

■ Intergroup/Central Offices: A.A.'s Front Line

Back in 1946 when only a handful of intergroup/central offices were fully operative—including those in California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, New York and Ohio—A.A. cofounder Bill W. observed in the June issue of the Grapevine, “Heaven has surely reserved a special place for every one of them.” Even as he was writing, service centers were opening in Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Wisconsin and—Canada’s first—Alberta.

Both Bill and his fellow A.A. cofounder Dr. Bob early saw that “to save whole areas from turmoil, small offices had to be set up, telephones installed, and a few full-time secretaries hired. . . . If they weren’t, the man coming in the door couldn’t get a break.” (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 161) The early service centers were plagued by a lack of money, space, help and an abundance of conflicting opinions, but still they persevered.

So when representatives from many of the 500 intergroup/central offices across the U.S. and Canada—together with trustees of A.A.’s General Service Board and directors and staff of A.A. World Services and the Grapevine—gather from October 4-9, 2007 at the 21st Annual Central Office/Intergroup/A.A. World Services Seminar at the Crowne Plaza hotel in Oklahoma City to share the spirit and substance of service, they will be mindful that the effectiveness of their own operations owes much to the trials, tribulations and collective sharing of their predecessors. As Jan D., formerly manager of the Edmonton, Alberta, Central Service Office, has pointed out, “Nothing in A.A. today is original. Everything we know and do to help the suffering alcoholic find sobriety came from our predecessors, whether the Oxford Group or intergroup/central office workers who came before and shared freely of their spiritual experiences and common sense gained the hard way.”

Many, if not most, service offices in A.A.’s early days, such as those in Chicago and Los Angeles, grew out of a phone number, listed as belonging to A.A., that plugged into a member’s home. Some—in New York City, Newark, New Jersey, and Toronto, Ontario, to name a few—were outgrowths of clubhouses that had been hubs for A.A. activities. Sometimes the clubs served as distribution points for A.A. literature, then began providing other services as well. Over time the service operations became entities separate from the clubhouses. Today clubhouses are not affiliated with A.A. In a surprising number of other localities, notably in the Upper Midwest and Canada, intergroups or

central service committees were in existence (several still are) long before there were actual offices.

In the beginning there was the Central Committee in Cleveland, Ohio, where by October 1939—little more than four years after Bill and Dr. Bob had their historical first meeting—a group of seven was meeting once a month, among other things to coordinate efforts regarding hospitalizations and sponsorship. Dr. Bob was not only a supporter but an active participant, according to fellow Akron member Dan K. “Doc used to play an important part in the Central Committee,” Dan reported, and the going could get rough: “During the meeting, sometimes, the words would fly like you were in a barroom.” One time, he related, “Dr. Bob stood up, hushed the crowd and said, ‘Gentlemen, please. We’re still members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Let’s carry the principles of A.A. into these business meetings. You are servants of your group, here to take the ideas formulated by the committee. Let one man talk at a time, and let us conduct this business meeting as a service to the Lord and a service to our fellow members. . . .’ After that there were no more brawls when Dr. Bob was around.” (*Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 288-89)

Columbus, Ohio, followed almost immediately with a service center, today called the Fellowship Intergroup, which started up in 1943. In nearby Akron, the birthplace of A.A., an Intergroup office was opened in April 1954. Its first newsletter, published that same year, commemorated November 18 as Gratitude Day. The cover, block-lettered by hand, signaled the dedication of the struggling little office that, with minimal financial support, was willing to go to any lengths to carry A.A.’s message of sobriety.

Bill W. acknowledged in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (p. 23) that “A.A.’s first organized service center” sprang up in Chicago, where an A.A. named Sylvia utilized her \$700 monthly alimony checks (a very large sum at a time when Bill and Lois were living on \$55 a week) to rent an apartment in the suburb of Evanston, also the locale of the area’s first A.A. meeting in 1939. So busy was the phone that Sylvia’s nonalcoholic personal secretary Grace Cultice rapidly evolved into an A.A. girl Friday.

By 1941, following publication of the Jack Alexander article about A.A. in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Sylvia’s place “became something of a Chicago Grand Central,” Bill W. later affirmed (*ibid.*), “and something had to be done.” So the A.A.s rented a one-room office in the Loop; there, Bill wrote, “Grace was installed to direct the stream

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of applicants for Twelfth Step attention, hospitalization, or other help.”

New York’s first local service center operated informally for years out of a clubhouse on Manhattan’s West 24th Street. The first local Central Committee was established in 1942, but the Intergroup wasn’t officially established until June 1946, when there were 22 groups in the metropolitan area. “Because of ongoing conflicts at the club, Intergroup moved into a storeroom on West 75th Street in November,” reported archivist Wally P., now of Tucson, Arizona, “and that’s when order started to grow out of chaos.” In the beginning, only 50 percent of the groups subscribed to intergroup and helped defray its expenses. But by 1951 every group in the district was fulfilling a group pledge to help maintain the office.

Minutes of a meeting of delegates to the Intergroup Association of New York in January 1950 recorded an anecdote told by Bill W. He said that “a woman came into the program stating, ‘My name is Toodles and I’m down to my last \$3 million.’ Toodles found sobriety but then died suddenly of diabetes and left \$10,000 to A.A.” The Alcoholic Foundation (renamed the General Service Board of A.A. in 1954) had earlier passed a resolution that no money could be received from individuals or outside services (unlike today, when an annual contribution up to \$3,000 may be made by an A.A. member, who also may leave a onetime bequest in the same amount). However, since the money had been left to Intergroup, Bill felt that “it’s your money to do with as you see fit.”

The Los Angeles Central Office started in 1944. “In those days A.A. wasn’t easy to find—and we kept it that way,” an oldtimer, sober since 1940, remembered later. “A carefully selected group of priests, judges and policemen knew about A.A.; our phone number wasn’t listed and could be gotten only from information. That way we

knew that any newcomer who found us had generally made enough of an effort to guarantee the sincerity of his desire for sobriety.” And in Newark, where the Big Book had been put together in the offices of Hank P., for a time Bill W.’s business partner and sponsee, Hank served as the first full-time paid secretary of the New Jersey Intergroup office from 1944-49.

In Charleston, West Virginia, the term “intergroup” was first used in 1953. The association evolved directly from the state’s first treatment center, founded in 1944. Named the Alcan Center, Inc., it was fondly referred to by locals as “the jitter joint.”

By the time the first General Service Conference was held 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 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). Sometimes over the years there was overlapping of services, especially when both entities were performing similar services; but eventually, thanks to shared experience and improved communication, in many places intergroups and General Service have come to work hand-in-glove.

Since intergroup/central offices are established and supported by local groups; they have no authority of their own. Each intergroup/central offices is unique, reflecting the needs and wishes of its own community, and is responsible to the groups it serves. Typically each participating group has an intergroup representative. These reps meet periodically to elect a steering committee, or board of directors, responsible for administering the office. They also keep their groups informed. A continuing flow of communication is vital, because the groups are completely responsible for the financial support of the office that services them, and local group members provide the volunteers to do the necessary Twelfth Step work.

Unity is the glue that holds the intergroup/central offices and general services together, but it is communication that jumpstarts mutual cooperation and harmony—vital both in reaching suffering alcoholics and in being attuned to the needs of those who are recovering in A.A. Many local intergroups produce their own flyers or information pieces. Also, 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.”