

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 a twelfth stepper contact them.

In the past, the A.A. answering service provided a listing for Alcoholics Anonymous in the local telephone directory. As technology has changed, A.A. members providing this service have found new avenues for problem drinkers seeking help to find A.A. – for example, getting the answering service number listed online with A.A. websites, Internet directories and local community websites.

GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS SERVED

Most answering services serve groups in one community only, or in one county. In some places, general service districts form the geographical boundaries. Some areas have started state-wide answering services.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ANSWERING SERVICE?

Sharing on this question varies: one or two members may be responsible; an answering service committee may handle matters; an intergroup or central office may manage this service; or the answering service may be the responsibility of the district or area general service committee.

WHO ANSWERS THE PHONES — A.A. MEMBERS OR COMMERCIAL ANSWERING SERVICE PERSONNEL?

Some answering services rely on A.A. members exclusively. Many answering services hire a commercial service which answers the phone and connects 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 the 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 Steppers.
3. Several A.A. members serve on a rotating duty basis. The commercial service refers calls to them, which they in turn refer to names on their list of Twelfth Steppers.
4. In some instances, the calls are referred to the nearest group, rather than to an individual member.
5. In some places, the 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, try to cross-connect (patch) the call with an A.A. member.
4. If the caller is reluctant to give a name, don't insist.
5. Never argue with the caller. Explain that you are an answering service and will try to put them in touch with an A.A. member.
6. Tell the caller that many A.A. members are at meetings in the evenings, often up until 10:30 or 11:00, so they won't expect an immediate call-back.
7. 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.
8. If you are criticized, tell the caller that you are acting on instructions from the answering service committee.
9. Problems or questions should be referred to this committee.
10. This committee will keep the commercial service informed about meeting changes, special events, and any other items that A.A. members might inquire about.
11. Record each call with the name of the caller (if possible), time, phone number, and reason for call. The operators note the disposition of the call with the name and phone number of the A.A. member to whom it was referred.

FINANCING

1. Carefully estimate how much money will be needed and how much will be available.
2. Be sure that the groups will finance the venture.
3. Encourage groups to pledge a regular amount each month.
4. When prorating costs among participating groups, add a small amount each month in order to build a reserve for emergencies or expansion of the service.

Paying for Commercial Answering Services

When several groups get together and decide to contract a commercial answering service, the usual experience seems to be that each group contributes according to its own group conscience. In some cases, each group is charged exactly the same amount. In a few instances, groups are charged for the answering service on the basis of group size. When district committees are responsible, groups contribute to the district committee and the committee pays the bills.

STARTING AN ANSWERING SERVICE

Sometimes an answering service has been started by one A.A. group or even by one or two members who felt the need for such a service. As the service begins to fill the need and as A.A. grows locally, other groups nearby become interested and join in the support of the answering service.

General service district committees sometimes are responsible for starting 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 support and of willingness to stick with the answering service until it has a chance to catch on and prove its worth.

The importance of keeping the list of volunteer Twelfth-Step workers up to date and on a rotating basis cannot be over-emphasized.

A Few Suggestions: Getting Started

1. 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.

2. Start small, and remember “Easy Does It.” It is easier to expand than to reduce services.
3. Abide by the group conscience of the groups involved. Take care to separate individual opinions from group conscience.
4. Generally answering services are listed under “Alcoholics Anonymous” or “A.A.” in the local telephone directory.
5. Since many people seek help via an Internet search, consider getting the answering service number listed on a local A.A. website and on G.S.O.’s A.A. website www.aa.org (contact the Group Services desk at groupservices@aa.org for the A.A. Answering Service Information Form and for more information)

Volunteer Support of A.A. Members

1. Consider the need for a responsible person to take charge.
2. In areas that use volunteers only, rather than a commercial answering service, there are many options available: call forwarding, voice-mail, a cell phone passed among volunteers, a voice-activated prompt system that gives callers options, etc.
3. If you cannot or do not choose to use a commercial service, start out with two A.A. members — a man and a woman, each with a reasonable length of sobriety — to handle the calls.
4. Consider the number of A.A. people available to answer Twelfth Step calls.
5. It is suggested that volunteer Twelfth Step workers should have at least six months sobriety and should state the days and hours when they will be available for calls.
6. Be sure that the list of A.A. volunteers is current and active.
7. Consider providing volunteer training and a list of suggested tips and referral numbers.

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

“We asked for a show at 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.”