

2024 Conference Committee on Policy/Admissions

ITEM D: Review report of the GSB Ad-Hoc Committee on Participation of Online Groups in the U.S./Canada Service Structure.

Background notes:

2023 Committee Consideration of the Conference Committee on Policy/Admissions

The committee reviewed the “Report of the GSB Ad Hoc Committee on Participation of Online Groups in the U.S./Canada Service Structure” and expressed appreciation for the report, particularly the results of the survey to delegates. The committee agreed that an important next step would be for delegates to find out more about the online groups in their areas and requested that the ad-hoc committee provide them with sample questions they may use in that inquiry. The committee looks forward to the next iteration of the ad hoc committee and the continued exploration of the possibilities for the participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada General Service Structure.

2021 Advisory Actions of the General Service Conference

The U.S./Canada General Service Structure recognize online groups and encourage their participation by listing groups who request to be listed in Fellowship Connection according to the group’s preferred district and area, with the default option being the location of the group’s primary contact. This replaces the 1997 Advisory Action that designated online groups as “International Correspondence Meetings.”

The General Service Board form a committee to explore future possibilities for the participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada General Service Structure.

Background:

1. Report of the GSB Ad Hoc Committee on Participation of Online Groups in the U.S./Canada Service Structure.

General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous
Trustees' Ad Hoc Committee on
Participation of Online Groups in the U.S./Canada General Service Structure
2023 Progress Report

1. Introduction

The genesis of the ad hoc committee's work began immediately post COVID with multiple requests coming from the Fellowship to the office, to the Group Services desk, and through the Conference, seeking some clear direction from the General Service Board in terms of how we are going to facilitate participation of online groups.

Below is an excerpt from the committee's Composition, Scope, and Procedure to highlight the scope of work:

- 1. This General Service Board ad hoc committee will explore future possibilities for the participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada General Service structure.*
- 2. This committee will review aspects of service to online/virtual A.A. groups and will make recommendations for changes and improvements when through careful deliberation it is deemed necessary.*
- 3. The committee recognizes this entire scope will need to be drawn upon and be enhanced by the shared experience of individuals and online/virtual groups.*

In order to facilitate the access to information on this topic to inform the group conscience, the committee has compiled a timeline of the ad hoc committee's work, a summary of year-by-year online group and district participation, a list of the Proposed Agenda Items on the topic of Participation of Online Groups from 2020-2023, the 2023 survey results, and the committee's recommendations at this time, for the consideration of the General Service Conference.

2. Timeline of Ad Hoc Committee work

2021/71st GSC

- Two advisory actions
- Composition, Scope, and Procedure

2022/72nd GSC

- Agenda items not forwarded.

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- Formation of virtual Areas
- GSO working group main points of interest:
 - o New Group Listing form revised to also be considered service material.
 - o The question of geographic service structure with non-geographic groups
 - o From an international perspective, the office received inquiries from members from other countries wanting to weigh in on our Conference and list with us.
 - o The working group has also frequently been asked about how to allow an international member to be a GSR.
 - o The biggest challenge the working group has come across is an advisory action that gives direction but also asks the GSO to list groups in districts and areas we have not even had the chance to communicate in detail with or they themselves are just starting to have conversations about.
- Communication with OIAA and other 12 Step Fellowships to understand development of online meetings prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and different approaches to the question of integrating online groups.
- International experience was also collected through the European Service Meeting (ESM) and REDELA (Meeting of the Americas)
- Questions asked at the time:
 - o What discussions regarding participation of virtual groups in your area/districts have taken place?
 - o Are your area/districts welcoming participation of virtual groups?
 - o What motions around this subject have been made/passed?
 - o What is your area doing as far as participation at district meetings and area assemblies for virtual groups? Hybrid?
 - o What is the cost to facilitate virtual group participation?
 - o Does your area have virtual districts?

2023/73rd GSC

- Committee chair gives a presentation and report, which includes the survey results, at the 73rd General Service Conference, followed by discussion.
- Policy/Admissions committee consideration
 - o Suggested questions are prepared and sent out to Delegates to confer with their Areas on the current landscape of participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada General Service Structure.

3. Year by year participation

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2021

- 595 active virtual groups
- 300 have a GSR.
- 10 have an Alt GSR.

2022

- 883 active virtual groups
- 587 have a GSR.

Virtual Districts:

Area 48 – NENY, District 20
Area 72 – Western Washington, District 25

2023

- 1168 active virtual groups
- 752 have a GSR.

Increase midyear to:

- 1236 active virtual groups
- 797 have a GSR.

Virtual Districts:

Area 14 – North Florida, District 2
Area 45 – Southern New Jersey, District 42
Area 48 – NENY, District 20
Area 58 – Oregon, District 33
Area 72 – Western Washington, District 25

4. List of Proposed Agenda Items about Participation of Online Groups from 2020-2023

The following Proposed Agenda Items were submitted for the General Service Conference. For 2022-2024, these items were not forwarded as in 2021 the creation of the Ad Hoc Committee...

2021 (71st GSC)

1. PAI 30: Consider a request from a local district that recognizes “Online Groups” as voting members of the district and asks that the Conference take action to grant “Online A.A. Groups” the same privileges as “Brick and Mortar Groups.”
2. PAI 34: Adapt the General Service Structure to recognize online-only groups as official groups. Without that recognition, members have no voice and are denied access to service opportunities.
3. PAI 37: Consider allowing Virtual or Online Groups to register under their respective district and area instead of the Online Intergroup.
4. PAI 45: Consider holding a discussion about how to give online only (virtual) meetings a voice and a vote in the General Service Structure and access to General Service Offices (GSO) services.

2022 (72nd GSC)

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1. PAI 18: Consider adding an agenda item to discuss online meetings and whether they are upholding or violating our traditions during the 72nd General Service Conference.
2. PAI 43: Consider creating a virtual Area for virtual groups in the United States/Canada General Service Conference Structure.
3. PAI 45: Establish and test virtual Area(s) for the U.S. and Canada online groups utilizing time zones rather than geographical locations.
4. PAI 46: Consider a request to recognize the Online International Groups (OIGs) and welcome these groups in the General Service Structure as outlined by a proposed diagram of this new structure.
5. PAI 61: That GSO consider adding a new Area to the service structure as a virtual only Area for those groups that have no affiliate Area. This Area could include all virtual-only meetings/groups that would like to remain/become active in the General Service Structure. This new Area would function completely as a virtual-only Area, having groups organized virtually. This new Area could elect a Delegate who is willing and able to attend GSO events and fulfill the responsibilities of an Area Delegate. After this proposal passes, this new virtual-only Area will have a vote at the General Service level. Once they are formed within the operating structure, the decision of this area will be left to this Area.
6. PAI 79: Consider creating two new non-Geographic Areas — one for the United States, and one for Canada — for the purpose of, but not limited to, the election of a Delegate by the GSRs from virtual meetings or groups in each of the new Areas to represent those meetings and groups at the General Service Conference and within the A.A. service structure as a whole.
7. PAI 83: Rescind the 71st General Service Conference Advisory Action #33 which states: “The General Service Board form a committee to explore future possibilities for the participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada General Service Structure.”

2023 (73rd GSC)

1. PAI 83: That Zoom or hybrid groups not be included in the structure of Alcoholics Anonymous.
2. PAI 181: Consider the approval of an Additional Delegate Area for Online Groups.

2024 (74th GSC)

1. PAI 19: I move that we expand Area boundaries to include languages and overlay time zones on top of Areas. Currently, only geographical boundaries are recognized. This is for integrating online meetings into the formal A.A. service

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structure, both nationally and potentially, globally. Currently, virtual meetings are not represented. As formal A.A. meetings, they would be entitled to full representation at the conference. They would have their own Delegates, DCMs, and GSRs.

To do this as soon as possible, two pilot websites would be set up to collect and verify the group's info, then pass it on.

Based on population density and for A/B testing, I propose one pilot on the East Coast and the other on the West. In addition to websites, 1 Area and 3 Districts should be initialized in each pilot zone as part of the pilots. This is to remove the roadblocks of getting new Districts and Areas approved. Without them, groups have nowhere to go. Registering a new group should be no harder than registering for an in-person meeting.

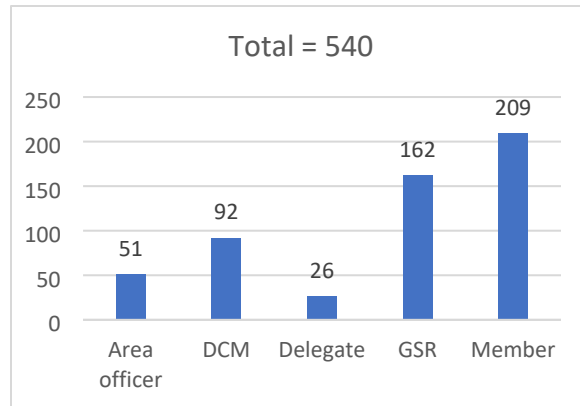
2. PAI 69: Add online areas to each region.
3. PAI 88: I propose that GSC take into consideration creating an additional Area — Area 94 covering online groups. The Regions could be the Districts.

5. 2023 Conference Committee survey results

In 2023, the Conference Committee on Policy/Admissions put forward the following committee consideration:

“The committee reviewed the “Report of the GSB Ad Hoc Committee on Participation of Online Groups in the U.S./Canada Service Structure” and expressed appreciation for the report, particularly the results of the survey to delegates. The committee agreed that an important next step would be for delegates to find out more about the online groups in their areas and requested that the ad-hoc committee provide them with sample questions they may use in that inquiry. The committee looks forward to the next iteration of the ad hoc committee and the continued exploration of the possibilities for the participation of online groups in the U.S./Canada general service structure.”

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The Trustees' Ad Hoc Committee on Participation of Online Groups met four times this year to review and implement this committee consideration. A survey was sent out in August to the Area Delegates, with a list of suggested questions for their local members. The survey form was also included as a link to facilitate distribution, and a deadline was given for October. The committee reviewed the results of the survey, which is provided below.

There were a total number of 540 responses, of which 518 were in English, 19 in French, and three in Spanish. The committee reviewed the responses and felt overall that there was not a strong sentiment for a particular action. It can be noted that of those that responded, most welcomed virtual groups and are ready to integrate them into the structure, while maintaining the autonomy of how to do so at the local level.

Virtual districts have gained traction as effective points of connection for online groups wishing to be a part of the service structure, resulting in a variety of perspectives on how online districts and groups can then be integrated into the Area structure. Some Areas have adopted hybrid formats for assemblies, while others feel the costs involved at present outweigh the expressed need for their service structure.

The survey questions 8 and 9 were included to organize feedback and are redacted here to keep participation by Area anonymous. Of those that responded, 74 Areas were

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represented, and 28 responses did not specify membership to an Area. Participants were also asked to confirm their level of representation, which is illustrated below:

Answers for the rest of the questions have been summarized below in figures where possible, and as a narrative where additional context is considered helpful.

Question 1: Are the online groups in your area participating in their districts? At the area level?

Responses	Tally
District	118
Area	43
Both	270
None	99
Area, District, None	10
<i>Total</i>	<i>540</i>

The vast majority of those who responded replied they were participating in both the area and district levels. All in all, the committee felt that these percentages supersede historic in-person participation in local assemblies, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Question 2: Is this participation at in-person meetings, online via hybrid meetings, and/or fully online only meetings?

Responses	Tally
In person	85
Online via hybrid meetings	177
Fully online only	116
No participation	60
Other	102
<i>Total</i>	<i>540</i>

In the case of those that provided a response for “Other” it was noted that there was a combination of formats depending on the needs of the groups, with some GSRs and DCMs offering to provide reporting to online groups where there were no hybrid options, for instance. There was also the idea of the hybrid format serving as an option for

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attending, so in many cases members would attend meetings sometimes virtually and sometimes in person. In this case, the respondents saw the hybrid format as less of a tool exclusively for “online groups” and more as a resource for all participants.

Question 3: Are members of your online groups active at the district and/or the area level as chairs/members of committees or officers?

Responses	Tally
Area	26
District	142
Area committees	12
Combination of the three	198
Other	136
Not sure	26
<i>Total</i>	<i>540</i>

There were a variety of responses, with over 69% showing that members are actively engaged in the service structure as representatives of online groups. Below is a selection of responses to illustrate some of the sentiments and perspectives:

- 1) *“No, they do not because they want to retain a virtual cyberspace area without a tie to a location. We can participate in OIAA with an IGR, but OIAA is also not recognized by GSO USA/Canada.”*
- 2) *“Since our AA group supports both in person and on-line, to date participation at the district level has been limited to those members who attend in-person meetings.”*
- 3) *“No, requires in-person participation.”*
- 4) *“Only one online group comes to our district meeting, but they do not vote.”*
- 5) *“When I think of “online groups,” I think “online only.” If they are hybrid, many have just one or 2 meetings online, so I don't really think of them as “online” since they still have brick & mortar space. Therefore, the online-only groups in my district DO NOT participate in District, Area, or Area committees. There is one online-only group that I know of in my and a member of that group is an Area Committee Chair. Their GSR has attended Assemblies in-person before.”*

Question 4: How are the voices of online groups heard at the area level?

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Responses	Tally
Through the service structure	318
Communication (outside service structure)	55
Not connected	67
Unknown	45
Other	55
<i>Total</i>	<i>540</i>

Of those that responded, there were six key points that stood out for ways that online groups are presently connected:

- The Delegates, DCMs & GSRs are informing members.
- Online districts
- Online groups send GSRs to assemblies.
- Same as any groups
- Hybrid either online or in person
- Through their own district

In general, local participation has adapted mostly positively to the inclusion of online groups. Respondents described many of the initial (and ongoing) challenges with budgeting, logistics, and technological knowledge, and local discussions show a group conscience that considers the real expressed need of the membership; in some cases, there is no benefit to the costs, and the membership is fine with in-person participation. The development of hybrid formats, despite the technical requirements they entail, has shown to be an excellent way of maintaining greater involvement, while letting the groups choose their way. On the other hand, the costs can be prohibitive in some Districts and Areas. Below is a selection of responses to highlight some effective methods and viewpoints:

- 1) *"We have our GSR represent us. Also, there have been online meeting "Meet and Greet" sharing sessions, just informal, to share tips and ask for help or ideas."*

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- 2) *“At our quarterlies through the DCM and also GSRs who attend the Assembly. We now provide hybrid at all of our business meetings.”*
- 3) *“Voting is available for eligible Area, Group and District members online.”*
- 4) *“The same as any other groups. There's no difference between a group that meets in a church, online, or in the local park.”*
- 5) *“We created a district for online groups and are trying to get them involved.”*
- 6) *“Must be present in person.”*
- 7) *“The information flows up and down the service structure as it always has. The DCM meets with GRSs at District meetings, DCMs represent the groups at the Area Committee meetings. We have online only Area Committee meetings, so there is no change at all in how information is communicated.”*
- 8) *“All of area meeting are Hybrid. We also have an online district.”*
- 9) *“Voting is available for eligible Area, Group and District members online.”*
- 10) *“We have to continue having a hybrid set-up to ensure online groups to participate.”*

Question 5: How have your districts and area coped with purchase, maintenance, and transportation of equipment, as required for online and/or hybrid meetings?

Responses	Tally
Budgeted	184
Not budgeted	52
Personal equipment	53
Unknown	73
Group autonomy	82
Mixed (help of IGCOs, reimbursed, partial, etc.) *	96
<i>Total</i>	<i>540</i>

The feedback suggested that while most groups, Districts and Areas used their Seventh Tradition funds to purchase equipment, there were concerns about the use of contributions and financial viability in the long term. In one instance a member shared that there was a question by some old timers about whether groups should own assets,

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and that once it was recognized as an important tool to help the suffering alcoholic, that was able to change some people's minds.

There was a widespread need for technologically savvy members to assist in the selection and set up of equipment, as well as encountering additional expenses around maintenance and transportation. These areas of service are sometimes challenging to fill, along with the current challenge of filling service positions in general in the Fellowship. Many Areas included the costs in their budget, while at the group and district level, in many cases members lent or donated their own personal equipment.

The timing of the pandemic not only created the need for online meetings and the questions that came with it, but also resulted in the excess funds that made investing in needed equipment possible. The committee noted whether contributions (Seventh tradition) will keep pace with the ongoing expenses incurred by the equipment.

Below are some of the responses to this question that highlight some of the main perspectives:

- 1) *"Each meeting of AA persons has taken responsibility for the purchase, maintenance, and transport of equipment required for their online meeting."*
- 2) *"Our members donate to cover our zoom expenses."*
- 3) *"Area pays for service. Transportation and maintenance is performed by the person performing area service."*
- 4) *"Our Area spent upwards of \$30,000 to create our initial hybrid set up. The first few years of hybrid Assemblies, we hired an outside firm to help facilitate our Area business meeting. Last year Area created a technology steering committee designed to coordinate and facilitate the hybrid needs for our business meeting. We have recently purchased a storage unit to store our equipment."*
- 5) *"We just use someone's zoom account and reimburse that member."*
- 6) *"Area has purchased their own equipment and taken care of maintenance and transportation of equipment as required for Hybrid meetings except for one exception where our assembly will meet only online. Our District and Groups are being responsible for their own equipment, maintenance, and transportation."*
- 7) *"It has become part of the budget."*
- 8) *"We invested \$5k initially and created a technology steering committee."*

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- 9) *“The groups in my district have been able to afford refurbished equipment. [...] There have also been donations. Otherwise, people use their personal equipment.”*
- 10) *“Using excess funds accumulated during the COVID pandemic.”*
- 11) *“The Area has hybrid equipment. It seems important to point out though: hybrid equipment and ensuring participation from online groups is not necessarily the same thing. We have members of online groups that attend Area assemblies in person, and we have members of in-person groups who attend online.”*

Question 6: What option does your area (inclusive of online groups) prefer:

Responses	Tally
No change: online groups are listed based on geography and areas are autonomous regarding if they need or want a virtual district and other efforts to facilitate participation	301
The implementation of an online area for US/Canada. The area would be autonomous regarding membership and structure; HOWEVER, delegates would need to be from the US or Canada	112
Other	127
<i>Total</i>	<i>540</i>

Based on the feedback for these options, in relation to previous years, it appears that the push for an online area has subsided. Some reasons expressed are that members have learned how to interact with virtual meetings in all forms and feel that the decision and the methods should remain autonomous at the local level. One example was: *“We find some merits with both options listed above. Online groups being listed based on geography and areas being autonomous in regard to becoming a virtual district and other efforts to facilitate participation. We also believe that delegates need to be from the US or Canada.”*

However, there were a significant number of responses that were undecided, as shown by the amount of “unknown” and “don’t know” responses. Some factors are that there is not a strong preference, members feel that what they have at the local level is working (such as hybrid assemblies), uncertainty about how the international membership would factor in, as well as a clear group conscience for how to decide what Area the group/District is connected to.

Below are some responses to highlight some of the main perspectives on this question:

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- 1) *“Both. Offer the choice. The A.A. online Intergroup could be a powerful force at on online Area. Online groups currently registered and active at local levels should be given the choice to remain.”*
- 2) *“It is difficult for a lot of members in the Area who are not part of online groups to fully understand the issues, so I am not sure that our Area (which consists mostly of in-person groups) is in a position to state a preference as an Area. However, some members of online groups in our Area feel very strongly that an online Area is needed.”*
- 3) *“In our meeting most members felt that it should be no change and based on geography. Several members commented that newcomers would be able to connect to a specific area to find an in-person sponsor. However, if a meeting was online only and covered attendees in a large geographical area, they would have the option to determine whether there should be an online are option.”*
- 4) *“We do not have a formal preferential option in our group. But our practice underlines the notion of no change. Among other things, online allows people who have had to leave the area to continue to participate with home group members, a very strong reason in our view to continue to maintain both options. We also have online participants who attend from Europe principally, and we welcome them, as well as former in person group members who have gone abroad and continue to participate online. We see all this implicitly as a continuation of A.A. unity.”*
- 5) *“Online groups be registered in the District and Area in which they are located. Treat online as a location. GSRs must occupy that Area and District in which they are located.”*
- 6) *“Summary: From listening during the breakouts, secretary report backs, and reading the compiled notes, it seems there continues to be more questions than answers. Pros and Cons of all options were raised. Responses varied as to which option was better. A few themes across groups included:*
 - *“More time and discussion is needed to figure out the best course forward. There are still many questions.”*

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- *“It is important for online groups to have a voice in this decision and determine what is best for them.”*
- *“Online groups should have autonomy to participate however is best for them.”*

Question 7: How have the online groups in your area used their expertise to help district and area service committees to:

- Bring online meetings to treatment facilities, correctional facilities, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers.
- Reach out and connect with remote communities.
- Help members who are homebound or have mobility issues.
- Offer more options for members with accessibility challenges, such as: hard of hearing, blind and/or deaf.
- Use simultaneous interpretation to offer meetings in more languages.
- Provide meetings for immunocompromised members.
- Offer meetings 24/7 for A.A.s who are shift workers, new parents, or caregivers.
- Make meetings accessible to those who have lost their driving privileges.

Of the varied answers, 35 indicated “all of the above” to the suggestions, 44 expressed that they did not know how to answer. Many responses selected multiple options, of which the specific instances were the following:

Responses that included the suggested options:	#
a. Bring online meetings to treatment facilities, correctional facilities, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers.	8
b. Reach out and connect with remote communities.	6
c. Help members who are homebound or have mobility issues.	68
d. Offer more options for members with accessibility challenges, such as: hard of hearing, blind and/or deaf.	33
e. Use simultaneous interpretation to offer meetings in more languages.	8
f. Provide meetings for immunocompromised members.	48

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g. Offer meetings 24/7 for A.A.s who are shift workers, new parents, or caregivers.	17
h. Make meetings accessible to those who have lost their driving privileges.	33

Below are some detailed responses that give further depth to the consideration that was given to responding to this question:

- 1) *"My online homegroup particularly attracts seniors! We use Closed-Captioning to aid understanding. Our open speaker meeting, and a split speaker discussion meeting attract newcomers, while long-timers flock to our Step/Tradition discussion meetings. Some of our members serve accessibilities committees. Online access is essential for most of our members."*
- 2) *"Our group is actively seeking a facility that would like an online meeting brought to them--the District Treatment Chair is working with us on this project. We have several members who are immunocompromised and attend our meetings regularly. They have said that this online meeting saved them so much worry, especially during Covid. We are 7 years old as a group but could not find an Area to accept us. Finally, we found our home in Area 72 and we are ready, willing and able to get busy!"*
- 3) *"OIAA has service committees similar to GSO, and at our group we are sponsoring a couple of women in nursing homes via Zoom. Remote community connection is inherent with OIAA. Zoom provides an opportunity to be of service to homebound and immunocompromised members. Signing and translation is available on-line and there are meetings at any time of the day for shift workers, parents, etc."*
- 4) *"Not sure what my district's efforts are for offering accessibility to online groups however my autonomous online home group has its own website our meeting is listed on aa-intergroup.org. We are a diverse cultural group. Our homegroup offers literature, does inventories, offers training for safety, group commitments, sponsorship, group conscience and literature studies. We practice the 36 spiritual principles of AA all online. Since Our group members (approx. 40+) are spread out across the country our Unity committee plans a live in person group anniversary*

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once a year. We also have live meet ups at various AA conferences and events throughout the year. Our GSR participates on their geo area level but as we rotate going forward this it is presenting a hardship for members to take this commitment due to remote locations and limited time and travel for the trusted servant participation. Our group philosophy is "Technology is the New Coffee Pot". We love AA and we will be here when you get here."

- 5) *"Our Online Group creates ad-Hoc teams to address Unity, Service and Recovery where we can connect to service commitments. Most members participate online only."*
- 6) *"My district has had no participation from our one online group. I suspect a lot of online groups are underrepresented because of the fact that districts are created by physical boundaries, so an online area would be wonderful."*

6. Ad Hoc Committee observations

- a. The committee noted with appreciation the diligent work of the local Area and District committees in exploring technological modalities that include online groups and benefit all members in general.
- b. The feedback from the survey was informative and highlighted these ongoing questions:
 - i. What differentiates an online meeting from an online group?
 - ii. How can online groups benefit from participating in the service structure?
- c. The committee affirmed that online groups and meetings reserve their right to remain autonomous, while encouraging ongoing communication with the rest of the Fellowship to foster unity and collaboration where merited.

7. Ad Hoc Committee recommendations

Within the framework of the committee's scope of work, the following are the recommendations it is prepared to make at this time:

- a. The committee feels that at this time there is no clearly expressed need for the creation of an additional Area for virtual groups. However, it feels that it might be helpful for local sharing to be compiled by the General Service

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Office, and that the Group Services desk consider the creation of an A.A. Guideline to encourage participation and provide shared experience for technological and logistical learned efficiencies.