

Supporting the Fellowship: G.S.O.’s New Member and Customer Service Department

If you called the General Service Office before June of this year and had more than one task to accomplish — say you wanted to order literature as well as update records for your group — you would have been routed to two different associates in two different departments. With the advent on June 28 of the new Member and Customer Service department, thankfully to many, this has changed.

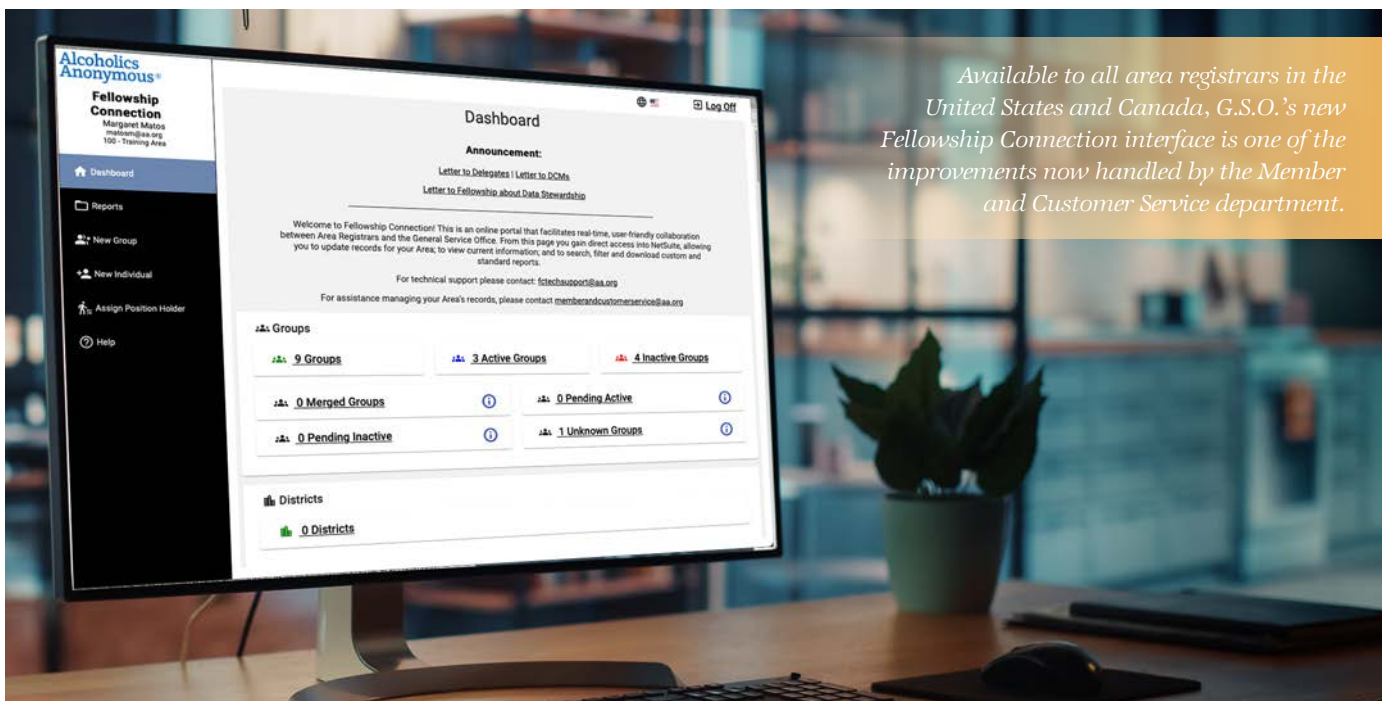
“The implementation of NetSuite [in 2019] really heightened the need to evolve the way we work to be more effective and efficient in supporting the needs of the Fellowship,” says Stephanie L., senior director of administration and strategy. “One of the many opportunities we identified, along with improved financial reporting and our user-friendly webstore, was the chance to integrate our customer-facing teams to better serve members and customers.”

The result, she says, is that employees who formerly worked in records, contributions and order entry are on one team, trained in handling inquiries in all of these formerly separate disciplines. “When a member or cus-

tomers calls, it will now be one-stop shopping.”

Margaret Matos (nonalcoholic), who began working at G.S.O. 15 years ago as a customer service rep, is the manager of the new Member and Customer Service team. She describes the “before” and “after” picture: “This department is a combination of four different departments. We used to have a Records Department, which took care of group, area and district updates. There was the Order Entry Department for anything related to placing a literature order — entering the order, processing the order, approving the order. Then there was the Order Inquiry Department, which took care of any issues customers might have — a damaged item, for instance. Lastly, there was — and still is — the Contributions Department, but our team now takes care of those members who call and want to contribute with a credit card.”

Now, says Margaret, the six-person Member and Customer Service team has been cross-trained in all of these areas. The training process, undertaken remotely during the pandemic, was “rigorous”: three-hour ses-



Available to all area registrars in the United States and Canada, G.S.O.’s new Fellowship Connection interface is one of the improvements now handled by the Member and Customer Service department.

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Note on anonymity: From time to time in this publication full names and/or pictures of G.S.O. employees, Class A trustees and other nonalcoholics are used. The anonymity of A.A. members is maintained, as they are identified throughout by first name and last initial only.

sions twice a week for seven weeks. “Each module took approximately four days to complete, with an extra day for assessment.” The end result is that members and customers can now call or email, and one person can help them with any and all business requests they may have.

“Before NetSuite, everyone was siloed in their own department, and systems weren’t speaking to each other,” says Malini Singh (nonalcoholic), director of the new department. “We used to have members say, ‘Do I have to be transferred? Can’t you take care of it here?’ All of this is a win for our customers and members and a win for G.S.O.”

The process, she says, is “speedier, easier, streamlined.” When a member or customer calls, the number goes right through to an associate — the new team will have reps speaking English, French and Spanish — instead of being routed through the main G.S.O. number. (The new dedicated phone number is 212-870-3023, and the new email is memberandcustomerservice@aa.org.)

“I come from a 30-year career in customer service,” says Bob W., G.S.O. general manager. “My organization cross-trained people years ago and it was a home run. People are calling us for help in certain situations — maybe they want to update the address of a group or get a certain piece of literature they want. Instead of getting passed to another department or having to call back, members and customers will get what they need. They’ll see that G.S.O. can deliver, that we are on their side. As stewards of the Fellowship’s Seventh Tradition dollars, we want to spend them as wisely as possible, and one way to do so is to be as efficient as possible with the services we provide. I’m really excited about this and think that ultimately it’s a great win for G.S.O., in terms of rounding out staff education on everything we provide, as well as meeting the needs of the Fellowship.”

■ An Armed Services Standing Committee for San Diego/Imperial California (Area 8)

A recent review of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s 2013-2017 studies on drinking within industries, published by the Delphi Behavioral Health Group, found that active-duty military members spend more days a year consuming alcohol than people in any other industry. Military personnel reported drinking 130 days out of the year and imbibing four to five drinks a day in one sitting at least 41 days a year, also more than any other profession.^{1*}

“Alcohol is always a problem in the military,” says Tiffany G. “It is culturally so different. You’re expected to drink, and to drink a lot.”

While not a member of the military, Tiffany has a family member who is, and she has spent a good deal of time on or near Marine Corps bases. Tiffany got sober some 20 years ago in Idaho and moved around a bit, first to Colorado and later to Florida. In January 2017, her family member got a duty posting to the MCAS (Marine Corps Air Station) at Iwakuni, Japan, and Tiffany decided to go along and have what she called “a great sober adventure.” Living on base, she worked as a civilian employee, but felt isolated when she stepped into a civilian world with a very different language. Her saving grace was the A.A. group that met twice a week on base, although it turned out that there was only one other person there who had worked the Steps and that Tiffany was the person with the longest sobriety. She ended up sponsoring men, despite A.A.’s time-honored “men with men, women with women” suggestion, because, as she says, “If we didn’t work together despite gender identity, we weren’t going to make it.”

Over time, Tiffany noticed that the group was shrinking. Marines and sailors rotated out to other duty stations, and military counselors received different postings; in all, there seemed little continuity. She puzzled over this and then thought, “Maybe they just don’t know we’re here.” Using her own funds, she ordered as much literature as she could, including “A.A. and the Armed Services” and “This Is A.A.” She got the C.P.C. and the P.I. workbooks and read them both carefully. (She found the P.I. workbook especially helpful.) She took pamphlets to the counselors and was able to attend internal “safety” briefings where she could make the case for A.A., thus gaining unusual entrée for a civilian. She was even able to produce a PSA for broadcast on the base radio station.

All of this work stood her in good stead when her family member received a permanent change of station to Camp Pendleton, located in San Diego, California. San

^{1*}Delphi Behavioral Health Group “Drinking Habits by Industry” <https://delphihealthgroup.com/drinking-habits-by-industry>

Diego is home to the nation's largest armed forces concentration, with more than 100,000 active-duty personnel, evenly split between the Navy and the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps base at Camp Pendleton is essentially a small city, stretching for 17 miles along California's coast, with a daytime population of 70,000 Marines and civilian employees. There are also some 240,000 veterans who reside in the area.

Tiffany did not know a soul in San Diego, but from the moment she arrived there in late December of 2018, she was, as she puts it, "in motion." "In Japan," she says, "I had been P.I. and C.P.C. rolled into one. But at Camp Pendleton I really wanted to be a part of a committee that would serve A.A." The first thing she did was contact the chair of the District 2 H&I (Hospitals & Institutions) Committee, and together they visited SARP Point Loma, the Marine Corps Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation Program. In January, she met with the Marine and Family Director of the Marine Corp Recruit Depot (MCRD) at the base, who, after speaking with her, requested that H&I bring a meeting to the base. Tiffany then contacted H&I but learned that the base was outside their charter, since it was not a hospital or institution.

It became a matter of increasing urgency for Tiffany to get connected with the right committee within District 2 in order to get support in terms of literature and the help of other A.A.s. Her connections in the Marines had put her in contact with Corps counselors and chaplains, and even to a four-star Marine general who converted part of the pamphlet "A.A. at a Glance" into a PowerPoint for Marine use. She tried the local San Diego central office, but it did not have a P.I. committee and was unable to help her. It was theoretically possible for Tiffany to start a committee on the district level and perhaps meet the needs of Camp Pendleton in that way. But San Diego is home to 15 different bases, as well as a third of the Pacific Fleet, so she realized that this really needed to be an area-wide effort.

So Tiffany called the Area 8 chair.

"What's going on?" he asked her.

"I need help buying literature for the Marines," she told him.

He suggested Tiffany speak at an Area Committee meeting. When she did so, things took a dramatic change for the better. "I found the heart of A.A. there," she says. "There was tremendous support." Members, many of whom were veterans, helped out, and she was able to purchase 200 "A.A. and the Armed Services" pamphlets to distribute. With this, Tiffany was off and running toward the ultimate goal: an area armed services committee.

Jerry S., then Area 8 alternate delegate and later Area

8 Panel 70 delegate, says, "Tiffany really embarked on an incredible journey. She encountered numerous local general service committees, not knowing who was running them or the personalities involved. Some egos got bruised along the way. But at the end of the day, we are all trying to extend the hand of A.A. and she was right out in front."

If you want to drink, that's your business
If you want to stop, that's ours

If you need help, contact A.A.
we are available 24 hours a day

North County Central Office
(760) 758-2514
www.ncsandiegoaa.org

San Diego Central Office
(619) 265-8762
www.aasandiego.org

Temecula Valley Central Office
(951) 677-1535
www.temeculacentraloffice.org

At the beginning of 2020, Tiffany created a detailed presentation for the creation of an Area 8 Ad Hoc Armed Services Committee, including goals and a mission statement, and it was voted in enthusiastically. Delayed somewhat by the pandemic, the ad hoc committee became an area standing committee in September 2020.

During the pandemic, A.A. meetings at Camp Pendleton had become inactive, according to Tiffany, and rather than going to virtual meeting platforms, the military simply shut them down. (They are now back meeting in person.) "So, you had alcoholics suffering more, with even fewer resources available to them," Tiffany says. The Point Lomas rehab, which Tiffany still visits with H&I, was only at 20% capacity and had closed for periods due to Covid-19 outbreaks.

There are other issues that the Area 8 Armed Services Committee — which Jerry S. describes as "the most participated-in and enthusiastic committee in the area" — can address, but the great benefit it provides is the uninterrupted flow of vital A.A. literature and meetings to a population where A.A.'s contacts often change as military personnel transfer in and out.

George W. is an appointed committee member on the trustees' C.P.C. committee. He served 24 years in the Army and has 22 years of sobriety. Of Tiffany, he says, "I'm grateful for the work she does [in Area 8] and the doors she's helped open. Not every area is going to benefit from having an armed services committee. There's no one-size-fits-all solution. But those areas that have a high concentration of armed forces — such as Norfolk, Virginia; Washington, D.C.; and Fort Benning, Georgia — might truly gain from the kind of structure Area 8 has put in place."

■ G.S.O.’s new General Manager: “A repository of shared experience”

Bob W., named G.S.O.’s new general manager on June 4, was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous at an early age. “When I was nine years old,” he says, “I started to go to A.A. meetings with my mother when she got sober. So I had a head full of A.A. before I even got started.”

Not that it kept him from giving drinking his best shot. Raised in western Massachusetts, Bob began drinking in earnest at the age of 17. He describes himself as a stubborn teenager who went his own way. “Defiance is a natural characteristic of an adolescent, but my alcoholism put it on steroids.” Bob’s life at the time was all about athletics, especially baseball, soccer, and hockey. He dreamed of playing for the Boston Bruins, but his dreams took a back seat to alcohol. “Beer in my hockey bag, drinking on the bench, that sort of thing. Skating and drunkenness don’t go too well together.”

Bob knew immediately that he was an alcoholic. Moving out of the house, going to community college and working in the family insurance business, he tried to keep up appearances. “I put a tie on and made it look like everything was fine.” But it was not. A broken engagement when he was 22, plus a stint in a locked psych ward, turned out to be his bottom. He got sober in 1993, at the age of 23, and is grateful for it. “There are a lot of ‘yets’ in my story,” he says.

From the very beginning, service was a hallmark of his sobriety. “When I was a year sober, I was able to take meetings into the same locked ward that I had been in. I was alternate GSR, DCM and LCM. At one point, I was area chair and alternate delegate combined.” Bob also served as Area 31, Panel 52, 2002-2003 delegate from western Massachusetts and as trustee-at-large/US from 2013-2017.

While keeping up this highly active pace of service, Bob managed to find the time to get married to his wife, Cheryl, and have six children (two boys and four girls currently ranging in age from 22 to 10). He continued working in the family’s independent commercial insurance business, which Bob’s great-grandfather had founded and passed on to succeeding generations. In 2002, Bob purchased it from his father and expanded the business, buying five other insurance agencies and two commercial buildings. “I loved insurance,” he says. “Some people think of insurance as sales, but it’s really service. I could be on a farm or in a high-rise building or at a manufacturing company, but I felt like I was helping people and building relationships, which I love to do.”

But A.A. beckoned. Bob was asked to consult at G.S.O. in the latter half of 2019 and went on to become interim chief financial officer in 2020, just as Covid-19 hit and G.S.O. experienced a sharp initial decline in contributions and literature sales. (It was an intense time

for Bob, who was still working in his insurance business, where he was dealing with the effect of Covid on his staff and customers, while at G.S.O. he was helping push through the financial ERP system.) However, contributions rebounded fairly quickly, and Bob told *Box 4-5-9* at that time: “More than the actual dollars, it is about participation and that is what gets me emotional. The principle of participation is rooted in our Fourth Concept and the Seventh Tradition.”

As general manager, Bob continues to feel this way. “I think the biggest focus that I have for G.S.O. is really a focus on the operational principles embodied in our Concepts and Traditions and Steps. I think it is important for G.S.O. to focus on participation and inclusion, on our group conscience, on our mission. What we do is facilitate and provide services to members and groups in order to help them carry the message to the Fellowship. Our publishing work is a service. It’s all about service.” (This focus on the Fellowship can already be seen in the creation of the new Member and Customer Service department — see page 1.)

Bob believes in a strong relationship between the A.A.W.S. and Grapevine boards and in unified working relationships — A.A.’s principles, he feels, very much encompass the joint work of the boards. Ultimately, as he puts it: “G.S.O. is a repository of shared experience that we want to make available to everyone.”

■ Grapevine Selects New Publisher: “The collected voices of A.A.”

Chris C., new publisher of AA Grapevine, is no stranger to the General Service Office. From 2002 to 2009, he was publications director at G.S.O., where, as he puts it, “I got to do a lot of things that would help other alcoholics,” including work on A.A.W.S. books and pamphlets, early versions of the aa.org website and video projects that included a remake of “Hope: Alcoholics Anonymous.” When he left G.S.O. to freelance, Chris’ clients included the Toronto video-production company that has partnered with Alcoholics Anonymous on film projects that include the anonymity-delayed telecasts of the flag ceremonies from three International Conventions.

In 2017, Chris worked with this company to produce the correctional video “A New Freedom” and in 2019 returned to produce the Grapevine video that was intended to be shown at the canceled 2020 International Convention. During that process, he impressed Albin Z., then Grapevine publisher, and Janet

Bryant (nonalcoholic) Grapevine director of operations.

“I first met Chris during the preparation for the Grapevine video,” Albin says. “It’s a great video, it really moves you along, and very professionally done, and he had a lot to do with that.” When Albin took an extended leave, the choice of Chris to fill in for him as interim publisher was a natural one.

Well before he came to G.S.O. Chris had had extensive experience in magazine publishing, but his career was nearly derailed by his alcoholism. Born and raised in Ossining, New York, Chris began drinking when he was 12. “It took me five years to get out of high school because I missed so much school drinking. In 1978, when I was 20, I realized how much alcohol had ruined my life and so I stopped for eight years, although without a program.”

During that time, Chris graduated from Syracuse University and started working for *Family Circle* magazine at the same time as he attended New York University’s Graduate School of Journalism. But when his first wife and he split up, he went on what he describes as a “two-year binge.” Seeking to recover and find his way back into graduate school, he remembered seeing an advertisement in the back of the NYU student newspaper: “A.A. meets every Monday, Room 413, Student Center, 12:30 pm.”

Chris actually attended that meeting. It was May 1989, and it was, Chris says, “the best decision I ever made. I asked for help for the first time. Afterwards, people came up to me and gave me a Big Book and a New York meeting book. They told me to do 90 and 90, to get phone numbers and call people. I couldn’t believe it.”

Chris’ personal and professional life took off after he got sober. He remarried — he and his wife Gail now have two adult children, Maggie and Cooper. Chris became managing editor of the *Family Circle* book division, did a stint in Des Moines, Iowa, with Meredith Books — he fondly remembers the A.A. meetings in Des Moines. A managing editor job at *Reader’s Digest* brought him back to New York, where he became editor in chief of their publishing division, before taking the G.S.O. publishing director job, which he considered “my Higher Power giving me an opportunity.”

Before Albin decided to retire, Grapevine had been moving forward with crucial changes. “Things were getting interesting,” Albin points out, “and you could just see the staff becoming engaged and excited. We had all this content and material, and we really began to use it to make up a unified brand” with initiatives like the Grapevine YouTube channel, the Audio Project and the redesigned aagrapevine website. Grapevine had also begun partnering with a well-known book distributor, to give its books a wider reach.

“Chris is the right person for Grapevine right now,” Albin says. “I like his sobriety and his ability to work with other people. I like his editorial experience. He’s taking the job at a pivotal time.”

“I’m very happy with the trust that has been put in me,” Chris says. “Such a wonderful magazine and Twelfth Step tool. I’ve already worked with this great staff for seven months and we’ve got strong support from freelancers and vendors. We’re moving forward with being more accessible to people. I want a working Grapevine app that really is the magazine for that month. In book publishing we have these wonderful books and we’re working hard to make them available in print, e-book and audio. I love podcasts. When I can’t sleep at night, I listen to ‘The Moth.’ The Grapevine podcast will soon be getting underway, just people talking about recovery — very peaceful, almost as if you were at the diner with a friend.”

In all, Chris says, “While the General Service Conference serves as the collective voice of A.A., Grapevine publishes the *collected* voices of A.A. We’re trying very hard to bring these stories to people, in many different ways, and to help inspire day-to-day recovery.”

■ Class B Trustee Deborah K. Joins the General Service Board

Following her selection in April at the 71st General Service Conference, the General Service Board of A.A. welcomed Deborah K. as a Class B (alcoholic) general service trustee.

Deborah was first exposed to Alcoholics Anonymous when she was 15 years old. “My friend group was sobering up, and many of the people I knew were being sent off to treatment,” she remembers. Alcoholism ran in Deborah’s family and before long she discovered that she might have a problem, too. “I fell into the rooms of A.A. for the wrong reasons and stayed for the right reasons,” Deborah says. That was in 1983; she now has 38 years of continuous sobriety.

A few years after becoming sober, she went on to college, eventually earned her Ph.D. in clinical psychology, and began her career with a specialty in neuropsychology. In 1996, Deborah landed a position and moved to Durham, North Carolina, which she describes as “a little pocket of A.A. heaven.” Having completed her studies, Deborah had the time to jump into service. “I was fortunate to have great sponsorship that sponsored me into service,” she says.

Over the years, she has served in many positions within the A.A. service structure — from being a Panel 59 delegate to her four-year tenure as a nontrustee director on the A.A.W.S. board from 2017 to 2021 before being elected as a general service trustee in April.

“What has been most surprising about service work is how much of a spiritual anchor it has been for me,” she says. “It is one of the key tenets of my life — in my work and in my sobriety and in my family life. It has given my life purpose.” Again and again, over the years,

Deborah has found herself turning to the principles of Concept IX, found in the *A.A. Service Manual*: “Good leaders, together with sound and appropriate methods of choosing them, are at all levels indispensable for our future functioning and safety. The primary world service leadership once exercised by the founders of A.A. must necessarily be assumed by the Trustees of the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous.” Recently, Deborah won a leadership award at her university. “I just had to smile and think of Concept IX,” she remarks. “All of those principles infuse how I approach my work and life. A.A. service has taught me how to be an effective leader in all settings.”

Deborah has found other intersections in her work and service to A.A. In both areas, there is a significant amount of attention to communication and motivation as well as to measuring outcomes. “How do we measure the outcomes of the work we do at the bottom of the triangle?” she asks. “How are we considering communication?”

“It’s a huge privilege,” she adds about her service work in A.A. “I hope to take my abilities and give back to the organization that saved my life. I know that this kind of work benefits me spiritually. It buys me both purpose and grace.”

At the end of 2018, Deborah was diagnosed with a serious medical condition that required intensive treatment over the course of a year. In between her treatments, she managed to attend board meetings. “Staying connected to my service community is what brought me through this experience,” she recalls. “It also taught me that it’s possible to have a full personal and professional life — and still do service.” In addition to her professional work and her service to A.A., Deborah and her husband have six children, who are mostly teenagers now.

“I credit service with my sanity,” she says. “It’s just as important as gratitude, faith and Step work. When I do service, I’m staying out of self and, instead, I’m in the stream of life.”

Research and Alcoholics Anonymous:

■ Cooperation with the Professional Community

From its very inception, A.A. has sought to cooperate — but not affiliate — with the professional community regarding the medical, psychological and spiritual implications of Alcoholics Anonymous and its program of recovery. A.A.’s history shows that cooperation with a wide range of nonalcoholic professionals who often encounter suffering alcoholics in the course of their work has been an integral part of the Fellowship since its beginnings. In fact, A.A. might never have gotten off the ground without the help of caring nonalcoholic professionals who came to recognize early on the effectiveness that A.A. was demonstrating in helping alcoholics to recover.

By design, A.A. is a loosely knit community of people who share their experience, strength and hope with each other. Embracing its nonprofessional status and dedication to the least amount of organization possible, the A.A. Fellowship hews to one purpose only, that of carrying the message of hope and recovery to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Nevertheless, scientific researchers and nonalcoholic professionals interested in the efficacy of A.A.’s approach to recovery have long sought to discover just how — and why — A.A. seems to have such success with alcoholics.

Their resulting conclusions have, as often as not, echoed this one from the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) in its October 14, 1939, review of the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, upon its publication in April of 1939: “The one valid thing in the book is the recognition of the seriousness of addiction to alcohol. Other than this [it] has no scien-

tific interest.” Fast-forward 75 years, and there is this, from retired Harvard professor Lance Dodes’s 2014 book *The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science Behind 12-Step Programs and the Rehab Industry*: “Alcoholics Anonymous was proclaimed the correct treatment for alcoholism over 75 years ago despite the absence of any scientific evidence of the approach’s efficacy and we have been on the wrong path ever since.”

It scarcely needs to be said, of course, that A.A. has never claimed this mantle for itself, with co-founder Bill W. often noting that there are many pathways to recovery. However, the Fellowship hasn’t lacked for support from numerous doctors directly connected with treating alcoholics, beginning with Dr. William Silkworth, who treated Bill W. at Towns Hospital in New York and formulated a pioneering theory of alcoholism as a physical allergy combined with a compulsion to drink. Neurologist Dr. Foster Kennedy was another early friend of A.A. in the 1940s, writing, “I think our profession must take appreciative cognizance of this great therapeutic weapon.” At A.A.’s 20th anniversary International Convention in St. Louis in 1955, two physicians — Dr. W. W. Bauer of the American Medical Association and psychiatrist and Class A trustee Dr. Harry M. Tiebout — addressed the gathering. Dr. Bauer told those present, “You are making a bigger impression on the problem of alcohol than has ever been made before.” Dr. Tiebout said that A.A. was “not just a miracle, but a way of life which is filled with eternal value.”

Scientific researchers, however, don’t place much emphasis on miracles. Over the years they’ve conducted

dozens of studies into the nuts and bolts of how A.A. really works to keep alcoholics sober — if, in fact, it does. Why does A.A. merit so much attention? Dr. Keith Humphries, the Stanford researcher who is co-author of the 2020 Cochrane Institute study on the efficacy of A.A. says, “A.A. is the most common place people seek help for alcohol problems. The fact that something is popular doesn’t mean that it works. Your job as a scientist is to say, ‘Okay, it’s popular. That makes it of interest. But I’m still going to subject it to tests, because these are vulnerable people and if it didn’t work, you’d have an obligation to let people know that.’” A valuable perspective, although past researchers have at times approached A.A. with an ingrained skepticism. As Humphries puts it, “I had worked hard to become trained to help people who are addicted and then here are these untrained people working in the same area. People I looked up to looked down on A.A. That was the attitude I absorbed.”

From a skeptical scientist’s point of view, this is understandable. How can a successful treatment for a deadly disease have originated with a conversation between a couple of drunks in Akron, Ohio? Eighty-six years and two million members later, A.A. continues to work alcoholic to alcoholic, peer to peer. It doesn’t accept contributions from outside sources, nor does it engage in or sponsor research about itself, except for its own internal demographic survey. Speaking to a group of neurologists and psychiatrists in New York in 1944, Bill W. summed it up: “You may inquire, ‘Just how does A.A. work?’ I cannot fully answer that question.... We can only tell you what we do and what seems, from our point of view, to happen to us.”

Some of the difficulty researchers find when studying A.A. may stem from the fact that it is by no means a homogeneous entity. A.A. groups, though guided by the Traditions, are largely autonomous, and there are

a diverse array of meetings and of alcoholics attending. In his paper, “Research on Alcoholics Anonymous: The Historical Context,” presented at a National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) conference in 1992, Ernest Kurtz, the empathetic but clear-eyed observer of A.A. and author of the A.A. history *Not God*, wrote:

[T]here is a very real sense in which, increasingly, there is no such thing as Alcoholics Anonymous — rather there have developed Varieties of the Alcoholics Anonymous Experience... Alcoholics Anonymous, decentralized as it is, now presents itself in a vast variety of groups, of formats, of understandings even of such basic-to-A.A. realities as *serenity*, not to mention *spirituality*. This can be a difficult point for people like us to accept, people who want to study A.A. Even when we study process, we like our phenomenon to hold still.

Other issues make researching A.A. problematic for even the most objective of scientists. Researchers have at times randomized alcoholics within a particular study to attend either A.A. meetings or psychotherapy for a specific time period, but who’s to say that those who stay sober are not highly motivated people who would get sober no matter what their form of treatment? (A criticism of past studies of Alcoholics Anonymous with positive outcomes is that those who are successful are a self-selected sample.) And, of course, the spirituality — or religiosity, as some courts have ruled — of A.A. is what Kurtz refers to as a “delicate, if not difficult, topic for most academicians.”

All of this began to change in the early 1990s, according to Dr. John Kelly of Harvard University, co-author on the Cochrane Institute Study. “What happened was that about 30 years ago the NIAAA called for more research on A.A. and all its mechanisms,” Kelly says. “For the

NEW FROM G.S.O.:

NEW AND REVISED PAMPHLETS:

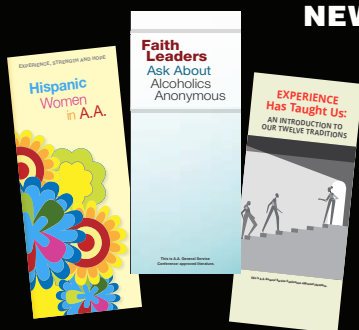
- **Hispanic Women in A.A.** (available in English and Spanish, French to follow)
- **Experience Has Taught Us: An Introduction to Our Twelve Traditions** (illustrated)
- **Faith Leaders Ask About Alcoholics Anonymous** (revised and retitled)

ALSO AVAILABLE:

- **2021 Final Conference Report**
- **Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions** (updated and footnoted – softcover)

COMING SOON:

- **2021-2023 A.A. Service Manual** (fully revised and redesigned)
- **Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions** (updated and footnoted – multiple formats)



first time, people began bringing serious science to bear on A.A. in order to look at the efficacy of the behavioral change through which A.A. confers benefits.”

This outpouring of research led to Humphries and Kelly’s systematic review and meta-analysis of 27 clinical studies comprising 150 scientists, 67 institutions and almost 11,000 people, which was conducted under the auspices of the Cochrane Library of systematic reviews, the recognized gold standard in scientific rigor for medical research.

The result? The first extensively researched evidence that A.A. works as well or better than other scientific treatments for alcoholism.

In an interview that first appeared in AA Grapevine, Kelly and Humphries describe their findings (all Kelly/Humphries quotes taken from their GV interview):

Humphries: The bottom line is that people who experience TSF [Twelve Step Facilitation] in A.A. are 20-60% more likely to end up abstinent than they are with other treatments like cognitive behavioral therapy, outpatient treatment delivered by a mental health professional, meditation or certain educational programs. That’s pretty incredible for this peer-oriented, grassroots organization. If you thought about this like cancer treatment, or in any other field of medicine, you would be doing backflips over a success rate like this.

Kelly: We looked at the number of days when patients didn’t drink anything. The farther out you get, the magnitude of difference increases. A.A. was more effective than other treatments at keeping people completely abstinent at every time point over a three-year span. Also, even if people drank again, they didn’t drink as much after having been to A.A., as compared to other therapies. And one more thing: A.A. is what I’ve referred to as “the closest thing we have in health care to a free lunch.” It saves the health care system money, the criminal justice system money. Our review showed that A.A. has the ability to effect much higher remission rates at a lower cost, sometimes much lower, than other therapies.

So, what does their research show about the way A.A. actually works?

Humphries: With A.A., a couple of things are fairly constant — there is good literature on this now. A.A. increases your willingness to get sober. Your motivation goes up. You may wake up and, to get your wife off your back, you decide to go to A.A. — and you hear a story that catches your own experience and you stay sober. Changes in social networks are very important [for recovery]. It’s important to find new people in your life and A.A. is good for that. The other thing I find fascinating is that altruism — the experience of helping others — seems to help. People who set up chairs and do the coffee and do the sponsoring. You can’t do that in individual psychotherapy,

and that seems to be healing for people.

Kelly: There is a tendency to forget how bad it might have been when you were drinking, so exposure at meetings to people telling their stories helps keep these memories green. Hearing these narratives can reverberate to your core and help remind you how you got there. The counterbalance to this is seeing over and over again how people got into recovery, the positive outcomes, the Twelve Promises. You remember the stick, but you see the carrot as well.

The spirituality that confounds scientists when it comes to studying recovery in A.A. does not trouble Humphries and Kelly:

Humphries: Another point in terms of the topic of “how A.A. works” is spirituality. A.A. is a spiritual program, of course, not a religious one. [The psychoanalyst and research psychiatrist] George Vaillant has written that “spirituality is based on our biology, whereas religion is based on our culture.” Spirituality is part of our limbic system — we have the capacity for spiritual emotion. Religion is like the lyrics and spirituality is the music. A.A. doesn’t give you the lyrics. You can borrow some or write your own. A.A. opens the doorway through which people can walk [and discover their spiritual lives]. From a biological perspective, it is really important to have access to all these positive emotions that could be called spirituality. Gratitude is very important, as well as humility. These emotions activate a sense of awe, as Vaillant says. It’s worth remembering with A.A. that Catholics do it and Jews do it. Native Americans, too. It is fast-growing in Iran. And, of course, atheists and agnostics. It is remarkably flexible spiritually.

Interestingly, Humphries’s thoughts closely echo those voiced by Ernest Kurtz in his 1992 NIAAA conference presentation:

A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson, together with medical researchers Abram Hoffer and Humphrey Osmond, discovered early on that some kind of *capacity for the spiritual* seemed to be required if an alcoholic was to get the A.A. program. They understood that capacity not as related to church-going or creedal affirmation or upbringing, but as some kind of process potentially present in every human being, a process that could be prodded.

The fact that researchers at last have empirical data that shows that A.A. works — not perfectly, but quite effectively — may not make much of a difference to A.A. members focused on getting sober and discovering the miracle that A.A. helps bring about in their everyday lives. Still, some may savor a brief moment of acknowledgment. Researchers John Kelly and Keith Humphries certainly do.

Kelly: You can see that for so many people who have been in A.A. and have heard it denigrated and put

down, there is vindication in this. This [study] is public access, free to anyone. If someone says, “A.A. is a bunch of crap,” hand it to him. What our research shows is that when you subject A.A. to the same scientific standards as any other type of intervention, it is at least as good and often better and certainly cheaper than anything else. When you’re talking about a disease that kills 3.3 million people around the world, this is something you have to pay attention to.

As Bill W. wrote back in 1958, “Today, the vast major-

ity of us welcome any new light that can be thrown on the alcoholic’s mysterious and baffling malady. We don’t care too much whether new and valuable knowledge issues from a test tube, a psychiatrist’s couch, or from revealing social studies. We are glad of any kind of education that accurately informs the public and changes its age-old attitude toward the drunk. More and more, we regard all who labor in the total field of alcoholism as our companions on a march from darkness into light. We see that we can accomplish together what we could never accomplish in separation and in rivalry.”

“A Remarkable Mission”



Sister Judith Ann Karam (left), with G.S.O. Archivist Michelle Mirza (nonalcoholic).

Nonalcoholic Class A trustee Sister Judith Ann Karam first learned about Alcoholics Anonymous as a teenager living with her family in Cleveland, Ohio, and working as a part-time pharmacist at Rosary Hall Sanitarium, one of the earliest alcohol rehabilitation centers, located in Cleveland’s St. Vincent Charity Hospital. Born to immigrant parents from Lebanon, at the age of seven Judith Ann lost her mother to leukemia soon after her younger brother was born. “This was a profound time for me,” Sister Judith Ann recalls. “I was able to pray and understand that my mother was with God. I had a sense that brought me into a spiritual realm, that I could connect with my mother by connecting with God.” Before long, she discovered the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, a religious order dedicated to serving the Diocese of Cleveland in health care, education and social services, and in 1964 she entered the order as a novice.

As a part of her responsibilities connected to the rehabilitation center, a young Sister Judith Ann delivered supplies and medications to Rosary Hall at St. Vincent Charity Hospital. In the early 1960s, sometimes this meant that the necessary “supplies” included fifths

of whiskey for patients who were being weaned off alcohol. There, at Rosary Hall, Sister Judith Ann also witnessed the vision and attentive care of Sister Mary Ignatia Gavin, who worked with Dr. Bob to treat thousands of alcoholics and establish one of the first 14-day treatment programs within a general hospital. As many members of Alcoholics Anonymous know, Sister Ignatia is commonly referred to as the “Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous.”

“This is where I was introduced to alcohol rehabilitation,” says Sister Judith Ann about Rosary Hall. “I remember seeing Sister Ignatia in the hallways and being very curious about her program.” She recalls the sister’s slight build and radiant smile, and noticed that when Sister Ignatia walked down the hallway she was never alone. “I saw how she lived in ministry with the hospital,” she recalls. Sister Judith Ann also recognized that at that time Sister Ignatia was a risk-taker for addressing a malady that was stigmatized by society.

“Even though I was young, I understood that Rosary Hall was very different from the other nursing units in other parts of the hospital. I saw how hard the sisters worked and helped people there,” adds Sister Judith Ann. “This is where my curiosity, understanding and love for the treatment of the alcoholic started.” At the same time, the work and dedication of the sisters inspired her own spiritual journey: “It was all about learning about God and praying to God — and seeing how the sisters lived while being in service to God.”

When she made the decision to enter the convent in 1964, Sister Judith Ann was asked what she might like to do. “I put two things down,” she explains. “A pharmacist or a nurse in Rosary Hall. They decided on the pharmacy for me, but Rosary Hall and addiction medicine has always been a part of this journey.” Sister Judith Ann continued her training in pharmacy and returned to St. Vincent Charity Hospital as a registered pharmacist. Her career in medicine and hospital administration grew

and evolved significantly over the years: Sister Judith Ann helped to develop the first clinical pharmacy program in the city of Cleveland. She earned a higher degree in the administration of hospital and health systems, and went to serve as CEO of several Sisters of Charity Health System hospitals from 1998 to 2013. Currently, she serves as Chair and Public Juridic Person of the Sisters of Charity Health System and congregation leader of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine. Throughout all of her studies and leadership positions, community-focused service has remained central to her work.

Because of her role as a leader of her religious order, Sister Judith Ann participated in many A.A.-related functions that celebrated the life and work of Sister Ignatia. “There was always a special religious service so that we could celebrate the gift that she gave to the Sisters of Charity — true love and help for the alcoholic,” says Sister Judith Ann. Because of this strong association, Sister Judith Ann was invited to the International Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous in Atlanta in 2015, when A.A. celebrated its 80th anniversary. She recalls the impact of witnessing thousands and thousands of recovering alcoholics gathered inside the expansive Georgia Dome. “It was overwhelming to see how many people had been impacted by Bill W., Dr. Bob and Sister Ignatia,” notes Sister Judith Ann.

Four years later, Greg T. — G.S.O.’s former general manager — went to Akron and together with Sister Judith Ann took a tour of St. Thomas Hospital, the Sisters of Charity hospital where Sister Ignatia began her work with alcoholics. Greg and Sister Judith Ann went on to visit other famous A.A. sites, including Dr. Bob’s home and the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel, where Bill W. made his fateful call to Oxford Group member Henrietta Seiberling. “We were at Dr. Bob’s gravesite in the Mount Peace Cemetery when there was a call from the chair of the General Service Board, asking if I would accept an

invitation to be on the board,” says Sister Judith Ann. “I was interviewed, and later elected by the 70th General Service Conference. It was such a tremendous honor.”

During her few years of service to A.A., Sister Judith Ann has already served on a number of committees — from finance and public information to the search committee for the new general manager of the General Service Office, Bob W. She was the first Class A trustee to serve on the A.A.W.S. board (2020–21), affording her the opportunity to learn a significant amount about the General Service Office and its operation. Despite the virtual nature of her participation during the pandemic, for Sister Judith Ann the care and feeling of the Fellowship has been palpable. “Every single day you can feel the care and the concern of those whose mission it is to reach out to the suffering alcoholic,” she comments.

Throughout her service to Alcoholics Anonymous, she has also made lifelong friends. “The support and love that people give to each other in A.A. is real,” she says. One of her favorite A.A. statements is the Responsibility Declaration, which she heard in the first A.A. meeting she attended after being elected as a trustee: “I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am responsible.”

“I’m so grateful to be among the dedicated individuals serving A.A.,” Sister Judith Ann adds. “It’s a remarkable mission — and a remarkable organization.”

Seventh Tradition Corner

“Some time ago I had the privilege of attending an A.A. Conference in another country, where I was also able to attend a few local A.A. meetings. While at one meeting, I had the opportunity to talk with an oldtimer about A.A. in his country over the last 25 years.

“Stressing to me how vital the availability of A.A. literature in their language was to the growth of A.A., he described the tears members had in their eyes after receiving the first shipment of Big Books in their native language. He shared with me that while it might not seem that important to others, for those dying of alcoholism, it was like the hungry getting a supply of food and water.

“This conversation, which occurred thousands of miles from where I live, reaffirmed for me the sacred obligation we have to carry the message and to help the next sick and suffering alcoholic. Translating A.A. literature is one of the life-saving actions — an action made possible by your contribution to the General Service Office.”

An anonymous A.A. member



■ “Children of Chaos”: The Birth of A.A.’s Traditions

“Moochers mooched, lonely hearts pined, committees quarreled, new clubs had unheard-of headaches, orators held forth, groups split wide open, members turned professional, sometimes whole groups got drunk, and local public relations went haywire.” (*The Language of the Heart*, p. 149)

Such, according to A.A. co-founder Bill W., was the state of affairs in many of the Fellowship’s fledgling groups during A.A.’s pioneering time. With little or no experience to speak of in the harrowing new adventure of sobriety, A.A. groups were flying blind.

Like wildfire, A.A.’s program of recovery, principally contained in the Twelve Steps as outlined in the Big Book, was spreading from one alcoholic to another, crisscrossing the nation and even jumping to foreign lands with alarming speed and facility. Helped by high profile media accounts and the growing support of medicine and religion, A.A. was well on its way to becoming a household name. People were getting sober and the good news traveled fast.

Nevertheless, A.A.’s collection of burgeoning groups often had little to hold onto beyond the deep desire of their members for individual sobriety. Everything was being defined on a day-to-day, person-to-person basis, with trial and error discovery of what worked and what didn’t. Rules were made and broken; policies were introduced and soon discarded; and, inevitably, powerful, sometimes bitter, disputes broke out regarding the relations of A.A. members one to another and to the outside world.

Problems were many in A.A.’s first decade, and while membership climbed higher and higher with each year, the challenges of living and working together not only as individuals but as groups began to pile up. With success and exposure also came suspicion, jealousy, and resentment. There was conflict over every conceivable issue: the use of money, the operation of clubhouses, misuse of A.A.’s name, leadership and personal romances. Meeting rituals varied from one group to another; some meetings aimed at low-bottom drunks, some featured those of the high-bottom variety; some allowed “slippers” to return to the fold, others thought they should be excommunicated.

As Bill recounted in *A.A. Comes of Age* (p. 203): “It seemed as if every contestant in every group argument wrote us during this confused and exciting period.” The problems articulated by these A.A. members threatened to overwhelm the nascent Fellowship, and Bill confessed in a 1950 letter to an A.A. member in Michigan, “When letters describing the growing pains of the early groups came across my desk... I used to lie awake nights. It seemed certain that the forces of disintegration would tear our pioneering groups apart...”

A.A. was not the first organization, however, to find itself foundering on the reefs of conflict and perilous success. The Washingtonian Society, a movement for the reclamation of drunkards a century earlier, had nearly

discovered an answer to alcoholism. At the outset, the society, which originated in Baltimore, was composed entirely of alcoholics trying to help one another. They had notable success and the movement thrived. Their membership passed the five hundred thousand mark. Yet, the Washingtonians permitted politicians and reformers, both alcoholic and nonalcoholic, to use the society for their own purposes and, in spite of their stated aims to avoid politics, religion and commercialization, many members took opposing sides publicly on questions of alcohol reform and other issues of the day. Within eight or nine years it was reported that the Washingtonians “had lost their thunder.” Said Bill W. at an annual A.A. banquet in New York City on November 7, 1945, “In short, the Washingtonians went out to settle the world’s affairs before they had learned to manage themselves. They had no capacity for minding their own business.”

The Oxford Group, a religious organization from which the seeds of A.A. grew and which supplied some of the Fellowship’s basic spiritual principles and precepts, also provided an example of what not to do. In *A.A. Comes of Age*, (p. 39), Bill wrote: “Early A.A. got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America.” However, while Oxford Group members were deeply interested in the plight of alcoholics, some of their practices made Bill and others uncomfortable. Serving as a spiritual springboard for many of A.A.’s fundamental concepts, the differences between the Oxford Group and the fledgling Fellowship ultimately prompted a separation of the two groups. As Bill once put it, “The Oxford Group wanted to save the world, and I only wanted to save drunks.”

Utilizing the example of the groups that had come before and the growing body of experience from its own internal struggles in the Fellowship’s first decade, A.A. inched closer to a set of working principles that could guide and protect the group life of A.A.

In 1946, in the the AA Grapevine, these principles were codified by the founders and early members as the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous and were published under the title “Twelve Points to Assure Our Future.” They were accepted and endorsed by the membership as a whole at the International Convention of A.A., in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1950. Later, in April of 1953, the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* was published, providing for the Fellowship a blueprint for individual recovery and a roadmap for how to survive as an organization.

“Children of chaos,” wrote Bill in Tradition Four, “we have defiantly played with every brand of fire, only to emerge unharmed and, we think, wiser. These very deviations created a vast process of trial and error which, under the grace of God, has brought us to where we stand today.”

NOTE: Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, events may be canceled or moved to online formats. Please contact the event coordinators as listed before making your plans.

Calendar of Events

Events listed here are presented solely as a service to readers, not as an endorsement by the General Service Office. Please note that we cannot attest to the accuracy, relevancy, timeliness, or completeness of information provided by any linked site. **For any additional information, please use the event contact information provided.**

September

8—*Online*. Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions. Via Zoom. Second Wednesday, June through December, 6pm CT.
Info: casa@chicagoaa.org

10-12—*Duluth, Minnesota*. 75th Duluth Roundup. Write: Duluth Roundup Committee, PO Box 16771, Duluth, MN 55816; Info: www.duluthroundup.org

10-12—*Online*. West Central Regional Forum. Write: Forum Coord., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163; regionalforums@aa.org.
Info: https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/regional-and-local-forums

17-19—*Key West, Florida*. Keys for Serenity. Info: www.keysforserenity.com

24-26—*Crescent City, California*. Sobriety by the Sea. Write: PO Box 871 Crescent City, CA 95531; Info: sobrietybythesea.com

24-26—*Wichita, Kansas*. 64th Annual Kansas Area 25 Conference. Info: ks-aa.org

24-26—*Richland, Washington*. Three Rivers Big Book Weekend III. Write: 1500 Kendall Benton City, WA 99320;
Info: threeriversbigbookweekend.org

25—*Montréal, Québec, Canada*. Journée des centres de détention- Région 87/ Correctional Facilities day Area 87. Info: Comité des centres de détention 3920 Rachel, Montréal, Québec H1X 1Z3;
centresdedetention@aa87.org

October

8-10—*Online*. Southwest Regional Forum. Write: Forum Coord., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163; regionalforums@aa.org.
Info: https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/regional-and-local-forums

13—*Online*. Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions. Via Zoom. Second Wednesday, June through December, 6pm CT.
Info: casa@chicagoaa.org

14-17—*Germantown, Tennessee*. 47th Annual Memphis Bluff City Fellowship.
Info: www.bluffcityfellowship.com

22-23—*Saint Cloud, Minnesota*. St. Cloud Roundup "This Too Shall Pass". Write: PO Box 125, St. Cloud, MN 56302.
Info: stcloudroundup@gmail.com

23-26—*San Diego California*. Seniors In Sobriety International Conference. Write: 3440 East Russell Road, Las Vegas, Nevada 89120; Info: https://seniorsinsobriety.com

29-31—*Las Vegas, Nevada*. International Conference of Secular AA Washington DC. Write: P.O. Box 70084, San Diego, CA 92167; Info: https://aasecular.org

November

5-7—*Talladega, Alabama*. ALCYPAA X. Write: 606 Sterling St., Piedmont AL 36772;
Info: alcypaa2020@gmail.com

10—*Online*. Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions. Via Zoom. Second Wednesday, June through December, 6pm CT.
Info: casa@chicagoaa.org

12-14—*Kenner, Louisiana*. 4th Annual Corrections Conf. Write: 104 Bissonnet St. Lafayette, LA 70507; Info: www.nationalcorrectionsconference.org

12-14—*La Crosse, Wisconsin*. Area 75 Conference. Write: PO Box 2123, La Crosse, WI 54602;
Info: https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2021-area-75-conference-tickets-132868598555

19-21—*Tampa, Florida*. Southern States Service Assembly.

Info: SSAASA6outreach@gmail.com

19-21—*Online*. East Central Regional Forum. Write: Forum Coord., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163; regionalforums@aa.org.
Info: https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/regional-and-local-forums

December

8—*Online*. Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions via Zoom. Second Wednesday monthly, June through December, 6pm CT.
Info: casa@chicagoaa.org

January 2022

7-9—*Garden City, Kansas*. 51st Annual Southwest Kansas Conference. Write: 102 Carefree Lane, Garden City, KS 67846.

15-16—*Bismarck, North Dakota*. Rule 62 Rendezvous Woodstock of ND. Write: P.O. Box 268 Bismarck, ND 58502.
Info: www.rule62rendezvous.org

21-23—*Spring, Texas*. 59th SETA Convention. Write: 3012 State Hwy 30 Suite 101, Box #168 Huntsville, TX. 77340;
Info: http://www.setaconvention.org

February

11-13—*Liverpool, New York*. Salt City Mid-Winter Roundup. Write: Ch., PO Box 367, Syracuse, NY 13209;
Info: www.saltcityroundup.com