

A.A.® Guidelines

Conferences, Conventions and Roundups

from G.S.O., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

A.A. Guidelines are compiled from the shared experience of A.A. members in various areas. They also reflect guidance given through the Twelve Traditions and the General Service Conference (U.S. and Canada). In keeping with our Tradition of Autonomy, except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole, most decisions are made by the group conscience of the members involved. The purpose of these Guidelines is to assist in reaching an *informed* group conscience.

HOW A.A.s MAKE THEIR GET-TOGETHERS ENJOYABLE AS WELL AS EFFECTIVE IN CARRYING THE A.A. MESSAGE OF RECOVERY

WHY HAVE AN A.A. CONVENTION?

It's clear that A.A. get-togethers beyond the group have become an established part of A.A. life. The calendar of events in any *Box 4-5-9* or on Grapevine's website, AAGrapevine.org shows some conventions, conferences, and roundups that are being held by A.A.s.

What makes an A.A. convention click for its participants? It's probably not style or form that matters so much as the spirit and feeling behind it. As one member puts it, the best A.A. convention is "just a darned good A.A. meeting blown up big." Just watch enthusiastic members at any A.A. convention and you'll get what he means. The atmosphere alone is worth the trip. Here you'll find fellowship, laughter, warmth, and understanding—"heaped up, pressed down, and running over."

CONVENTIONS COME IN MANY SHAPES AND SIZES

An A.A. convention is almost any A.A. get-together beyond the group-meeting level. These range from special meetings of one evening's duration to longer events-area, statewide, or regional weekend conventions. They will, most likely, be one of the following:

1 The special open meeting. This kind of gathering can serve useful purposes. It will, of course, bring together the A.A. members in a city or area. But it also provides a good opportunity to invite interested friends of A.A. to the meeting. Certainly, it's proper on such occasions to send special invitations to members of the clergy, doctors, lawyers, social workers, public health officials, and others who may have a special interest in A.A.

2 The one-day session. This might include several general meetings throughout the day. For a start, there's a "welcome" meeting in the morning, followed by other activities. There may be another open meeting in the afternoon, while the main open meeting with the featured speaker is saved for the windup meeting in the evening. If the convention is held in a school, civic hall, or other building with additional rooms, it's likely that the program for a one-day session can also include A.A. workshops and panels, service meetings, assemblies, and closed meetings.

3 The banquet. Many intergroups or central offices now sponsor annual banquets, often to help support their office operations. Some groups and areas also have banquets (or informal buffet and potluck dinners) as anniversary or gratitude observances. The banquet often features an after-dinner speaker or some other program of interest to A.A. members.

4 The weekend convention. This is an ideal form for a state, provincial, or regional convention. Members often arrive for an opening meeting session or "coffee & conversation" on Friday evening. Additional meetings and workshops—as well as other activities—continue through Saturday and even into Sunday afternoon. The convention may include a banquet, luncheons, special breakfasts, Saturday-night dancing and entertainment, and perhaps a spiritual meeting on Sunday morning.

THE CONVENTION BEGINS WITH A PLANNING COMMITTEE

Once a get-together has been scheduled, it needs a planning committee. The work in setting up a convention is too much for one person. He or she will need at least a dozen assistants, frequently more.

One method of forming the committee is simply to appoint a general chairperson who then completes the committee by finding able volunteers to chair the various committees.

Another method—popular when a number of groups sponsor a convention—is to send a committee representative from each group. Once in session, representatives can elect a chairperson and receive assignments to specific committees.

In some cases, the convention may be the responsibility of the general service committee from the area. In others, the convention committee may be organized separately. Either method works well if it corresponds to the wishes of the A.A. groups in the area.

In some areas, there is a permanent convention committee, set up within the area committee, so that valuable experience of convention planning can be carried over from one year to the next. Membership on such a committee is, of course, on a rotation basis,

so that new members are added yearly, but a proportion of experienced convention planners is retained at any given time.

Once assembled, the convention committee is usually organized along functional lines, with each chairperson responsible for a phase of the planning. Here's how a typical committee might be arranged:

1 Chairperson (assisted by one or two co-chairpersons) oversees the entire convention; coordinates the work of subcommittee chairpersons; keeps informed on the progress of all the arrangements; calls committee meetings when needed.

2 Secretary keeps all written records, including minutes of the committee meetings; also sends out notices of committee meetings and other mailings to committee members.

3 Treasurer is, of course, responsible for all money, including revenues from registration and banquet tickets; pays all bills; usually advises the chairperson on cash supply and income flow as well as rate of expenditures.

Experience indicates it's best if the treasurer is a person with four or more years' sobriety and some solid business experience. Each check usually calls for two signatures. Most convention committees require a complete report from the treasurer within a month or two of the convention. Some committees have the report audited as a further safeguard for convention funds.

4 Program Chairperson. Since this is often a very complex job, its objectives are discussed under the separate heading "What Makes a Good Convention Program?" This person usually sends invitations to speakers and panel members who chair various meetings.

5 Registration Chairperson supervises the production and distribution of all tickets, including those from online registrations. This job requires special attention to the task of tracking payments and bringing in the collection. This person is responsible for creating printed and online registration forms, name tags and welcome packets; and oversees the registration table.

6 Public Information Chairperson has the sensitive task of encouraging a large attendance without abandoning A.A.'s principle of "attraction rather than promotion." Publicity efforts can be kept within the dignity and spirit of A.A. through the following means:

a. Preparation and distribution of material about the program, speakers, and time and location of the convention (perhaps including map of area, if necessary). It's advisable for the convention committee to rent a post office box and/or create a generic email address, and use that on all mailings, with no reference to A.A. on return addresses or in email subject lines. When sending A.A. mail to multiple recipients use can be made of the BCC (Blind Courtesy Copy) option to protect the anonymity of all recipients.

The convention publicity material could also be sent to the press,

radio, and TV outlets in the immediate area, (The Public Information Workbook, available from G.S.O., gives useful advice on approaching the media.) If media or the general public are invited be sure to attend to the details of how they will be greeted and if special meetings or contacts will be set up for them.

b. Regular flyers about the convention are usually mailed monthly to all groups in the area, with the first mailing beginning about six months before the convention date.

c. Dates and location of the convention, with a mailing address, and/or website, for information or registration, should be sent four months in advance to the A.A. Grapevine and to *Box 4-5-9*, to be published in their calendars. Only Area, regional, state, or provincial events of more than one day's duration are listed. Send A.A. Grapevine notices to the G.V. Editorial Department, 475 Riverside Dr., New York, NY 10115 or submit to the online calendar at www.aagrapevine.org. Send *Box 4-5-9* notices to *Box 4-5-9*, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163, or via the *Box 4-5-9* event information form on www.aa.org.

7 Entertainment Chairperson will arrange for the convention dances and floor show if there is one. The chairperson hires the band and other performers (or arranges for recorded music). At some conventions, the local A.A.s provide entertainment by putting on a play about A.A. Traditions (for script, write to G.S.O.), or putting together choruses and variety shows. This chairperson might also arrange to make sightseeing available for conventioners.

8 Hospitality Chairperson serves as convention host, organizing a committee that will greet out-of-town guests, arrange transportation for them when necessary, and see to any other needs they might have while attending the convention. Usually members of the hospitality committee wear special identification badges and are available to answer questions and provide assistance to conventioners.

9 Display and Literature Chairperson is responsible for displays and posters and for having A.A. literature available for all. G.S.O. provides a literature display to all conferences and conventions. (See "Displays" on page 6.)

10 Recording Chairperson is responsible for negotiating with the individual or company who will be recording the convention. That individual will be directly responsible to the convention chairperson (see Recording Guidelines on page 5).

PAYING THE BILLS

How are the costs of a convention covered and what can be done to make sure that the venture won't go deep in the red? Some conventions may involve spending several thousand dollars, so the committee must have a fair picture of the financial arrangements long before the convention opens. There's no substitute for common sense here; the committee must take a businesslike approach to finances and keep expenditures somewhere within a conservative

estimate of anticipated revenues. As for financing the convention, several sound methods seem to be in general use:

1 The Underwriting Method. The groups in the area, perhaps through their representatives on the convention committee, agree to underwrite the complete costs of the event. Since the registration fees can be established at a level sufficient to cover the total costs, this should result in no actual out-of-pocket costs to groups. It's a good idea, though, to put the tickets on sale well in advance of the convention and to know where the break-even point lies. Registration fees cover costs for special events.

2 The Convention Fund. In some areas, the groups make year-round contributions to a convention fund. Then, there is no registration fee, except possibly for out-of-state visitors.

One method of covering deficits, provided it is done with tact and sufficient explanation, is to take up a special collection at the convention. But if the groups have already been consulted and have agreed to underwrite the convention, making up the deficit is their ultimate responsibility.

Most conventions, however, make a profit. What's to be done with these surplus funds? In most cases, part of the surplus is held in trust for next year's convention. Then the committee may use the balance to help support local service offices or the General Service Office. In accordance with our Seventh Tradition, only funds from A.A. members attending the event should be contributed to support A.A. activities.

3 Self-support. Based on A.A. experience shared with G.S.O., committees have found it best not to solicit for outside donations of any kind. This is in keeping with our A.A. principle of self-support. (This does not pertain to ordinary business negotiations with the facility where the event is taking place.) For additional resources visit the "contribution and self-support" page on G.S.O.'s website.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD CONVENTION PROGRAM?

One A.A. member shared his opinion that the program wasn't really the most important thing at a convention. He looks for something in addition—the joys of meeting new and old friends, working together for our common good, and sharing our experience, strength and hope with each other.

He goes on to say that there can also be a letdown feeling when we leave a convention if the program hasn't been imaginative and inspiring. This takes careful thought well in advance of the convention date. A well-balanced program might include:

1 The Convention Theme. Often, it's easier to plan the overall program by organizing it around a simple theme. Such a theme might be "Unity," "We Came to Believe. . .," "First Things First," or a similar A.A. saying or topic. This does not mean that the entire program must be devoted to the theme idea; it does, however, serve as a reminder that an A.A. convention advances the common purpose of Alcoholics Anonymous. Some events adopt the current year's General Service Conference Theme.

2 Main Features-Banquets, Open Meetings, etc. In planning a convention, program chairpersons usually schedule several **large open** meetings throughout the event, although not necessarily in immediate succession. A Saturday-night banquet may also serve as an open meeting, with a speaker following the dinner.

The large open meeting brings unity to the convention and gives the opportunity for presenting certain matters—such as the selection of the next year's convention site—before the entire assembly of A.A.s attending. But too many open meetings in any single convention can be tiresome; as a general rule, three or four such meetings are sufficient in a weekend convention.

3 Panels. Many program chairpersons schedule workshops and panel sessions to provide suitable convention activity without overloading the program with open meetings.

Workshops and panels may take a variety of forms; one popular arrangement is to set up a panel with three speakers and a chairperson. Each speaker may be assigned a topic and a time limit. The session may be followed by a short question-and-answer period, if time allows.

On the subject of panels, experience has shown that topics such as "How the General Service Office Works" or "Why G.S.O.?" attract only a small audience and therefore do not carry the message in a satisfactory fashion. G.S.O. staff members can best be used as speakers on regular panels—where their familiarity with A.A. worldwide can add an extra dimension to the presentation.

Any one of the trustees (especially your own regional trustee) would be invaluable on such topics as "A.A. and Responsibility." They are in a crossroads position where they are aware of our Fellowship—particularly on the public level—and also have an overall perspective on our purposes, strengths, and weaknesses. They can be of great value in helping us learn more about worldwide A.A.

Don't forget your own G.S.R.s, committee members, and delegates and past trusted servants. From their work in carrying the message outside their own groups, they'll have many ideas on such subjects as "Is A.A. Changing?," "A.A. at Work, Then and Now." Many other A.A.s oldtimers, and not-so-oldtimers, also have worthwhile information and thoughts on such subjects.

Here are some suggested topics appropriate for workshops and panels:

Correctional Facilities

Treatment Settings

Public Information

Cooperation With the Professional Community

Sponsorship

Service

G.S.R.s

Twelve Traditions

Twelve Concepts

Intergroups and Central Offices

A.A. Grapevine/La Viña

Special Needs

(Some program committees select phrases from A.A. literature as workshop or panel topics.)

"Balance" and "flow" are two key words in the planning of a convention program, particularly in setting up the panels. It's important that the program flow smoothly, with one feature following another in a pleasant, logical series. It's also important that the panel topics and participants be balanced, so as not to give the audience too much of any one subject, too many speakers from one area, or too many panel participants of similar experience and viewpoint.

One effective way to insure maximum interest and participation in the convention is to farm out each meeting, workshop, or panel to a different group or area within the convention territory. Thus, the groups themselves plan and organize the meetings, always working closely with the general program chairperson to assure balance.

4 Care of Speakers. Most conventions feature speakers from out of town, sometimes A.A. members living a thousand miles or more from the convention site. This means that program chairpersons have a responsibility to see that certain important matters are properly handled on the speakers' behalf:

a. **Expenses.** It should be clear, when the speakers are booked, what terms are being made for expenses. Unless it's otherwise specified, speakers have a right to assume that all their travel, meal, and hotel expenses will be paid for the entire trip. Speakers will also expect hotel or motel accommodations as a matter of course; if they're to be guests in private homes, this should be explained before their arrival.

b. **Speaking Arrangements.** Speakers should know when they're expected to speak, as well as on what topic and length of time, and whether their presence is also required elsewhere in the convention. (Some speakers may be unable to attend the entire convention.) No other commitments besides speaking should be made for speakers without their knowledge and consent. Most speakers will also appreciate knowing something about the conditions under which they'll speak; let them know whether there'll be a podium, public address system, etc. If the speaker will be taped, be sure that the speaker is aware in advance.

c. **Speaker Hosts and/or Hostesses.** Responsible members from the local group should be assigned the duty of being host to the visiting speakers and making sure that they have proper accommodations, as well as transportation and other conveniences.

PROVIDING SERVICES FOR A.A.s WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

For Deaf Members

A.A. members who are deaf or hard of hearing may need special considerations when attending an A.A. conference or convention. For those who have a fair amount of hearing and/or who read lips,

seating near the speaker may be all that is required. In some cases amplified headsets are provided. Others who are deaf may require the use of a sign language interpreter. Here are some points to consider when planning a conference or meeting that will be attended by deaf or hard of hearing A.A.s.

1 Reserve interpreters well ahead of time because they are in great demand.

2 Budget the interpreting expenses. Find out early what the estimated cost will be, whether by the hour or by the day. If you are holding concurrent workshops, you may need more than one interpreter at the same time. If your event is small (and short) you may be fortunate to find a qualified volunteer, but do not expect to rely on volunteers.

3 In arranging preferred seating for deaf or hard of hearing members, designate the reserve area clearly: "Please reserve for hearing-impaired members."

4 Sensitize workshop leaders and meeting chairpersons to the use of the interpreter.

5 Stick with your plans once you have announced that an event is sign-language accessible. Consider that there may be fewer events accessible in ASL to deaf members. Any unexpected or last minute removal of services could be problematic, especially for those members who may have travelled long distances to attend.

6 If the event is a large one with concurrent meetings and workshops, plan for continuous availability of several interpreters.

7 If you are listing the event with the General Service Office, your local intergroup, or in any A.A. publication, specify that it is sign-language interpreted. If possible, have a T.D.D. number that deaf people can call for more information.

For A.A.s With Other Special Needs

Committees assist A.A. members who have a variety of challenge to accessing the A.A. message.

For example, for blind people, some convention committees provide programs in Braille. Also, if meetings are wheelchair accessible, this may be noted in the program.

GUARDING ANONYMITY

Announcement For Press

When A.A. conventions are being covered by members of the press, it's customary to begin meetings by asking their cooperation in protecting members' anonymity. Such an announcement might go like this:

"Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films."

“Thus, we respectfully ask that A.A. speakers and A.A. members not be photographed, videotaped, or identified by full name on audiotapes and in published or broadcast reports of our meetings, including those reports on new media technologies such as the internet.”

“The assurance of anonymity is essential in our efforts to help other problem drinkers who may wish to share our recovery program with us. And our Tradition of anonymity reminds us that “A.A. principles come before personalities.”

It's unusual that any newspaper or broadcasting station these days will fail to cooperate with this request; not only is the A.A. principle of anonymity well known generally, but our G.S.O. in New York City has advised the press and broadcasters year after year of A.A.'s position on this matter.

But it's possible that members' anonymity may be violated through indirect methods. There's a likelihood, for example, that too much promotional zeal on the part of the convention committee may lead them to reveal a great deal of information about speakers without actually disclosing last names. This means, in the case of some well-known individuals, that their anonymity is technically protected but actually broken, since their identity can be readily recognized by anybody familiar with them or their work.

In one case, for example, a university professor had been invited to address a large A.A. banquet in the same state where he lived and worked. Only his first name, nickname, and last initial appeared on the announcement posters, but the name of his school and a previous academic connection were fully displayed. The professor's actual identity couldn't have been more clearly revealed if his last name and photograph had been included.

Is there a safe way to avoid making such de facto anonymity breaks? Well, one good procedure is to ask speakers how they wish to be listed on posters and advance notices. They'll know better than anybody else how much information about themselves ought to be revealed. In any case, whatever the speakers' feelings, the practice of using initials rather than last names should always be followed for the protection of A.A., as well as the individual.

PICTURE TAKING GUIDELINES

Many A.A. event committees announce that the taking of photographs during A.A. meetings might make some attendees uncomfortable regarding their anonymity. Even when photographs are permitted to be taken, some committees provide reminders that any photographs taken should be away from crowds, to ensure that no images are taken of people who have not given permission to be in the picture. The A.A. Anonymity Display Card (M-61, available from G.S.O.) is often used for such announcements.

As the long form of Tradition Eleven reminds us, “Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed” (this would include on digital media such as social networking, Internet and other nonpassword protected websites). In 2013 the General Service Conference affirmed “...that the Internet, social media and all forms of public communications are implicit in the last phrase of the Short Form of Tradition Eleven, which reads: ‘...at the level of press, radio and films.’”

As a further note about anonymity, event committees may announce, “Out of respect for others, please do not take photographs during any of the meetings. Also, be considerate when taking photographs around convention venues. Take care that you do not capture images of A.A. members, family members, and friends who did not give permission and may not wish to appear in your pictures. Please do not post recognizable photos of identifiable A.A. members on websites accessible to the public, including unrestricted pages on social networking sites.”

AUDIO RECORDING GUIDELINES

Shared experience makes it clear that recording of an A.A. convention cannot be left to chance. It is a difficult and time consuming job, including preliminary work with the speakers and decisions about who will record the convention, the conduct of the recorder during the convention, and his/her staff and follow-up after the convention. Following are some suggestions if the convention committee decides to use an outside vendor:

- 1 The recording chairperson may represent the convention in reaching agreements with the person who will be recording that particular convention, and in developing a written agreement.
- 2 The convention recording chairperson may develop a release form on which speakers agree to being recorded or decline to be recorded.
- 3 Experience shows that it is best to encourage speakers not to use full names and not to identify third parties by full names in their talks. The strength of our anonymity Traditions is reinforced by speakers who do not use their last names and by recording companies or recorders whose labels and catalogs do not identify speakers by last names, titles, service jobs or descriptions.

Experience also indicates that speaker recordings are being disseminated over the Internet, a public media outlet. In addition, some A.A. members, if being recorded for future play on a public website, may choose to leave out other details of their lives that may make themselves or their families identifiable.

- 4 The recording chairperson ensures that a recorder has an understanding of the Traditions.
- 5 The agreement prepared by the convention committee determines what the recorder sells or displays on-site.

6 The convention committee clarifies that recording may be done by an outside vendor, and is not an official part of the convention.

7 Convention committees discourage any recording royalties to the convention committee.

VIDEO RECORDING GUIDELINES

In keeping with a 1980 General Service Conference recommendation, it is suggested that speakers not be recorded on video.

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS ON GOOD CONVENTION MANAGEMENT

When your committee is discussing the convention, try to go over the things you liked and didn't like at past conventions, especially matters that caused petty irritations and annoyances; most likely, they can be avoided. Here are a few suggestions:

1 Badges. A.A. conventions don't seem to be right without identification badges. See that they're in bold, colorful letters, so they can be read at a glance.

Try not to subject guests to more than a few minutes' wait in registering for the convention and picking up their badges. Organize the registration so the process will flow smoothly and quickly.

2 Coffee. It's an essential feature—plenty of coffee sessions through-out the convention. Don't forget, some A.A.s come more to talk to each other than to listen to speakers, so be sure they have lots of opportunity to gather 'round the coffeepot.

3 Accessibility. At large conventions, it's sometimes necessary to hold some of the open meetings in buildings other than the one used as convention headquarters. Try to plan the meetings so members do not have to go more than a few blocks for a meeting or panel session. One exception to this might be the last open meeting of the convention, from which the guests will most likely be making their departure.

4 Hotel & Motel Registrations. Often, printed lists of local accommodations, giving prices and other information, are available from local chambers of commerce and similar offices. If possible, send these lists out with the registrations and give members a chance to make their reservations long before the convention.

Don't assume, in sending out the lists, that all A.A.s intend to stay in medium- or high-priced accommodations; also include the lower-priced hotels and motels. In some places, hotels or camping facilities are also listed, for the A.A.s who may arrive in campers.

5 Professional Assistance. Don't hesitate to avail yourself of assistance from local chamber of commerce officials and convention managers. They already know all about the problems you'll be facing, and they can give invaluable advice and assistance.

6 Displays. You can pass along important A.A. information in an attractive way by requesting the convention literature package to make up an A.A. literature display. This complimentary package is available in English, Spanish or French from G.S.O. for local conventions/conferences/roundups in the U.S. and Canada and contains one copy of all A.A. book dust jackets; one copy of all A.A. Conference-approved pamphlets; A.A. Guidelines; flyers; List of Central Offices, intergroups and Answering Services for the United States and Canada; List of General Service Offices, Central Offices, Intergroups and Answering Services Overseas; List of Service Material Available from G.S.O.; *The A.A. Service Manual*; and the Conference-approved Literature & Other Service Material catalog.

You can also purchase the current Membership Survey Display (M-13, *English only*) that offers a "snapshot" of A.A. through survey-based statistics on age, sex, occupation, length of sobriety, etc. This display is 27" high, 39" wide; has a double easel in back. It may be available for sale at your local intergroup/central office, or at A.A.'s online store, orders@aa.org.

7 Don't Compete With Last Year. While it's best not to try to compete with previous conventions, if you're the convention chairperson, you will naturally want to benefit from the experience of previous, convention committees.

A.A. AND AL-ANON

The following questions often arise:

How may A.A. and Al-Anon cooperate in area and regional conventions and get-togethers?

In accordance with the Twelve Traditions, a convention would be either A.A. or Al-Anon—not both. However, most A.A. convention committees invite Al-Anon to participate and plan their own program, and the committee arranges for facilities for the Al-Anon meetings.

Should an A.A. convention committee make a contribution to Al-Anon from the financial profits of the convention?

In accordance with the self-support Traditions of both Fellowships and to abide by the concept of "cooperation but not affiliation," it is suggested that A.A. should not make gifts or contributions to Al-Anon. By the same token, A.A. should not accept contributions from Al-Anon. If separate registrations have been kept for both A.A. and Al-Anon, however, income may be easily assigned. For further shared experience please see the A.A. Guidelines on the Relationship Between A.A. and Al-Anon. (MG-8)