

July 18, 2020

Dear Al-Anon/Alateen Members of Area 24 in Maryland and the District of Columbia,

Please take a few minutes during your meetings to read this first page to your members. Also, please forward the following Q&A, which is quite detailed, to all your members electronically. It will be a good resource as groups begin to discuss their futures during your group consciences.

There is a lot of discussion right now concerning Face to Face (FTF), Hybrid and Electronic Meetings. We have been receiving many questions and wanted to address some of your concerns. This information will also be posted on our Area website: area24@marylandlanddc-alanon.org.

The following Questions & Answers (Q&As) were developed after consultation with staff at our World Service Office (WSO) in Virginia Beach, as they are also receiving inquiries from members all over the world about how to “safely open” our FTF meetings. The Q&A below is intended to offer some guidance as our members reason things out with one another, in order to reach an informed group conscience regarding how their group will proceed. They certainly do not address every issue that may come up. This document is long and detailed because of the many issues relate to FTF and electronic meetings which we have never had to consider before. Please make time to read it and share among members. Remember this is an ongoing discussion and all decisions will have to be made in conjunction with the facilities in which your group meets adhering to local, state, and federal guidelines.

Some of the topic addressed are:

- ✓ Group issues while being a temporary electronic meeting:
 - How long can a meeting choose to stay as an electronic meeting? How can the meeting best attract and serve newcomers? Who can participate in group decisions? How can the meeting continue to collect funds for the 7th tradition? What action does the meeting need to take to permanently become an electronic meeting?
- ✓ Use of copyrighted Al-Anon conference approved literature in virtual meetings.
- ✓ Transitioning back to a face to face (FTF) meeting.
 - Can the FTF meeting meet the local public health requirements? How will the meeting satisfy requirements for possible contact tracing? Does the meeting facility have their own requirements? Can the meeting provide social distancing for all attendees? Can the meeting provide for safe handling of physical objects by attendees? Are members willing to perform sanitizing and other required tasks?
- ✓ Issues involved with hybrid, combined in-person and electronic, meetings.
 - Does the facility provide the technology required, such as Wi-Fi?
 - Are there members willing to handle new roles, such as technology support?
 - Will some roles and duties only be available to members who attend in person?

Remember, an informed Group Conscience is the way to address all concerns. Please refer to the following Q&A.

Love in service,

Idalia R, Area Delegate

Phil B, Area Alternate Delegate

Joe D, Area Chairperson

Dolores M, Area Secretary

Charles L, Area Treasurer

***SPECIAL NOTE:** Please look on the last page for directions on how to obtain the free, downloadable Conference Approved Literature (CAL) on the World Service website, www.al-anon.org, referred to in this letter.

Questions & Answers

Question 1: *Our face-to-face (FTF) meeting switched to a web-based platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. How long can we stay with that format before we have to go back to FTF?*

Answer 1: Many virtual meetings (Zoom, GoToMeeting, etc.) were created in response to the need within our fellowship for members to meet “online” while we were instructed to “shelter in place” by public health officials. Using a virtual platform as a substitute for FTF was intended to be temporary.

There is no time limit imposed on these temporary meetings at this time. It is possible that groups in our Area could continue to meet only virtually for many more months, if/until all of the members of the group feel confident that they can meet in person without concern about COVID-19. Some ongoing considerations regarding meeting virtually are:

- **Registration**—your meeting would continue to use its current WSO ID# in all communications with the District, Area and WSO. The Link to the meeting’s virtual component could be posted on the local AIS office website or Area website. The Link might also be shared among regular group members (not a public site) provided that there is some way for newcomers in your geographic area have access to the link.
- **Access/Newcomers**—At the present time, many meetings have posted links to their temporary virtual meetings on AIS and Area websites. Members are encouraged to discuss (in a business meeting) the group procedures for safely sharing the link to their virtual meeting. We want to ensure that newcomers in your geographic area can find and participate in your meeting, just as you would if you were still meeting FTF. One way to accomplish this is to create a group email address specifically for newcomers and others to contact the group in order to be given the link to your meeting and password (if necessary).

***SPECIAL NOTE:** We have been informed that some groups may be using the special features of virtual meetings to limit attendance to only the members who had previously attended their FTF meeting, and to screen out members they don’t know. While it is legitimate to address safety concerns and not post the links to your meeting publicly, it is even more important that the primary purpose of Al-Anon continue to be front and center for all groups: **to welcome and give comfort to families and friends of alcoholics.**

Our traditions are clear: the only requirement for membership is that there be a problem of alcoholism in a relative or a friend. Excluding Al-Anon members or newcomers from meetings is not in keeping with Al-Anon’s Traditions and principles.

- **Representation and Voting:** Any and all decisions regarding your meeting’s format, ensuring access for newcomers, etc., are appropriately decided by reasoning things out with one another through an informed group conscience. Some meetings hold regular business meetings, while others schedule them as needed.

If your meeting is attracting large numbers of Al-Anon members from outside our geographic area, the question of who has a voice and a vote on group matters can become very complicated, very quickly. Our Service Manual notes it is within the autonomy of each group to decide who votes in group matters. *“Many groups request that only members who regularly attend the meeting vote at the group business meeting. Members who regularly attend more than one group may want to consider at which group to vote on District or Area matters, keeping in mind that our principles are spiritual and voting on an issue more than once could be viewed as trying to control or dominate the outcome”* (p 51 Service Manual)

If you have been attracting members from outside the Maryland/DC area, you may want to discuss whether members outside our geographic region will have a voice and/or vote on local issues. Many District and Area policies and procedures (such as Alateen safety issues, Area Elections, Area Bylaws, etc.,) are only of local concern. Al-Anon Information Service (AIS) matters only affect local meetings.

- **Literature** (See Q&A # 2 Below)
- **7th Tradition**—As is true for every area of group business, the decision about how to collect 7th Tradition and when to distribute “surplus” funds to the service arms is decided by the group members and each group’s Treasurer. The Group Treasurer should continue to give regular reports regarding group contributions and expenses (as was done at FTF meetings). The Group decides the methods of contributing to the group during this time when it is not possible to make cash contributions and how to pay for the virtual meeting subscription.
 - a. Rotation of leadership could address both **a)** who is paying for the virtual meeting account, and **b)** who is hosting the meeting? The group’s members (versus the virtual account holder) decides these issues.

Question 2: *While we are using a temporary virtual platform, what reading materials can be used/displayed?*

Answer 2: **First and foremost, only Al-Anon/Alateen CAL is used in Al-Anon/Alateen meetings.**

- Retyping our literature into a Word document/PDF and sending that to other members and/or sharing it on the screen during a virtual meeting is a copyright violation!
- Every member of the meeting can go the WSO website and have direct access to an online Service Manual at any time via a phone or computer, which allows our members to read directly from our CAL.
- For more information please see the Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual, 2018-2021 Version 2 pages 63, 89 and 111-116. Also see the pamphlet “Why Conference Approved Literature (P-35)
- *What is okay to display on a screen during our meeting?*
 - CAL that is available to be viewed/downloaded from WSO’s website (www.al-anon.org) may be displayed. Our Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual 2018-2021 Version 2 (Pg 24-27) contains everything needed for the meeting’s format, such as Suggested Welcome, Steps, Traditions, Closing, etc. The Al-Anon Focus/Declaration Table Card (S-24) is a Service Tool that can be “displayed” by holding it up to the meeting host’s camera on his/her computer/phone
- *What about scanning/photocopying/retyping other pieces of CAL Literature or excerpts from a page of CAL to be displayed on screen?*
 - This is a violation of the Copyright! Copyright laws do not support posting excerpts from Conferenced Approved Literature (CAL) even for registered meetings. By doing this, CAL could be reproduced and modified. (This is how daily readers ended up online years ago and were sold by outside entities). Any CAL can be read aloud directly from the literature by the participants, just as in FTF meetings.

***SPECIAL NOTE:** While the scanning, photocopying, and retyping of CAL might seem harmless, the problem is that members have taken liberties such as adding graphics and even changing the wording. Most CAL states *“All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.”* We all need to respect WSO copyrights.

Question 3: *We have members concerned about returning to their FTF meeting due to a variety of factors, such as their age, health conditions, young children at home. What are things our group needs to consider regarding “reopening” FTF meetings?*

Answer 3: There is a lot to consider! A group conscience or group inventory would need to consider a variety of concerns. Some of those are:

- Have public health officials in your area given the “ok” for groups of people to begin meeting FTF in your city/county? If so, what are the local restrictions (i.e., number of people, face masks, physical spacing, use of sanitizer, etc.)?
- Has the facility at which you meet re-opened? If so, do they have their own restrictions that are more rigorous than the public health restrictions? We have heard of some facilities requiring that: no food/drinks are allowed in the room; all people entering the room must have their temperature taken; all surfaces, handles, doorknobs must be wiped down with disinfectant wipes before/after the meeting.
- Does the room in which you meet allow you to maintain the “social distancing” requirements of your locale and/or meeting location? What will you do if more numbers arrive than your limit?
- How will you handle literature—both selling it and using it? Will literature for readings be passed from member to member to read aloud? Will members be required to wear gloves if handling literature? Might members read the readings off their phones?
- Will members be allowed to use the bathrooms? If yes, are you required to disinfect the area used?
- How will you “pass the basket”? Instead of physically passing it around, perhaps one person walks around with it? Or perhaps it is placed on a table for members to go up to?
- For meetings outside on a parking lot or lawns, can people hear each other? Will they have access to a restroom?
- Do you have enough Group members willing to be of service and responsible for the additional tasks involved with COVID-19 restrictions/requirements?

- Is there a requirement or need for your group to have a person to communicate with local Contact Tracers if the need arises? Do you establish a Contact Tracer Liaison as a service position? Do members have a concern how this affects anonymity vs public health?

Following are some related concerns that some meetings are considering. It will be up to each of your groups to decide how to proceed if you do decide to have a Contact Tracer Liaison:

- Perhaps attendees sign in by first name, last initial, and telephone number or email. The Contact Tracer Liaison could save the list for a period, such as 30 days, and destroy it afterwards.
- One suggestion was for the group to give attendees a piece of paper with the Contact Tracer Liaison's name and contact information on it.
- If implemented, what will the group do if an attendee refuses to sign in?
- If you have a sign in sheet, how do you physically protect those signing in? Do attendees bring their own pens? Do you wipe shared pens down after use?
- What if an attendee gets sick and is tested? Some groups are mandating:
 - That person should contact the Contact Tracer Liaison, let them know they are being tested AND call them back with the results.
 - If there is a positive test result, the Contact Tracer Liaison then informs everyone who was at a meeting with this person in the last month and advises them "a member is sick and being tested, you should self-quarantine and get tested". No names should be provided/released.
 - If this situation arises with your group, will you continue to hold FTF meetings or will you suspend them? How will you communicate that information?
 - If you yourself tests positive and have contact with your Health Department, you do not need to break your anonymity or anyone else's. You can simply say you were at a "spiritual gathering" and "here is the person's name who can provide you all of my contacts there" and give them the Contact Tracer Liaison's information.
 - If a member is contacted by a Health Department, the only information they are going to provide is "you have come in contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 and need to self-quarantine and get tested". This could have been anyone – family member, friend, co-worker.

Question 4: *Can we hold a “hybrid” meeting (a meeting that is both FTF and virtual), at the same day and time/simultaneously? And can we do that indefinitely?*

Answer 4: Your currently registered in-person meeting could potentially go back to meeting FTF and attempt to add a simultaneous electronic component. Some groups may wish to experiment with a “hybrid” model until it is safe to meet only in person. Before doing so, it is crucial that your members discuss this at a business meeting: “How do we hold a hybrid meeting and honor our legacies without diluting our program or compromising our principles?”

Below are only a few of the many issues your group will need to consider:

- Does the meeting location support the technology (such as Wi-Fi) that would be needed? Is there a member willing/able to attend the FTF meeting to handle the technology issues? Will this member attend consistently?
- Will the technological component be audio only or both audio and video?
- Do you have enough members to handle the group’s service roles (including new ones added due to COVID-19) if the group is split between two venues?
- **Participation:** Will everyone be able to hear each other? How will members signal that they want to share? Will all members have equal access to sharing?
- **Representation and Voting:** The issues we addressed above in Q&A #1 apply here. Since the electronic meeting will become an adjunct to the FTF meeting, it would be appropriate to consider:
 - How and with whom will you share the access to the virtual link? The meeting link might be shared only locally.
 - How to ensure that local newcomers can find both your FTF location and its electronic link?
 - How will you determine if members who want to join virtually do live within the Maryland/DC area?
 - If you have members attending virtually who live in our Area, but not in your District, how will you handle their voice and vote.
- How will you protect the anonymity of members in the FTF and those joining virtually?
- How will you handle the 7th Tradition, so your meeting is self-supporting and able to contribute to our service arms? Will you have enough contributions to pay rent at the physical location as well as pay for the virtual platform, especially with fewer in attendance at first?

***SPECIAL NOTE:** There is no WSO process or policy in place at this time to register a new AI-Anon/Alateen meeting that meets both FTF and electronically simultaneous (at the same day/time). Face-to-Face meetings and permanent electronic Meetings are part of two separate service structures (see question 5).

Question 5: *Our group members like meeting virtually and want to continue doing that permanently without returning to meeting FTF. Can we do that?*

Answer 5: Yes, you can. However, if your meeting is considering this alternative—only meeting virtually now and in the future—please read through the points below carefully so that you understand how that will impact your group and your connection to your District and Area!

Your Electronic Meeting would become a completely new meeting!

- Your current FTF meeting will be disbanded. Your former WSO identification number will become “inactive”.
- You would register your Electronic Meeting (EM) as a new meeting with WSO.
- Your new EM would be given a new WSO identification number.
- The Link to your EM would be posted on the WSO website, along with all of the other EM meetings listed here: [https://al-anon.org/al-anon.meetings/electronic meetings/](https://al-anon.org/al-anon.meetings/electronic%20meetings/).
- **Access to your new, EM meeting:**
 - All EMs are posted on the WSO website and are accessible to all members and have no geographic boundaries.
 - This meeting would be open/accessible to all Al-Anon members around the world.
- **Representation of your meeting:**
 - Your EM would register with a Current Mailing Address (CMA)—a Group member who becomes your link/connection with the WSO. The CMA participates in quarterly conference calls with the WSO.
 - Your group would no longer have representation at the local level, as you will no longer be “local” but “international”. Your groups connection to the District by a GR will no longer exist. As an individual Al-Anon member, you may have a voice at District and Area meetings (through participation in other, in-person, local meetings), but your EM Group, as a Group, will not have a voice or vote at District/Area meetings. EMs do not have GR’s only CMAs. The direct link of service for the Electronic Meeting is to the WSO through the EM’s CMA.
- **Literature:**
 - When Electronic Meeting register, they agree to abide by the Traditions just as FTF meetings do: only CAL is used during EMs.
 - EMs can request a yearly license to quote CAL, limited to “short excerpts (maximum one paragraph) from Conference Approved Literature (CAL) in text format in their meetings.” See Electronic Al-Anon Meeting Guidelines (G-39).
- **7th Tradition**—all funds beyond those needed to pay for the EM electronic link would go directly to WSO, the only service arm serving the EMs.

A few additional notes...

LITERATURE FOR YOUR VIRTUAL MEETINGS: If you do not currently have the literature we have referred to, please access the WSO website and follow these prompts to locate and download it. These CAL selections are free to download by going to: www.al-anon.org.

- **Service Manual Readings P24-27:** Place your cursor over MEMBERS, click MEMBER RESOURCES, click MANUALS AND GUIDELINES, click AL-ANON/ALATEEN SERVICE MANUAL. As you will see, it is very easy to navigate through the Manual using the arrows to turn the pages and to use the “search” feature to go directly to the readings you use at your meetings.
- **Al-Anon Guidelines:** Access all the Al-Anon Guidelines from the MANUALS AND GUIDELINES page.
- **Pamphlets:** Free downloadable: <https://al-anon.org/for-members/members-resources/literature/downloadable-items/>
 - Are You Troubled by Someone’s Drinking? (S-17)
 - Did You Grow Up With a Problem Drinker? (S-25)
 - Detachment (S-19)
 - Welcome Checklist for Newcomers
- **Other Items available to download for free:**
 - Fact Sheet For Electronic Meetings (S-60)—for registered permanent Electronic Meetings (S-60)—for registered, permanent Electronic Meetings: <https://al-anon.org/for-members/group-resources/grouprecords/electronic-meeting-change/>
 - Talk about Safety in Al-Anon Meetings! (Member—Group Resources)

These are only some of the issues where members will be “reasoning things out” with one another. We urge you to make a well-informed group conscience keeping the principles of the program at heart as well as the safety of everyone involved. We greatly appreciate you sharing this important information with your group.

Knowledge Based Decision Making (KBDM) is the process that the Area uses at our Area World Service Committee (AWSC) meetings, Steering Committee meetings and Assemblies to come to an informed group conscience. If you are interested in further information about KBDM please reach out to Area Officers/Steering Committee or any of our Past Delegates listed in the Al-Anon-Cer.

Remember to take your Higher Power into each discussion. Do not hesitate to reach out to any of us. Thank you.