

AA ANSWERING SERVICES

The National Office receives many questions about AA answering services. Since our information on this subject was incomplete and largely outdated, we mailed a questionnaire to AA answering services and Central Offices (Intergroups) in the US and Canada. The response to this questionnaire was extremely good; a great deal of valuable information was shared with us; and these Guidelines are designed to share it with you.

Naturally, an answering service that takes care of 14 groups will have a very different experience from that of a central office (intergroup) serving up to 900 groups and using an answering service for after-hours calls only.

Helpful information was sent by many Central Offices (Intergroups); but, because these Guidelines are intended for those who are just getting started and are not yet ready for a central office (intergroup), we will share only the information pertaining to AA answering services.

All of the following material is drawn directly from the responses to the questionnaire. The suggestions offered are based on the actual, practical experience of AAs in many localities.

GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS SERVED

Most answering services take care of groups in one community only, or in one county.

1 In a large West Coast state, an answering service solved a problem for several cities that were in the same county but had separate telephone directories. Long-distance telephone calls were necessary to reach the central office that served them. At the suggestion of the central office, three of these cities got together and hired a 24-hour answering service, with each city paying one-third of the monthly bill.

2 To handle a similar situation, another West Coast central office availed itself of a service offered by the telephone company, which provided a special local phone number with a direct connection to the central office at no extra charge to the caller.

Perhaps other central offices are using such a method for providing an answering service to the more remote member groups.

STARTING AN ANSWERING SERVICE

Sometimes, an answering service has been started by one group or even by one or two members who felt the need for such a service. As the service began to fill the need and as AA grew locally, other groups nearby became interested and joined in the support of the answering service.

However, an overwhelming majority of the people who responded to our questionnaire agreed on this point: As a basis for such a decision, the group conscience of all groups involved should be consulted *in advance*, in order to ensure both financial support and a supply of volunteers to take *Twelfth Step* calls.

Here is a sampling of some of the experiences that were shared with us:

- 1 *"We asked for a show of hands at just one meeting, and seven people indicated they had come to AA through the answering service. Is it worth it? We should say it is!"*
- 2 *"We are pleased with our answering service. We have 'Twelfth-Stepped' the operators, and they are gracious and sympathetic. We feel fortunate and grateful."*
- 3 *"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."*

HOW ARE ANSWERING SERVICES FUNDED?

When several groups get together and decide to employ 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.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ANSWERING SERVICE?

Our questionnaire asked whether the answering service was responsible to a committee on which each group had a representative, or who was responsible if there were no committee. We received a variety of answers:

- 1 *One member is responsible.*
- 2 *Two members are responsible.*
- 3 *Answering service chairperson and volunteers are responsible.*
- 4 *Answering service committee is responsible.*
- 5 *Answering service chairperson is responsible.*

Even when responsibility for the service is assumed by two or more members or a committee (regardless of what it may be called), it was suggested that *one person*, appointed by the committee or group involved, should make the arrangements, have all the later contacts with the answering service, and pay the bills – in order to avoid confusing the answering service personnel.

WHO ANSWERS THE PHONE – AA MEMBERS OR COMMERCIAL ANSWERING SERVICE PERSONNEL?

The majority of our respondents seemed to use a commercial service, though some rely on AA members exclusively. 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 AA member, who then calls the alcoholic seeking help.*
2. *The Twelfth Step list is arranged according to geographical areas. When the address of the prospect has been ascertained, an AA member in the vicinity is called. Several suggested that there should be separate lists of men and women Twelfth-steppers.*
3. *Several AA 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 Step workers.*

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 AA 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 AA volunteers.*

When an alcoholic calls for help ...

One answering service shared the following information, which might be helpful to those who plan to use a commercial answering service and want to explain their needs to its personnel.

- 1 *Answer by saying, "AA answering service." (This way, the caller will not launch into his or her story).*
- 2 *Try to find out what the caller wants, but don't try to 'qualify' him or her.*
- 3 *If a person is reluctant to give a name or other information, try to cross-connect (patch) with an AA member.*
- 4 *If the person is reluctant to give a name, don't insist.*
- 5 *Don't argue with callers; explain that you are only an answering service and will try to put them in touch with an AA member.*
- 6 *Many AA members are at meetings between the hours of 7.30 and 10.30pm. Inform callers of this situation, 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 *This service is set up so that any criticism can be answered by telling 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 of meeting changes, special events, and any other items that AA members might enquire about.*
- 11 *The answering service operators record each call on a slip of paper with the name of the caller (if possible), time, phone number, and reason for call. On the back of the slip, the operators note the disposition of the call with the name and phone number of the AA member to whom it was referred.*

PROBLEMS IN FUNDING AND ADMINISTRATION

Very few reported problems about raising money to pay for the answering service. Usually, Groups were aware that the service was filling a real need and consequently were willing to support it. Respondents did emphasise the importance of being assured in advance of support and of being willing to stick with the answering service until it has had a chance to catch on and prove its worth.

The only administrative problem that was mentioned with any frequency was the importance of keeping the list of volunteer twelfth-steppers up to date and on a rotating basis. In a few instances, the AA members felt that the commercial service was too impersonal and cold. Others suggested that communication between the AA members and the answering service improved when AAs began talking to the people who were actually handling the calls.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THOSE CONSIDERING AN ANSWERING SERVICE

Getting Started

- 1 Be sure that all groups in the area – rather than just a few members – really want to establish such 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 in the area involved. Take care to separate individual opinions from group conscience.
- 4 In the beginning, be prepared for slow acceptance by some members and for scarcity of volunteers. These are simply growing pains. Criticism – both constructive and the other kind – will be forthcoming. Even though you hear “It can’t be done”, it really can – and it can be a most rewarding experience as well.

Volunteer Support of AA Members

- 1 Consider the number of AA people available to answer *Twelfth Step* calls.
- 2 Consider the need for a responsible person to take charge.
- 3 Be sure that the list of AA volunteers is current and active.
- 4 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.
- 5 If you cannot use or do not choose to use a commercial service, start out with two AA members – a man and a woman with reasonable length and quality of sobriety – to handle the calls. If possible, arrange a small salary to ensure dependability.
- 6 In one area that uses volunteers only, rather than a commercial answering service, an answering machine was rented from the telephone company. The machine gives an announcement message, carries two phone numbers, and also records incoming calls. It can be operated by remote control, so that volunteers can take and act upon messages with greater convenience.
- 7 Carefully estimate how much money will be needed and how much will be available.
- 8 Be sure that the groups will finance the venture.
- 9 Encourage groups to pledge a regular amount each month.

- 10 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.

Commercial Services

- 1 Investigate the commercial service thoroughly before reaching an agreement with it.
- 2 Understand what your needs really are, and find out whether the service can provide them. Explain carefully to the service what AA is and what kinds of calls to expect; emphasise that its employees do not have to become authorities on alcoholism, but merely refer calls to AA members.
- 3 Have a written contract, and issue written guidelines for the answering service. (See "*When an alcoholic calls for help*" above.)
- 4 Request a report from the service each month about the number of calls received and the action taken on them.
- 5 Check on the turnover in service personnel, and be sure to maintain *current* lists of material for the personnel. Periodically ask them questions and try to become aware of the kind of information they are giving to callers.
- 6 Have one member in charge of the answering service – that is, to collect the money, pay the bills, get the volunteers, and deal with the commercial service personnel. This member should be responsible to a committee or whatever group is serving in that capacity.
- 7 Have the chairperson of the answering service committee or another experienced AA member work with the operators in the initial stage of using a commercial service, so that questions can be answered on the spot. This will help the operators to establish an appropriate approach to the alcoholic calling and to recognise the extreme importance of this initial contact.
- 8 Have representatives of the answering service committee go to the groups, explain how the service will work, and ask for volunteers for the *Twelfth Step* list.
- 9 Investigate the possibility of a patch system whereby the answering service can patch a call through its switchboard to the telephone of an AA member.
- 10 Have patience, tolerance and faith.

One area reported using the same answering service for 20 years, with reliable AA members keeping the *Twelfth Step List* up to date. They still feel this system is working very well.