

LOCAL/CENTRAL SERVICE OFFICES

WHAT IS A LOCAL/CENTRAL SERVICE OFFICE?

A Central Service Office (Local/Central Service Office) is an AA service office that involves partnership among Groups in a community, just as AA Groups themselves are partnerships of individuals. It is established to carry out certain functions common to all the Groups, functions which are best handled by a centralised office, and it is usually maintained, supervised and supported by these Groups in their own general interest. It exists to aid the Groups in their common primary purpose of carrying the AA message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

THE FUNCTIONS OF A LOCAL/CENTRAL SERVICE OFFICE

AA's experience has clearly demonstrated that central offices are essential, particularly in populous areas, and there are close to 500 of them functioning around the world, performing vital AA services. Needless to say, these constitute a network of service outlets and AA contacts for which we should be very grateful. Sometimes, however, Local/Central Service Office ventures have bogged down in disputes over money, authority and like matters and have thus become less effective in carrying the AA message. It is not always clear why these troubles have arisen, but often it has been because the proper functions of a Local/Central Service Office were not clearly explained or understood, or because there was some disregard of the principles inherent in AA's *Twelve Traditions*. So the following suggestions have been made to outline the basic services a Local/Central Service Office might offer:

1. **AA Enquiries:** By providing an Alcoholics Anonymous listing in the local telephone directory, a Local/Central Service Office can accept enquiries from those seeking help. They can refer the caller to the appropriate AA Group, where sponsorship is arranged, or have a *Twelfth Stepper* contact them.
2. **Office Facilities:** A Local/Central Service Office can maintain a conveniently located office in which paid workers and/or volunteers are available to carry the message of AA to the alcoholic.
3. **Information Exchange:** The Local/Central Service Office can function as a clearing house for the circulation and exchange of information among all the AA Groups in the community.
4. **Local Committees on PI & CPC:** The Local/Central Service Office is an ideal contact with those in the community seeking information about AA. Thus, AA's relations with the public and professionals in the field of alcoholism are often best handled through the Local/Central Service Office. This activity includes various jobs:
 - a) Making arrangements for AA speakers at the request of non-alcoholic groups.

Maintaining a PO Box so that AA inquiries may be handled discreetly, particularly to protect the anonymity of members.

Assisting the press and other public media in the development of newspaper articles and general publicity about AA, keeping in mind the principle of attraction rather than promotion. For example, TV and radio announcements, programmes on alcohol abuse; suggestions for newspaper and magazine articles; the latest facts about AA and other useful material.

Co-operation with other community agencies which deal with alcoholism and the alcoholic. Such assistance should, of course, be supplied generously but always in keeping with the *Twelve Traditions* and in such a manner as to keep AA free of affiliations. (Special Conference-approved pamphlets, "*How AA Members Co-operate*", "*If You Are a Professional...*" and "*AA in Your Community*", can be obtained from General Service Office. Also available, "*Co-operation With the Professional Community Workbook*", a loose-leaf binder containing sample letters, background information, pamphlets and other material).

In Areas where Public Information and Co-operation with the Professional Community Committees are under the auspices of a General Service Committee, the Local/Central Service Office works in close co-operation with these committees.

5. **Hospitalisation:** Where a plan has been developed for admitting AA-sponsored patients to local hospitals, the Local/Central Service Office can serve by making the arrangements.
6. **AA in Institutions:** The Local/Central Service Office can maintain contact with Groups in Correctional Facilities and Treatment Centres (CF&TCs), offering literature and sponsorship and arranging for AA speakers and visitors to the meetings in those institutions. When there is a CF&TC Committee for this purpose, the Local/Central Service Office may assist it by passing along to the committee the duties that come under the auspices of AA in institutions. (A practical way of keeping up this close working relationship is to have at least one member of the Local/Central Service Office Committee on the CF&TC Committee.) Local/Central Service Offices handling institutional contacts are also urged to send for General Service Office material: Guideline GL-16: "*Correctional and Treatment Facilities Committees*" and the pamphlets "*AA in Treatment Centres*" and "*Bridging the Gap*".
7. **AA Publications:** A Local/Central Service Office is well-situated to prepare and publish periodicals such as meeting lists and contacts, and a Regional bulletin or magazine.
8. **Local AA Events:** An AA Local/Central Service Office is a logical body to manage the details of an annual AA dinner, picnic or convention, if the participating Groups wish it.

MAKING A GOOD BEGINNING

Like many well-meant ventures in AA, Local/Central Service Offices sometimes suffer because they are impulsively conceived and hastily established. The unhappy and damaging experiences of such ventures indicate that a few questions should be raised before a Local/Central Service Office is opened. The first and most important should concern actual need - is there a sufficient number of Groups in the community to justify a Local/Central Service Office? Are they able and willing to support it financially? Have they been consulted as to whether such an office could serve their needs? And will they co-operate with it and support its aims and purposes? If, after such consideration, an office seems impractical or unnecessary, it is possible that a telephone answering service may be better suited to the needs. See Guideline GL-09: "*AA Answering Services*". Questions should also be raised about the proposed location of the Local/Central Service Office and the personnel and equipment it would need.

It is sometimes tempting at this stage - perhaps in the interest of making the best use of scarce funds - to consider moderately priced or free facilities supplied by other agencies or organisations, but it's better to forego this short-term advantage if there's any likelihood that AA would lose its independent status in the bargain, or appear - in the public mind at least - to be sponsored or controlled by that other organisation. The question also arises whether to buy or rent the premises. Traditionally, AA 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 AA members of the future to financial obligations for which they have not initially assumed responsibility. So renting a facility has proved best.

It may also appear attractive at this point to consolidate the Local/Central Service Office with the facilities and operations of a club, but the risks and pitfalls involved in this are almost too numerous to mention here. Certainly, an obvious reason for discouraging this is the possibility that the problems of operating the club and the Local/Central 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 regular AA Group activities; any strong identification with a club may impair a Local/Central Service Office's ability to serve the Groups.

A central location for the office is usually desirable, if finances permit. It is also well to consider possible future needs when evaluating the initial requirements: sometimes accommodation may be rented in a building where adjoining rooms may become available later on. Sufficient room should be provided for photocopying and collation, mailing work, committee meetings, *Twelfth Step* phone calls and consultation with newcomers. Since a Local/Central Service Office is intended to provide services for all 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 is, however, really up to each office, acting autonomously.

GETTING UNDER WAY

Once some of these preliminary matters have been satisfactorily dealt with, the road is clear for the formal organisational work. Here's a suggested plan that has worked well in many instances:

Each Group in the community is asked to send both a GSR and an Alternate to a special meeting to form a Local/Central Service Office Committee (called a *Steering Committee* in some places). In large communities it may be preferable, even necessary, to utilise the Area/District structure and have the DCMs form the Local/Central Service Office Committee. Once formed, the Committee assumes responsibility for the project and outlines its aims and purposes for approval by the participating Groups. Such an outline might cover these points:

Listing all Groups in the community that want to participate;

1. A reminder that financial support is voluntary and not a condition of membership (in keeping with AA tradition at other levels
2. A clear explanation of the fact that responsibility for the maintenance of the Local/Central Service Office rests with the Groups. So each Group should name a Local/Central Service Office representative and alternate to serve a specified term as the connecting link between the Group and its Local/Central Service Office;
3. A summary of the functions of the Local/Central Service Office and an explanation of how it will be staffed and operated;
4. A discussion of how the service office will handle - on the Groups' behalf - such vital matters as inquiries from newcomers, relations with the press and similar duties;
5. Assurance that the Local/Central Service Office will be operated in keeping with AA's *Twelve Traditions*.

GROUP REPRESENTATION AT A CENTRAL OFFICE

Local/Central Service Offices usually have no authority on their own account: they derive it from the participating Groups. The Groups, of course, maintain effective control over the Local/Central Service Office operation through their representatives and financial support. Just as our Delegates serve at our annual AA Conference on behalf of the Groups, so do these local representatives reflect the Groups' will and conscience in the operations of the Local/Central Service Office. In some communities, a Local/Central Service Office Committee or Steering Committee is set up to handle the administrative activities of the Local/Central Service Office. This committee meets monthly and deals with general policy and plans. At quarterly meetings, it reports to the Groups or the Group representatives on Local/Central Service Office activities. It is extremely important to keep a two-way flow of information going between Local/Central Service Office and Groups.

STAFFING THE OFFICE

As well as the AA volunteers, who respond to *Twelfth Step* calls at the office, most Local/Central Service Office now employ at least one paid full-time secretary; large offices may also have paid clerical workers on the staff to assist the secretary. Although the principles involving certain paid employees of Local/Central Service Office are now widely known in AA, it is still helpful to review the appropriate AA Tradition at the time of opening a new Local/Central Service Office. As it states in *Tradition Eight: "Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centres may employ special workers"*. We may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we might otherwise have to engage non-alcoholics, and such services may well be recompensed. It should be clear from this that the professional secretary functions as a paid employee of the Local/Central Service Office, not as an AA member, during duty hours and is hired on the basis of professional skills. Regarding compensation for paid workers, Bill W writes in "*Twelve Concepts for World Service*" that "*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*". Social Security and certain insurance benefits should be provided, together with sick leave, holidays and pensions.

Rotation among paid staff workers is also discussed in "*Twelve Concepts*", which suggests that when there is more than one paid worker, rotation of service assignments offers security and continuity in an office. It is practical for each worker to possess the general ability to do, or to learn how to do, any job in the office. The basis of compensating paid workers then becomes time served rather than special abilities.

It is suggested that the Local/Central Service Office professional secretary also be accorded a vote as well as a voice on the Steering Committee. This policy is successfully followed by AA World Services Inc. The co-ordinating staff member - a paid employee as well as an AA member - also serves as a director and thus has a vote on policy matters.

SUPERVISION - MAKING THE OFFICE SERVE

It is plain that the success of the Local/Central Service 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 take the trouble to explain it in the By-laws or some other set of Guidelines. For while it is difficult to establish hard-and-fast rules and then live by them: it is at least reasonable to clarify matters such as the function of the office and the extent of the paid secretary's authority and duties. Sometimes major decisions can be entrusted to the paid secretary, while in other cases it may be wiser for the Steering Committee to retain control. In any case, it is important that problems get an early review by somebody who is authorised to deal with them, otherwise the Local/Central 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 that all the Groups in the community should be encouraged to share. Nevertheless, it is also important that calls be distributed according to the location of the Group, that is, newcomers should usually be put in touch with the Group nearest to them unless they ask otherwise.
2. Meetings of the Steering Committee should be held often enough to dispose of problems of immediate interest and concern. Monthly is a widely-accepted periodicity;
3. After business hours, a telephone answering service - carefully chosen - should handle incoming calls (see Guideline GL-09: "*AA Answering Services*");

4. Authority and responsibility should be related. It is unfair, for example, to assign certain responsibilities to anyone, professional or volunteer, without 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 AA Group:

- Office facilities have to be leased;
- A secretary must be hired and paid;
- Office supplies must be purchased; and
- The telephone bill has to be paid regularly.

To take care of these responsibilities adequately, it has been found wise to opt for separate incorporation of special facilities such as service offices, which require money and/or management. Since Group purposes, local conditions and state laws vary, it is suggested a local lawyer be consulted regarding such incorporation. At the same time, the following points might be emphasised:

1. The name "*Alcoholics Anonymous*" should not appear in the corporate title - this name ought to be the sole property of AA as a whole;
2. Limit the activities of the corporation to the one locality only;
3. Expenses create a need for financial responsibility that should be recognised 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. **The Pledge System:** Each Group agrees to contribute a fixed amount, paid periodically, for the support of the office. This assures the Local/Central Service Office of a regular income and helps it to plan the best means of meeting its own obligations. But occasionally there are Groups that refuse to support a central office. In these cases, the spirit of contributing voluntarily that prevails throughout AA should also characterise the raising of funds for the office. If Groups can't or won't pay their share of the costs, they shouldn't be denied the services of the office.
2. **Sale of Literature:** Many Local/Central Service Office publish their own meeting lists, others produce introductory pamphlets explaining AA; these can be sold at a profit to help defray office expenses. It is also possible to buy books from General Service Office at the Group price for resale at the retail price, the profit going to support the office; there are also discounts on pamphlets ordered in quantities of 100 or more.
3. **Group Collections:** AA Groups participating in the financial support of the Local/Central Service Office may choose to make their contributions by setting aside fixed sums from their regular collections.
4. **Special Collections:** Some Groups provide a special collection box or basket in a convenient place during meeting times, inviting members to contribute. In that same vein, AA members can make individual contributions on a pledge or voluntary basis directly to the Local/Central Service Office, keeping in mind, however, that such contributions should not exceed \$6,050 (the 2008 Conference Approved figure) in any one year.

5. **Drives and Events:** Some Central Service Offices conduct periodic drives for funds. Others hold yearly banquets, conventions and similar events, using the 'profits' for support of the office.
6. **Prudent Reserve:** For help in financial planning, the 1977 General Service Conference recommended that "a suggested prudent reserve ... preferably be one to 12 months' operating expenses, depending on local needs".

CENTRAL OFFICES AND GENERAL SERVICE OFFICE

Common experience has shown that AA's world-wide unity is best served if AA Groups maintain their own separate contacts with General Service Office, rather than have the Local/Central Service Offices maintain these contacts on their behalf. Direct Group contact with General Service Office doesn't take the place of services provided by a local Local/Central Service Office, but it does help General Service Office to keep in closer touch with the Groups. Local/Central Service Offices and Area Committees are complementary rather than competitive AA operations. Both exist to help ensure AA unity and to fulfill AA's primary purpose of carrying the message, but they do it through separate structures.

There are, however, some important areas of interest in which close contact between the Local/Central Service Offices and General Service Office is not only desirable but necessary. It is helpful for General Service Office to receive regular listings of Group mailing addresses as compiled by a Local/Central Service Office. If such listings are not prepared, Local/Central Service Offices can still improve AA services by keeping General Service Office up-to-date on Group changes. General Service Office seeks such information from each Group, but this is not always forthcoming. It is the job of the Group Secretary to register the Group with General Service Office for the Public Liability Insurance Scheme (see "Australian AA Service Manual" under Section 2: "The AA Group").

Thus, up-to-date information from the Local/Central Service Office helps General Service Office to maintain unbroken contact with the Groups. It is important to note here that Groups should not assume that if they list themselves with a Local/Central Service Office they are automatically listed at General Service Office. For this reason, new Groups are encouraged to send a Group Registration Form directly to:

General Service Office of AA, 1/1 Garnet St, Rockdale NSW 2216

For its own part, General Service Office also seeks to keep all Local/Central Service Offices well informed. As a regular policy, for example, two copies of the General Service Office bulletin "*AA Around Australia*" are sent to each Local/Central Service Office, unless more are requested. General Service Office also keeps a record of all Local/Central Service Offices and is interested in assisting these offices wherever possible.

NEWSLETTERS OR BULLETINS

Newsletters or bulletins published by Local/Central Service 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 officers. Frequently material from AA literature is reprinted and discussed and articles on subjects of interest to members also are published. Experience indicates that, as in most AA service activities, it is prudent to make a committee (rather than one or two individuals) responsible for the formal planning and content of the bulletin. These people may be appointed by the Local/Central Service Office Committee or by the Local/Central Service Office representatives. Many local publications quote from AA literature such as the 'Big Book', the "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions", the "Australian AA Service Manual" and Conference Approved pamphlets. Any AA newsletter, bulletin or meeting list is more than welcome to use this material, of course, but please include the appropriate acknowledgement (as below), in order to ensure that the copyrights of AA literature are protected:

- 1 The copyright to the AA Preamble is held by AA Grapevine Inc, not by AA World Services. The correct acknowledgement is: *"Reprinted with permission of the AA Grapevine, Inc"*.
- 2 *"Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions"* should be followed by these words: *"Reprinted with permission of AA World Services, Inc"*.
- 3 After a quotation from an AA book or pamphlet: *"Reprinted from (name of book or pamphlet, page number) with permission of AA World Services, Inc"*.
- 4 See also GL-02: *"AA Conference-Approved Literature"* and see the *"Australian AA Service Manual"* Section 11: *"AA Literature"*, especially *'AA's Intellectual Property – Trademarks'*. The General Service Board has asked that when AA logos are used by the Fellowship for its flyers, media releases and events notices, that Members respect and take pride in the symbols and not be tempted to embellish or combine logos with other artwork – and when presenting these symbols, to see that the circles are nice and round, not carelessly distorted into ovals.

The insertion in the proper place of the lines emphasised above will help all of us do our part in trying to protect our own literature from misuse. A list of Newsletters in the Fellowship is available from General Service Office upon request. Here are some more suggestions based on local experience with AA newsletters and bulletins. Perhaps you might consider:

- Printing your newsletter on standard A4 paper (29.7 x 21.0 cm);
- Scheduling a 'theme issue' at regular intervals, centring on some aspect of the AA programme and using excerpts from Conference-approved material (with proper credit) relating to the theme;
- Asking for and publishing letters from your AA readers;
- Carrying minutes of various committee meetings - Local/Central Service Office Steering Committee, institutions, public information, etc;
- Carrying committee financial reports and records of Group contributions;
- Running occasional appropriate cartoons. (If these are from the *AA 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 up paid readership.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is the key to working together - Local/Central Service Office and the Area Committee and the District Committee and the General Service Office. There is plenty of work for all of us, especially for the Local/Central Service Office Committees concerned with public information, with the professional community and with prisons and hospitals. 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 to avoid duplication of effort. It is not important who does the work, but that the work gets done; that help is there for the next alcoholic who needs us and our Fellowship.

GOOD LUCK and SMOOTH SAILING

We hope the above suggestions will help make your Central Service Office venture a vital and fruitful addition to the AA activity in your area. As we've pointed out, these are suggestions only - it is the spirit and co-operation behind the central office idea that will make it work.