They knew each other, but many of them had never met, since their only encounters had been in early forms of online A.A. groups. Those unable to travel to San Diego were able to “virtually” attend the convention through the suite. Two major email groups, several groups from the major online services, and an Internet Relay Chat channel participated in uniting alcoholics from all over the world with the online members and visitors in the suite.

The Living Cyber suite was a great success, and the committee realized that, with the rapidly expanding Internet, alcoholics around the world would need an online version of a brick-and-mortar intergroup/central office. They formed the Online Intergroup of Alcoholics Anonymous (OIAA), which was registered in New Jersey in 1996. According to OIAA chair Vicki E., online intergroup provides “a centralized location where groups can come online and people can find the groups they need.” Crucial to OIAA’s function is a rigorous vetting policy. “Our policy and admission committee is very strict in vetting our groups before we register them — we need to make sure they are true A.A. groups, operating within our Twelve Traditions.”

At any given time, OIAA may have more than 100 groups listed. They represent all types of meetings — email, chat, telephone, audio, video — for all different groups, including general discussion meetings (both open and closed); men’s and women’s meetings; meetings for those who for one reason or another can’t leave home; meetings for those who are Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing; and meetings for atheists/agnostics, military and LGBTQ members. “All types of people come to online meetings,” Vicki says. When she was training as a nurse and had to travel 50 miles to work, she was unable to get to her regular meetings and so went online. Now she mixes brick-and-mortar meetings with cyber meetings, depending on her schedule.

With meetings in 13 different languages besides English, OIAA is essentially an intergroup/central office for the online world. It functions along the lines of a regular intergroup, depending on Seventh Tradition contributions from its listed groups for expenses, with the usual number



of committees liaising with general service structures in the countries OIAA reaches. And, of course, the Twelfth Step function is central to OIAA’s mission. OIAA’s Twelfth Step Help Committee (known informally as “the Steppers”) responds directly by email — 24 hours a day, in numerous languages — to anyone who clicks on the “Get Help” button on the OIAA site or the meeting sites it links with. According to Vicki, the Steppers answer some 300 to 500 emails a month from all over the world.

This Twelfth Step work, like any other, is crucial. “You are sometimes dealing with alcoholics who are feeling hopeless and you want to connect with them, get them help,” says Vicki. “Even though you are on the Internet, you are working side by side with them.” And, occasionally, there is that validating moment when the virtual world meets the physical one.

“I was at the San Antonio International Convention [in 2010], in our hospitality suite, when we had a man come in from Peru,” Vicki relates. “Where he lived, he said, there were only three A.A. members, all 50 miles apart, and they could only meet once every three months, traveling by boat. Aside from that, his lifeline to A.A. was online meetings. So, people do stay sober, all over the world, against the odds. And that is what OIAA is there to help them with.”