

■ Meeting Uncertainty with Resiliency: G.S.O. in the Pandemic

“As a result of Coronavirus (COVID-19), New York State has shut down 100% of operations of ‘nonessential’ businesses/ organizations,” the announcement posted to aa.org read. “The General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., located at 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY is closed, effective March 20, 2020, until further notice.”

Given the toll that COVID-19 was already exacting on the New York metropolitan area, this announcement was not unexpected. Nonetheless, it was a first: never in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous had the General Service Office — whose antecedents stretch all the way back to the late 1930s and Bill W.’s small office at Honor Dealers in Newark, N.J. — been forced to shutter its doors. G.S.O. is home to 95 employees of A.A.W.S., plus a dozen more working for AA Grapevine. These men and women, both alcoholic and nonalcoholic, serve a worldwide membership of over two million alcoholics in myriad ways: answering letters, preparing bulletins, keeping prison inmate correspondence flowing, processing group contributions, providing new literature (and keeping older literature up to date), helping prepare for the General Service Conference and World Service Meetings, preserving A.A. history in print and digital archives, and maintaining the aa.org website, in three languages, with its 14 million yearly viewers.

As the pandemic worsened, G.S.O. faced an unprecedented logistical, technical and, yes, spiritual challenge. With employees scattered to their homes, how would it continue to fulfill its original function, as described by Bill W., of being a “point of reference on the globe where our few but important universal services can focus and then radiate to all who wish to be informed or helped”?

Even before the New York shutdown order, says G.S.O. General Manager Greg T., “In the first week in March, we formed a task force comprised of myself and senior management and staff. The welfare of our employees and their families was paramount in all of the thinking and planning.” Working to help G.S.O. prepare for the coming crisis was Stephanie L., G.S.O.’s Senior Director of Administration and Strategy.

“As the news of the health crisis developed,” says Stephanie, “we started to forecast and think about how we could move forward. We actually thought we had more time, which we obviously didn’t. The Human Resources department was very important in everything we did. Prior to our closing the office on March 20, we had already said to employees, ‘If you are not comfortable coming in, talk to your supervisor and we’ll arrange to ship your equipment now.’ So, actually, from March 13 to March 20, folks exited at their discretion. By March 19, it was very much a skeleton crew here.”

Another major area of concentration, Stephanie relates, was technology. “Our workforce was not necessarily equipped for remote working,” she says. “We looked at the tools we had on hand, ordered printers and monitors, and then the shelter-in-place order came down from the governor [New York governor Andrew Cuomo] and we had to leave quickly. The order for printers and monitors never arrived. And this was where the true agility of the Information Technology department came in.”

G.S.O. Technology Services Director Lorna Graham (nonalcoholic) was only hired to her full-time position on February 3 — just in time for a historic pandemic. It sounds daunting — and it was — but G.S.O. did have one important advantage. “By the time I arrived, the team was in the clean-up phase of a multi-year project to migrate to a cloud-based platform for business operations. This meant we didn’t have to give access to servers, and we were able to seamlessly move people to their home offices.”

Although, of course, it wasn’t all that seamless. “I joke that laptops were the toilet paper of the business world: as we tried to set people



Meeting Guide

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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.

up at home, I discovered you couldn't get them." Then there was the issue of the printers and monitors not arriving, and the fact that employees had what Lorna calls "their own tech mini-environments" at home, with different Internet service providers, different equipment and, sometimes, passwords that had been set up by their children — and that no one could remember.

Working with her staff of three — Dmitriy Kerget, Mili Alma-Noyola and Pedro Gonzalez (all nonalcoholic) — Lorna was able to address these issues. Pedro found himself driving to employees' homes to set up computers and printers and to facilitate connectivity with the office. "This was actually a whole team effort by the entire office," Lorna says. "Many employees were taking equipment home, so we were coordinating with their department managers to box it up and get it ready. I am really grateful and thankful for my staff, who have worked just tirelessly."

As for the rest, Lorna says, "We are facing the problems that any other organization with a remote business environment is facing right now. Many people want a monitor or a wireless mouse or a webcam because some of their tech is outdated, and they have to be on Zoom or whatever all day. We're available to help at any time. We've also set up a daily Zoom meeting from 10 to 11 so anyone who has tech difficulties can pop in. Our goal is to continue to be able to respond as nimbly as possible."

The closing of G.S.O. came in a year that was to have featured A.A.'s 2020 International Convention in Detroit, Michigan. Regrettably, the Convention had to be canceled. Michele Grinberg, Class A (nonalcoholic) chair of the General Service Board, says, "This was one of the very early decisions on the table," in part because of vendor contracts. Greg T. adds that it was "unfortunate, but necessary." (As it turned out, Detroit became another COVID-19 "hot spot," and the TCF Center, where the International Convention was to take place, was turned

into a 900-bed hospital to care for those ill from the virus.) G.S.O. issued information concerning registration refunds on aa.org; according to Julio E., staff member on the International Conventions assignment, almost 1,000 would-be convention-goers told G.S.O. to keep the money and to contribute it to the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous for the U.S. and Canada.

The 70th General Service Conference was scheduled to take place in Rye, New York, during the week of April 18-25, but it became obvious this could not go on as usual either. On March 12, the General Service Board announced a "Virtual General Service Conference," a decision made in conjunction and consultation with G.S.O. According to Michele, "During the course of about a zillion Zoom calls, the three boards [the General Service Board, A.A.W.S. and AA Grapevine] worked together with the Fellowship with a goal of making sure the Conference delegates' voices were heard and that there would be a meaningful Conference."

Planning a virtual Conference was a complex undertaking, says Patrick C., staff Conference coordinator. "There are 135 Conference members. You've got a delegate from Hawaii and one from Newfoundland, so the time zone difference required us to pare down the daily schedule from no earlier than noon to no later than 7 p.m. Eastern Standard Time." And how much time could you ask even the most devoted trusted servant to spend hunched over a laptop? "Ultimately, we cut down our traditional seven-day event to four days, six hours a day, with breaks to avoid screen fatigue," Patrick says.

The complexities continued. With most corporations going to remote operations, virtual conference vendors were booked months in advance, so the decision was made to use Zoom Meeting Room and Zoom Webinar as a platform for the virtual Conference, whose date is now set for May 16-19. (See page 9 for a report and summary of Advisory Actions from the 70th General Service Conference.)

Next steps included deciding what was absolutely the most essential business of the Conference — streamlining it, in other words — without losing what Patrick calls "the spirit of the Conference, the unity and connectivity." A timesaving example: during the course of a regular Conference, there would normally be written reports from the three corporate boards as well as live presentations by the chair of each board. It was decided to pre-record videos of the board presentations and post them prior to Conference, so that Conference members could stream them beforehand or at their convenience.

All of this has been done remotely, of course — Patrick's kitchen in northern Manhattan has become a Conference information clearinghouse. From handling voting in a virtual space to determining the optimal tech capabilities of delegates (it turns out only a small percentage have needed to be trained), planning the Conference has been a "unique and fantastic experience," says Patrick. "We've worked with the board,

delegates and G.S.O. staff members, and everybody has been ready at each decision point to do what needs to be done.”

There are other G.S.O. employees inventing solutions to problems they never thought they would have to solve. A.A.W.S. Mail/Shipping Manager Aubrey Pereira (non-alcoholic) is one. He currently hosts the G.S.O. mailroom right in his Bronx apartment. “A courier service picks up the mail from the Grand Central Station post office box [Box 459] and delivers it to me on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays,” says Aubrey. “On Wednesdays, I go to the post office at 125th Street in Manhattan to get the mail for 475 Riverside Drive, which is the street address of the office. When I go to the post office, I mask up and glove up. I take the mail back to my apartment, and I use a disinfectant spray on it and let it sit for an hour.”

The mail consists of a combination of literature orders, contributions, notices from people who are updating addresses (some still do it on paper) and inmate mail, which goes to Brenda B. on the Corrections desk. There’s also mail for members of the senior management team and staff, and Aubrey either sends this to them via courier service or delivers it over to Zenaida Medina (nonalcoholic), Assistant Director of Finance, who scans it and then emails it to its intended recipient.

Naturally, Aubrey’s days are busy, even though he estimates he is getting half the mail he received prior to the pandemic, probably due to the fact that A.A.s are not meeting in groups or perhaps even going to the post office. “At some point,” Aubrey says, “we’ll return to some semblance of normalcy. Until then this is how we are dealing with it, just to keep the avenues of communication open to the Fellowship and to not have the mail completely stopped.”

Brenda B., on the Corrections assignment, is one of the beneficiaries of Aubrey’s work. Letters from inmates — 400 a month — arrive at her apartment via the courier service. She replies to each letter. “It depends on the letter and the request. Sometimes they say they are depressed, so I try to be as encouraging as possible.” The materials she might normally include with her replies — literature and copies of Grapevine — are out of reach in the mailroom at the office, but she managed to have a thousand copies of the spring issue of “Sharing From Behind The Walls” — the quarterly newsletter published by the Corrections assignment — shipped to her, and she inserts these with her replies. “I also updated the letter with the information that Grapevine is free and available on its website.”

When she is not occupied with inmate correspondence, Brenda is busy answering emails and phone calls from the Fellowship. It’s busy, but she’s grateful for two things. One is the chance to help the inmates — “They are our brothers and sisters behind the walls, and any one of us could be in their place.” Another is for her colleagues at G.S.O. “I am super grateful to be part of this wonderful team, making all this work.”

Working remotely has not impeded the goals of the Publishing department in any appreciable way, says Publishing Director David R. “In many ways the department — with its editorial, French and Spanish translation, print and digital production, mailing, warehousing and shipping, order entry, customer service, international licensing and translation review and intellectual property administration divisions — has never been more energized, creatively engaged and ardently committed to doing our part to share A.A.’s message via our literature.”

This is not to say it wasn’t a mad scramble for the first three weeks after the office shut down, with nonstop Zoom meetings, including on Saturdays and Sundays. “We moved mountains (and lots of desktops and printers!) to get our telework connections clicking; and with help from our stellar tech services leader, Lorna Graham, this was rather surprisingly painless,” says David.

Among the many current publishing projects moving forward is the 2020 catalog of Conference-approved literature and other A.A. material (with new, simplified pricing) — 110,000 copies of which have been printed to be inserted into all orders from A.A.’s literature warehouses. (It is also available as a PDF on aa.org). Newly produced audio book recordings of the Big Book and



Teleworking from home — one employee’s set up, including secure access to the office-wide VPN (virtual private network).

“Twelve and Twelve” (in English, French and Spanish) have recently been posted for listening on aa.org along with DVDs of those books in ASL. In mid-April, work on a “first-ever” project began: the studio recording of A.A. General Service Conference-approved pamphlets as read by professional voice actors. “The first pamphlet recorded in English, was, fittingly enough, ‘Access to A.A.: Members share on overcoming barriers,’” David says.

And in an essential change for an age of remote operations, David says, “We have gotten independent legal advice on how to move our international licensing of A.A.W.S.-copyrighted items of literature into streamlined electronic sharing and signing processes,” which will expedite the time-consuming procedure of sending signed documents to and from remote places. In all, David says, “We’ve never been more committed to getting the job done.”

At Grapevine, A.A.’s international journal, Publisher Albin Z. and Senior Editor Jon W. decided that the best thing they could do for the Fellowship was to “unlock” issues of Grapevine — normally available only to subscribers — on the new aagrapevine.org website. All A.A. members now have free access to Grapevine issues from January through May 2020. (La Viña issues are free January/February through May/June.)

“Grapevine is a place where people in A.A. share their experience, strength and hope,” says Albin. “Making this digitally available to everyone during this crisis can help them to stay connected.” Grapevine also posts all G.S.O. updates on the COVID-19 crisis on its website and carries pertinent tutorial videos on its YouTube channel, including one on how to prevent the digital platform

“bombings” that have plagued some meetings in recent weeks. Other Grapevine projects continue, including the “Daily Quote” book, reprinted in three languages. Originally prepared for the International Convention, the book will now be ready for sale to all members. Also moving forward is Grapevine’s timely project to make its content (magazines, books, audio books) available to prison inmates via tablets.

As the pandemic worsened and A.A. meetings began to close down around the country and the world, Racy J., on the Public Information (P.I.) assignment, received a “first wave” of media queries focused on how A.A.s might stay sober in an age of social distancing. The information she provided came from the shared experience of the Fellowship.

“Not being able to meet in person certainly has its challenges,” Racy says. “But what we communicate to the press is that from A.A.’s earliest beginnings, it has always been not so much a place, but a spiritual principle we live by. The experience of A.A.s grew from early members who had relatively few meetings to attend. Ways to stay sober could include a phone call, a letter in the mail, a Big Book. Anyone who is familiar with the Online Intergroup of A.A., the *Loners-Internationalists Meeting (LIM)* or people living in remote parts of the world knows that many alcoholics have long been meeting remotely.”

A second wave of media queries, mainly from local press outlets, focused on the experience of A.A.s on various digital meeting platforms, like Zoom, Google Hangouts or WhatsApp. “Media wanted to know how these were helping alcoholics stay sober — how they

■ Résumés for Trustees Election due January 1, 2021

Three new Class B (alcoholic) trustees — from the East Central and Southeast regions and the trustee-at-large/U.S. — will be elected at the General Service Conference in April 2021. Résumés must be received at G.S.O. no later than January 1, 2021, and must be submitted by delegates only.

The new East Central regional trustee will succeed Mark E., of Chesapeake, Ohio; the next Southeast regional trustee will follow Cathy B. of Morgantown, West Virginia. The new trustee-at-large/U.S. will fill the position currently held by Newton P., of Cary, North Carolina.

A sound A.A. background is a basic qualification for Class B trustees. Ten years of continuous sobriety is desirable but not mandatory. Candidates should be active in both local and area A.A. affairs and, because trustees serve the entire Fellowship, they require the background and the willingness to make decisions on matters of broad policy that affect A.A. as a whole.

Since much is asked of the trustees with respect to their time, it is important that trustee candidates understand the commitment of time required. Trustees are expected to attend three quarterly board weekends, with meetings running from Saturday morning through Monday noon; a quarterly meeting combined with the General Service Conference (seven days) in April; and any special meetings of the board. Regional trustees also serve in rotation for attendance at Regional Forums other than in their own regions. In addition, regional trustees are usually asked to serve two years on either the A.A.W.S. or AA Grapevine corporate boards, which meet more frequently than the General Service Board. Trustees serve on committees of the General Service Board and may also serve on trustees’ subcommittees or corporate board subcommittees, whose work often involves conference calls. They are often invited to participate in regional or area activities, such as service conferences, area assemblies, etc.

Trusteeship is for four one-year terms. Applicants are encouraged to discuss this time commitment with their family and employer. Trustees are reimbursed for travel, hotel and meal expenses.

compared to in-person meetings.” While handling national press inquiries, whenever possible, Racy directed inquiries to local P.I. committees. “There has been some wonderful coordination between local committees and the media,” she adds.

The third wave of media attention came with the advent of trolling attacks on the platforms where A.A.s were meeting. “Responding to these queries means walking a delicate line — sharing the experience of the Fellowship but not acknowledging or endorsing any particular platform,” which could represent a Sixth Tradition break.

In general, Racy feels, we are entering new territory with these widespread digital meetings. “I’m seeing in real time groups having the discussion as to how we can utilize these platforms to carry the message while retaining anonymity. There may in fact be a lack in our current service material that needs to be explored.”

G.S.O. Archivist Michelle Mirza (nonalcoholic) is making sure that none of the history of the pandemic as it relates to A.A. is lost to the Fellowship. She says that, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, news articles were coming in “at warp speed.” She continues, “There is nothing previously that has compared to this — not even 9/11, which was more localized. The very fact that this is affecting meetings globally is daily news. We’re receiving maybe ten news items a day.”

Archives no longer subscribes to a clipping service that sends in articles with A.A.-related topics. “Now we use Google Alerts, indexing certain terms like ‘A.A.’ ‘Big Book,’ etc.,” Michelle says. “We may not capture 100 percent of the articles, but what we miss, the Public Information assignment usually gets, and we work closely and exchange information. We are archiving samples of articles that mention A.A. and meetings or groups, along with ones that reference G.S.O. or intergroup. We are also transcribing some radio programs.”

Michelle and her group collect internal correspondence — sharing from members, as well as staff responses — and external communications sent out by G.S.O. She has also been hearing from a few archivists in California who have started a newsletter and invited local archivists and members to share pandemic-related material.

“Five years ago, if we were in this position,” Michelle says, “we would not have been able to function as we are functioning now. The last couple of years, we have been digitizing archives, scanning thousands of documents. Now we are able to do research at home, and we have desktop scanners to help us preserve all of this for the future. We are all really, really busy.”

Jeff W., staff member on the Group Services assignment, says that a good deal of his job is “to stay in touch with groups and help them be part of the service structure. But there are now literally hundreds or even thousands of new groups on these digital platforms.” And this is not even to mention the established groups that have transitioned to digital platforms.

“The people doing the truly heroic work here,” Jeff says, “are the intergroups, including Online Intergroup of A.A. They are all working tirelessly, coming up with new tech solutions. New York Inter-Group, for instance, has set up a Zoom Enterprise account and allows groups to use it to set up their own accounts for free. It can host groups with as many as a thousand participants per meeting.” (New York Inter-Group says in a note on its website, “Groups continue to run their own meetings, at their regular dates and times, with their usual group format. We simply provide the technology.”)

Jeff feels this is the “really amazing story” of the pandemic — A.A.s going to great lengths to make sure other A.A.s have access to meetings. But he is quick to point out the more difficult side of the steep economic downturn for intergroups. “We are hearing from intergroups that they may not have large enough prudent reserves to survive this — and they are not getting sales from literature as they normally might. Group contributions are down. Some are considering applying for the federal PayCheck Protection Program (PPP) loans for small businesses. They are calling us and asking, ‘How does this fit with the Seventh Tradition?’

“We don’t want to interpret Traditions for them. I provide sharing from delegates and regional trustees and from Archives on matters of finance. I remind them that it’s not just about the Seventh Tradition. The Fifth — keeping the doors open to carry the message — comes into play. As does the Fourth Tradition, concerning autonomy. It’s a tough call.”

Groups, too, are concerned about finances, focusing on the best way to collect Seventh Tradition contributions remotely. Jeff provides them with information about digital options available — in particular a *Box 4-5-9* article entitled “Passing the (Digital) Basket” (Winter 2017) — and feels that most groups are solving this problem relatively quickly.

Despite all these weighty issues, A.A. will always be A.A. — complaints come in from members about other members smoking during Zoom meetings, which upsets ex-smokers. Or even working out on Zoom calls. Sharing your experience, strength and hope, while on an exercise bike? Who would have thought?

Clement C. is Senior Manager of the new Communications Department, which acts as an internal agency supporting G.S.O., A.A.W.S., AA Grapevine and the General Service Board with various communication, digital projects and other initiatives. Like Jeff W., Clement has seen the Fellowship step up during the crisis to find innovative ways to reach out to other A.A.s. “TIAA [Technology in A.A.] Forum is sharing information in all kinds of ways to help people communicate online,” he says.

Clement is on the Meeting Guide app committee (for more on the Meeting Guide, see “The Meeting Guide App,” *Box 4-5-9*, Fall 2019). “There are separate volunteers who support the app, who are not a part of



Temporary mailroom set up by the A.A.W.S. mail/shipping supervisor in his apartment in the Bronx. The daily mail includes literature orders, contributions, update correspondence and inmate mail.

Jeff W. says the staff desk rotations have a huddle every day at 1:15. “Whoever is available can call and share information. It’s serious, because there’s so much new that is happening, but there are also some laughs. This has been one of the lifesavers.”

“One thing obviously missing from all of this,” David R. says, “is the ability to pop into the office next door and have a quick conversation. The success of telework depends on having all of those connections that would be spontaneous during the course of the day in a physical office, those impromptu one-on-ones. So much is happening, but we have the ability to connect with each other so quickly — via Zoom, phone calls, whatever — that I don’t think we have actually

lost much of that spontaneity.”

Despite the successful move to remote working, the question lingers: What next?

There are no definitive answers, says Greg T. “I’m only guessing at this point, but by the last week in May or the first week in June, we could be on the path to a partial return. In that case, I would anticipate that our daily schedules would be adjusted to ensure the building is social-distanced.” Coincidentally, G.S.O., currently on the 11th floor at 475 Riverside Drive, had planned to take space on the eighth floor later in the summer, which, should the staff be able to return, will provide the opportunity for more social distancing.

Greg is also aware of concerns about the financial sustainability of the General Service Office. “Obviously, we’ve never been in this position before, but the General Service Board Reserve Fund was created decades ago by our wise and prudent predecessors for just such a moment, to make sure the entire business survives and maintains continuity. In an emergency, the Reserve Fund is funded up to about nine months of operating expenses, and we are going to be drawing down from it over the next three to four months, before we start to get back on our feet again.”

In terms of group contributions, G.S.O. accepts Seventh Tradition contributions via PayPal and will be testing Venmo and other platforms, many of which the groups are already using. As always with Alcoholics Anonymous, “money and spirituality mix in the basket,” even if that basket is a virtual one.

Beau B., of Neptune, N.J., has devoted much of his tenure as a Class B (alcoholic) trustee to working to promote A.A. connection and growth — to finding fresh approaches to helping suffering alcoholics — particularly through technology.

the service structure,” says Clement. “They were able to add fields to their plug-in with conference call phone numbers and Zoom meeting information. When Josh R., who designed the app, became aware of this, we moved it forward in the committee to get approval to update the information.”

It has been a hectic time for Communications, especially in the first few weeks after the G.S.O. closure. There was new information on aa.org that needed to be updated on a regular basis — information about the closure of the office, the cancellation of the Convention, and the General Service Conference going virtual. Clement and his group worked with the P.I. assignment to create the first press release dealing with virtual meetings and social media. Many people thought G.S.O. was no longer taking literature orders, so a notice was created on how they could use the online store to order.

“It seemed like everything we were saying had a shelf life of two to three days and then needed to be changed,” Clement says.

Any organization as tight-knit as the General Service Office lives not just by work alone, but also by human contact. “One of the things I am really most proud about is the communication that we have maintained throughout this time,” says Stephanie L. “We have weekly senior management meetings where we share information with senior leaders. We also have department meetings. I’m very happy with the way we connect and communicate.”

Whether on Zoom, Google Teams or Slack, the internal meetings have become incredibly important to G.S.O. employees isolated in their homes. Greg T. has set up a general manager’s Zoom meeting on a weekly basis; there is usually 100 percent attendance. Dubbed the “huddle,” this meeting is echoed in numerous smaller huddles within departments throughout the week.

“COVID-19 will not stop us from doing A.A.,” he says. “All the way up and down the A.A. triangle, you’re seeing people adapting, finding a way. One thing you’re seeing in groups are these new service roles popping up, practically overnight — for example, the online coordinator who makes sure the meeting is set up properly, so that the leader can lead a meeting. Often these are people who maybe haven’t been involved in service, but they know their way around IT and they show up.”

The current crisis, Beau thinks, is helping us use the Traditions “to think about how we *can* do things, rather than as reasons why we cannot.” Staying at home and attending online meetings may help us redefine singleness of purpose and give us more understanding of those with accessibility issues. Looking at a Zoom meeting in gallery view, Beau says, “We see a quilt of people — everyone in their own homes, the diversity of the members. There is a wall between us, yet not. When meetings end with a closing prayer, it sounds awful and ragged and yet I love it. I feel it as touching and spiritual.”

Stressors abound. A.A.s and their families face the same devastating toll of illness and economic hardship as the rest of the world. Newcomers face difficult hurdles when it comes to connecting with our potentially lifesaving program. But, Beau says, “I am not worried about A.A. being forever changed by this in terms of who we are as a people and what we value the most — carrying the message and helping each other. A.A. thrives in uncertainty. When times are soft and comfortable, we fight about comma placement. In times of trouble, people stand up and show up, and say, ‘Give me a bucket and a shovel.’”

■ Opening for Three Class A (nonalcoholic) Trustees

Following the 2021 General Service Conference there will be openings for three Class A (nonalcoholic) trustees, replacing Michele Grinberg, of Charleston, West Virginia; Leslie Backus, of Savannah, Georgia; and Peter Luongo, of Germantown, Maryland. The trustees’ Nominating Committee asks that trustees, delegates and directors submit any names they deem appropriate as candidates for Class A trustees. Class A trustees are chosen from a variety of professional backgrounds, including doctors, lawyers, clergy, social workers, educators, finance/accounting and corrections professionals. In seeking applications for all vacancies at A.A.W.S., Inc., AA Grapevine, Inc., and the General Service Board, the Fellowship is committed to creating a large applicant file of qualified persons reflecting the inclusiveness and diversity of A.A. itself. Please submit your candidate’s business or professional résumé to the Secretary, trustees’ Nominating Committee (nominating@aa.org), by July 24, 2020.

C.P.C.:

Reaching Out Virtually

According to A.A.’s 2014 Membership Survey, 57 percent of members said they were referred to Alcoholics Anonymous by a “counselor, medical or mental health professional,” which is one of the reasons Cooperation with the Professional Community (C.P.C.) committees are so crucial to Twelfth Step work. Even before the current pandemic, C.P.C. chairs were working hard to find a way for C.P.C. committees across North America to exchange meaningful information and best practices via digital means.

Two such C.P.C. chairs are David L., Area 67 (Southeast Texas), and Bill C., Area 83 (Eastern Ontario). Sober since 2013, David became interested in connecting C.P.C. groups in October 2019, when he heard about a committee in western Washington that was doing Twelfth Step calls to hospitals when doctors notified them that alcoholics came in seizing or otherwise displaying withdrawal symptoms. “It was work that interested me,” David says, “because it is so much like Bill and Bob back in the old days — finding A.A. #3, working in hospital settings. We heard there were other C.P.C. committees doing that type of work in California and Canada, and so we started the process of setting that up in Houston. And then we had the thought, what else can we learn from other groups?”

That’s when David instituted Zoom conference calls between C.P.C. committees, partly in order to connect and to share experience. As of January of this year, the Zoom meeting is open not only to southeastern Texas, but to committees across North America: “We have had 30 to 40 people on these calls, from Washington State, Florida, New York, the Carolinas, as well as Canada,” says David.

One of the Canadians on the calls was Bill C. of Ottawa, sober since 2010. As part of his work outside A.A., he became familiar with Zoom and other means of connecting people online. “I’m a fan,” he says. When he became Area 83 C.P.C. chair in January 2019, Bill instituted a quarterly C.P.C. Zoom meeting, connecting district C.P.C. chairs in order to augment and update the information they exchanged at spring and fall assemblies. “It was also for people who can’t get to the assemblies,” he says. “Area 83 is a large piece of geography; not everyone has the ability to meet in person.”

With social distancing currently in place, no one can meet in person, which is why Bill and David’s work has been so timely. Diana L., the C.P.C./Treatment coordinator at G.S.O., says that she’d been aware before the current crisis that some groups in Canada and the U.S. were meeting via digital means. But now it’s the only way they can meet.

“With things the way they are now, it’s really spreading — whether we meet on Zoom or Google Hangouts or

other platforms. It isn't the same as it was, because what has happened is obviously very disruptive, but C.P.C. committees are still helping professionals find local A.A. meetings, still being that local resource and contact. The means have changed. The intent is the same."

At Area 67's monthly C.P.C. Zoom meeting in early April, C.P.C. committee chairs shared ideas such as sending emails to social workers and counselors, and reaching out to case managers at treatment centers and offering Zoom Big Book or topic meetings specifically tailored to their particular facility. Suzanne B., South Florida (Area 15) secretary/treasurer, describes presenting to University of Tampa nursing students via a Zoom meeting. "In lieu of our in-person handouts, I spent time explaining the aa.org website. They were given the exact pamphlet name and number along with how to find the 'A.A. for Healthcare Professionals' video. The entire presentation, including Q&A, lasted 40 minutes."

Bill C. in Ottawa notes that the C.P.C. committee of District 28, Area 83, had similar success presenting via Zoom to a local college. "This is a great way to say that A.A. is in our community, available and there for your clients," Bill says. "There are limitations, of course. Now is not a great time to reach out to physicians and local healthcare providers, who have their hands full. Security concerns need to be addressed. And there is a key concern about how to reach the newcomer coming down the health or treatment pipeline who is showing up to his or her first virtual meeting. What does that feel like to a newcomer? We don't quite know yet, but we can still reach out, not just digitally, but by making that phone call."

The voice of A.A., in other words, is still there, even if the physical presence is, for the time being, on mute.

■ Mobile Intergroup — An Outreach Tool

On a cool Tennessee afternoon in February 2020 (when A.A.s gathered in person — before Coronavirus closures), Rebekah R., office manager of the East Tennessee Intergroup of Alcoholics Anonymous (ETIAA), along with a few A.A. volunteers, showed up a few hours before a scheduled event, unloaded and unpacked boxes of items, and began setting up displays. In the weeks prior to the event, flyers were passed out advertising a "Mobile Intergroup Workshop." Now, thanks to the flyers and word of mouth, curious and interested A.A.s were gathered in front of the table. While a volunteer filmed the entire workshop (without showing faces, of course), Rebekah took her place behind the displays of books, pamphlets, information boards and other assorted items. She greeted the crowd and began to speak about how to bring intergroup — and, more importantly, *why* to bring intergroup — to your event.

She shared a condensed overview of an intergroup: "The purpose of an intergroup is to facilitate Twelfth Step work. That is our main purpose. It is why we have a hotline — to get people together to do Twelfth Step calls." Briefly, she described the difference between an intergroup and the General Service Office: "We [intergroup] do the things individual groups can't do, like set up a hotline number, carry lots of literature, and keep our meeting information up to date in the Meeting Guide app. We make it easier for A.A.s in our area to carry out Twelfth Step work." While G.S.O. also makes Twelfth Step work possible, she pointed out, "They do things an intergroup can't, like publishing books and running the General Service Conference."

The purpose of the Mobile Intergroup Workshop was not only to communicate the functions of an intergroup, but also to show area A.A.s that they, too, could join their intergroup and extend its reach by bringing it to their area events — literally. Gesturing to the tables laden with information, books and other items, Rebekah said, "Although it may look like our mobile intergroup is just selling things, our main focus is to be of service, especially to areas that cannot get to us easily." The ETIAA provides coverage for seven districts within Area 64 (Tennessee), which includes 25 counties with approximately 120-150 groups and 400-500 meetings per week.

While a still-suffering alcoholic may first hear A.A.'s message from any one of a number of sources, for many A.A. members, it was someone at a local intergroup or central office who answered their first shaky call asking for help and who communicated A.A.'s message of hope and recovery. Intergroup was the "hand of A.A." that was ready and waiting to be extended when that drunk gathered up the courage to call. The mobile intergroup, according to Rebekah, improves communication because it is an "outreach tool for intergroup. Using it, we can tell people about intergroup so that they can use us. If they don't know we're here, they can't use us."

As Bill W. said in an address to the 1960 General Service Conference, "When you think about it, A.A. is a unique means of communication: our lives have depended on communication; our unity depends on communication; our function depends on communication. Everything has hung on this business of communication." (*Our Great Responsibility*, pp. 101-102).

Using ability and imagination, A.A.s have communicated the message of hope and recovery in a multitude of ways — and through a multitude of outlets. In this spirit, ETIAA has posted the workshop on YouTube so anyone interested in using mobile intergroups to help carry the A.A. message can learn more. The workshop has been posted in two parts: "Mobile Intergroup Workshop Part One" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GAwTtL6QU8>) and "Mobile Intergroup Workshop Training Part Two" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QPnzowN1Kg>).

■ The 70th General Service Conference Convenes

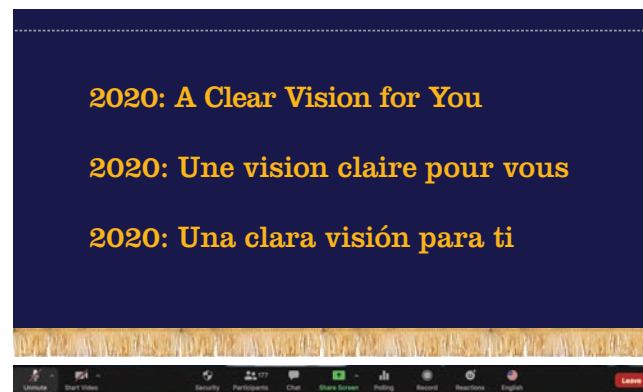
With a little help from our friends — a handful of tech consultants, Zoom operators and meeting “ushers” — the 70th General Service Conference convened virtually on Saturday, May 16, 2020. Originally scheduled for the third week in April, the annual Conference for the U.S./Canada service structure was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, opening the door to a historic first: digitally drawing together 135 Conference members from Hawaii to Newfoundland, across multiple time zones, in three languages, to do the business of A.A. in the U.S. and Canada.

Getting to this historic moment did not happen overnight, and the process began with the difficult decision of the General Service Board not to hold the Conference in person in New York, as had been done for the previous 69 Conferences. It was a decision made after long and thoughtful consideration, even with no obvious alternative visible on the uncertain horizon of the worldwide pandemic.

Closely following that decision, the wheels began turning in search of a viable alternative — one that would hold in balance the multiple schedules, language needs, technical capabilities and differing digital skills of Conference members and non-voting logistical and support staff. With input from all quarters, solutions to the many challenges began to coalesce, with dates reset, schedules drawn up, digital practice sessions undertaken, and tech training offered to those who might need it.

Following the determination from the General Service Board that only “essential business” would be undertaken by this virtual Conference — with “essential business” defined to include Conference committee meetings and reports, board reports, trustee elections, a few presentations, and debate and voting on Conference committee recommendations — one of the initial concerns focused on how to condense and transition a sprawling agenda originally scheduled for a six-day, in-person Conference into a four-day, virtual Conference, with limited time available for meetings and discussion. To accommodate this new, tighter format, each Conference committee met via Zoom prior to the rescheduled Conference to make a detailed evaluation of their original agendas and to pare them down to a manageable size given the narrower time frame. No items were tossed, and any item that didn’t fit on the abbreviated agenda was automatically forwarded to the 71st General Service Conference in 2021.

There is more to the General Service Conference than business, however, and another principal challenge was determining how to enable the interpersonal connectivity so vital to the spiritual nature of the Conference itself. With no hotel hallways to wander or to congregate in, no meals shared around communal tables, no post-meeting ice cream adventures on the streets of New York City or the wooded pathways in Rye, how could



participants build the kind of fellowship on which we alcoholics thrive — and which is critical to the work of the Conference?

With this in mind, a number of events were built into the schedule to allow for some measure of social connectivity and personal sharing, starting with a half-hour digital hospitality session each day and followed by the virtual Serenity Group meeting each morning. Additionally, a Gratitude Booth was set up for Conference members to record two-minute messages for other Conference members; and many attendees spent their time during scheduled breaks and before meetings in front of their computers spotlighted in their Zoom squares dancing to music selected by the tech director and sending messages back and forth through the Zoom chat feature. And, not to be outdone, G.S.O. staff member Irene D. hosted a virtual DJ dance party and ice cream social one evening, featuring a musical journey through the years, from Bill Haley and the Comets, the Ronettes, the Funkadelics and the Bee Gees to Pharrell Williams singing “Happy.”

On a deeper level, as noted by Tom A., rotating West Central regional trustee, in his keynote address, spirituality could be found in the challenges of the Conference itself and the issues facing the Fellowship as a whole. “I’d suggest to you that our unique situation with this virtual Conference provides us with many opportunities for spiritual growth,” he said in a prerecorded video message for all Conference members. “Yes, there are fresh problems and let’s hope few if any acute perils, but regardless, our unity is paramount in envisioning the future and architecting the structure to accomplish our tasks.”

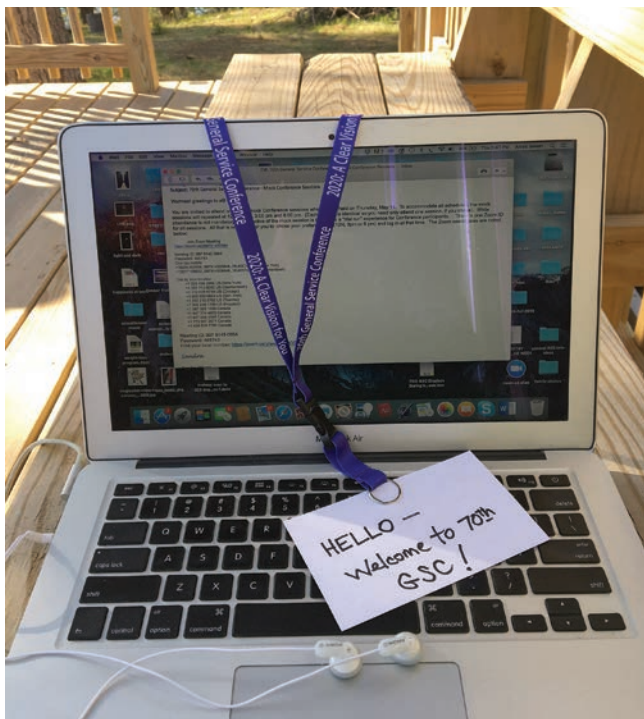
Addressing a broad range of issues, the 70th Conference (made up of **93** delegates, **26** trustees and corporate directors from A.A.W.S. and Grapevine, along with **17** General Service Office, Grapevine and La Viña staff members) worked its way through its essential business, formulating a path forward for the Fellowship. Not without controversy and important questions of process, procedures and the relationship between the boards and the Conference itself, the Conference sought

to acknowledge changing times and to articulate solutions for engaging diverse populations not being reached effectively with the A.A. message.

Not all Conference discussions resulted in Advisory Actions, with many of the important matters put forward in “committee considerations” — more informal suggestions and guidance from each committee on how best to carry the message. (These committee considerations, along with all Advisory Actions, are printed in their entirety in the Conference *Final Report*, available later in the summer.)

The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it is having on the Fellowship — not the least of which is financial — was never far from the thoughts of Conference members. As noted in her prerecorded corporate report, Cathy B., the current board chair of A.A.W.S., stated that 2020 could be dubbed “the year of disappointments” — the cancellation of the 2020 International Convention and two Regional Forums, the postponing of the Conference itself, and other rippling effects of the pandemic, both inside and outside the Fellowship. Yet, in a closer look, she noted, we can see that along with the disappointments have come some opportunities. The Fellowship quickly stepped up and began organizing digital meetings; service-minded A.A.s set up virtual workshops; and central/intergroup offices scrambled to keep their meeting lists up to date with the most current digital information. “Ours is a society based on service and dependent on action,” said Cathy, closing with a quote from Bill W.: “To serve A.A. is to live.”

Focusing on A.A. unity and what binds us together, Michele Grinberg, nonalcoholic chair of the General Service Board and one of the Conference chairs, shared in her General Service Board report how much she was



looking forward to the Conference, saying that “Bill W. would be pleased” with how the Fellowship is embracing new technology and “the ‘colossus of communication.’” Additionally, in her welcoming remarks to the 70th General Service Conference, she stated what was becoming clearer and clearer to each Conference member, in sync with the theme of the 70th General Service Conference, “2020: A Clear Vision for You”: “Our society is changing,” she noted, and then suggested with a characteristic smile, “Let’s grow in service, together.”

For any of the 135 Conference members and all of those participating in support, it will be a long time before anyone forgets the instruction issued by the Conference chairs on a regular basis: “If you would like to be recognized, please raise your digital hand and you will be unmuted.”

2020 Conference Advisory Actions

Conference Advisory Actions represent recommendations put forward by the standing committees of the General Service Conference that have been discussed, voted on and approved by the Conference body as a whole during general sessions. A sampling of Advisory Actions from the 2020 General Service Conference appear below in abbreviated form. A complete list of Advisory Actions will be published in the Conference *Final Report* (available from G.S.O. in late summer).

Agenda — That the theme of the 2021 Conference be “A.A. in a Time of Change.”

Finance — That language related to the “virtual basket” be included in the pamphlet “Self-Support: Where Money and Spirituality Mix.”

Grapevine — That the name of the Conference Committee on Grapevine be changed to the Conference Committee on Grapevine and La Viña.

Literature — That the video “Your General Service Office, the Grapevine and the General Service Structure” be approved; that the “A.A.W.S. Policy on Publication of Literature: Updating Pamphlets and other A.A. Materials” be acknowledged and accepted by the General Service Conference.

Public Information — That all A.A.W.S. video titles be adjusted for search engine optimization (SEO).

Report and Charter — That a sentence in Article 4 of the current Conference Charter be updated to reflect the voting procedures for Conference members to bring about a reorganization of the General Service Board, if or when such reorganization is deemed essential.

Treatment and Accessibilities — That the pamphlet “Bridging the Gap” be updated.

Trustees — That the slates of trustees and officers of the General Service Board be approved; and that the slate of directors of AA Grapevine be approved. (Due to questions of eligibility, the slate of directors of A.A.W.S. was referred by floor actions to the trustees’ General Service Conference Committee for consideration.)

NOTE: In light of the impact of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic on public gatherings, please contact the event coordinators as listed to confirm whether or not events are taking place.

Calendar of Events

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

June

- 5-7—*Storm Lake, Iowa.* Area 24 Spring Conf. Write: Ch., Box 62, Pochahontas, IA 50574; www.aa-iowa.org
- 5-7—*Frederick, Maryland.* 50th Maryland State Conv. Write: Ch., Box 1710, Frederick, MD 21072; www.marylandaa.org
- 5-7—*Roswell, New Mexico.* 63rd Area 46 Conv. Write: Ch., Box 2768, Roswell, NM 88202; www.nm-aa.org
- 5-7—*Wurzburg, Bavaria, Germany.* 16th Miracles in Progress Roundup. Info: recover@youmu.de
- 10—*Online.* Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions via Zoom. Second Wednesday monthly, June through December, 6pm CT. Meeting ID: 949 0569 8995; password: 222835. Info: casa@chicagoaa.org.
- 12-14—*Tallahassee, Florida.* Founder's Day Florida Style. Write: Ch., Box 38034, Tallahassee, FL 32315; www.foundersdayflorida.org
- 12-14—*Akron, Ohio.* 85th Founder's Day. Write: Ch., Box 12, Akron, OH 44309; www.foundersday.org
- 12-14—*Sheridan, Wyoming.* Area 76 Spring Conv. Write: Ch., 495 Kingfisher Ave, Sheridan, WY 82801; www.area76aawyoming.org
- 12-14—*Kenton, Oklahoma.* Camp Billy Joe Roundup. Write: Ch., 57552 Twentynine Palms Hwy, Ste 299, Yucca Valley, CA 92284; foreverpurple18@yahoo.com
- 19-20—*Joliette, Québec, Canada.* 44e Congrès de Joliette et Lanaudière Nord. Écrire: congres0326@aa90.org
- 19-21—*Columbus, Nebraska.* Area 41 Reunion. Write: Ch., 514 Bellevue Blvd N., Bellevue, NE 68005; www.area41.org
- 26-5—*Sventoji, Palanga, Lithuania.* Nine Days and Nine Nights. Info: info@aalietuvoje.org

July

- 3-5—*Anaheim, California.* XLV Conv. Estatal Hispana de CA. Write: Ch., 330 N. State College Blvd, Ste 207, Anaheim, CA 92806; www.convencionestatalca.org
- 3-5—*Rouyn-Noranda, Québec, Canada.* Congrès de Rouyn-Noranda. Écrire: 215, Ave Dallaire, Rouyn-Noranda, QC J9X 4T5
- 16-19—*Lubbock, Texas.* 44th Lubbock Caprock Conv. Write: Ch., Box 6511, Lubbock, TX 79493; caprockconvention@att.net
- 17-19—*Rimouski, Québec, Canada.* 41e Congrès du Bas-St-Laurent. Écrire: Prés., 136 rue Saint-Germain Ouest, CP 651 Rimouski, QC G5L 4B0; <https://aa-quebec.org/region88/WP/>
- 17-19—*Livingston, Montana.* Beartooth Mtn Conf. Write: Box 23406, Billings, MT 59104; www.beartoothmountainconference.com
- 24-26—*Lincoln, Nebraska.* XIV Conv. Hispana de NE. Para Info: Com. Org., 2748 S Street, 3rd floor, Lincoln, NE 68503
- 24-26—*Baie-Comeau, Québec, Canada.* 50e Congrès de Baie-Comeau. Écrire: Prés., Dist. 8909, C.P. 6052 Mingan, Baie-Comeau, QC G5C 0B7; web.district8909@gmail.com
- 30-2—*Raleigh, North Carolina.* 73rd NC State Conv. Write: Ch., Box 41451, Raleigh, NC 27629; www.aanconvention.com

31-2—*Hot Springs, Arkansas.* 80th Old Grandad Conv. Write: Ch., Box 7660, Little Rock, AR 72217; www.oldgrandadconvention.com

31-2—*Marble Falls, Texas.* SWTA 68 Summer Workshop. Info: www.aa-swta.org

August

6-9—*Jacksonville, Florida.* 64th FL State Conv. Write: Ch., Box 57442, Jacksonville, FL 32241; www.64.floridastateconvention.com

7-9—*Eugene, Oregon.* Summerfest. Write: Ch., Box 11824, Eugene, OR 97401; www.aa-summerfest.org

14-16—*Soldotna, Alaska.* Wilderness Jamboree. Write: Ch., Box 1625, Kenai, AK 99611; www.aakenaipeninsula.org

14-16—*Schaumburg, Illinois.* IL State Conv. Write: Ch., 180 N. Wabash Ave., Ste 305, Chicago, IL 60601

14-16—*Joplin, Missouri.* 33rd Summer Hummer Conf. Write: Ch., Box 2364, Joplin, MO 64804; summerhummer12@gmail.com

21-22—*Austin, Texas.* SWTA 68 PI/CPC Conf. Write: Ch. P.O. Box 141434, Austin, TX 78714; www.aa-swta.org

21-23—*Richmond, Virginia.* 25th SE Woman to Woman Conf. Write: Ch., Box 66443, Virginia Beach, VA 23462; www.sewomantowoman.org

■ Announcement of Openings for Nontrustee Director Positions

There will be upcoming openings for nontrustee director positions in 2021 for both A.A. World Services, Inc. and AA Grapevine, Inc. Nontrustee directors are A.A. members selected for business or professional experience that relates to the activities of the corporations. Per the A.A.W.S. and AA Grapevine bylaws, a non-trustee director can serve up to four successive one-year terms. Full details will be made available on aa.org and aagrapevine.org, the Meeting Guide app news alert feature and in a letter to Conference members and the Fellowship later in the year.

September

4-6—*Concord, California*. Unity and Service Conf. Info:

www.unityandserviceconference.org

4-6—*Chicago, Illinois*. 48 Conv. Hispana de Estados Unidos y Canada. Escribir: Box 945, Woodstock, IL 60098; www.conventionhispanadeaauasaycanada.com

4-6—*Vayamundo, Houffalize, Belgium*. A New Pair of Glasses. Info: www.aaconv.be

11-12—*Lévis, Québec, Canada*. Congrès de Lévis. Info: www.aa89.org

11-13—*Stamford, Connecticut*. 62nd Area 11 Conv. Write: Box 370005, West Hartford, CT 06137 www.ct-aa.org

17-20—*Ventura, California*. VII SWACYPA. Write: Ch., Box 91855, Santa Barbara, CA 93101; www.swacypaa7.org

18-20—*Grand Junction, Colorado*. 35th Color Daze Wknd. Info: www.colordaze.com

18-20—*Wichita, Kansas*. 63rd Area 25 State Conf. Write: Ch., Box 1543, Garden City, KS 67846; www.ks-aa.org

18-20—*Williston, North Dakota*. ND State Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 2578, Watford City, ND 58854; www.aanorthdakota.org

25-27—*Crescent City, California*. Sobriety by the Sea. Write: Ch., Box 871, Crescent City, CA 95531; www.sobrietybythesea.com

25-27—*Wakefield, Virginia*. 27th Wakefield Campfire Conf. Write: Ch., Box 1732, Hampton, VA 23669; www.wakefieldcampfireconference.com

25-27—*Richland, Washington*. Third Three Rivers Big Book Weekend. Write: Ch., 3019 Duportail St. #108, Richland, WA 99352; www.threeriversbigbookweekend.org

October

2-4—*Oacoma, South Dakota*. Area 63 Fall Conf. Write: Ch., Box 471, Parker, SD 57053; www.area63aa.org

2-5—*Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia*. 55th Australian Nat'l Conv. Write: Ch., Box 1218, Toowoomba, QLD 4350 AU; www.aanatcon2020.com.au

9-10—*Louisville, Kentucky*. Falls City Conv. Write: Ch., Box 37137, Louisville, KY 40233; www.louisvillehostcommittee.com

9-11—*Coralville, Iowa*. Area 24 Fall Conf. Write: Ch., P.O. Box 173, Fruitland, IA 51106;

iadistrict13dcm@gmail.com

9-11—*Biarritz, France*. Biarritz Internat'l EN Speaking Conv.

Info: www.aaconventionbiarritz.com

November

13-15—*Alexandria, Louisiana*. CENLA Sobermania. Write: Ch., Box 118, Tioga, LA 71477;

www.sobermania.org

13-15—*Lancaster, Pennsylvania*. 63rd E. PA Gen. Svc Conv. Info: www.area59aa.org

UPDATE ON 2020 A.A. INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

Cancellation of the 2020 International Convention has been a great disappointment for many A.A. members, but it has also provided an opportunity to provide a new experience and to bring together many of the special components that make International Conventions memorable — by utilizing a virtual platform. For this purpose G.S.O. is planning a 2020 International Convention digital site. Throughout the month of July, the 2020 International Convention will come alive online with A.A. speakers; a digital “Carrying the Message Pavilion”; sharing from nonalcoholic friends of A.A. and special guests linked to our history; a presentation of the 40 millionth Big Book; a new Archives video on the history of A.A.; an AA Grapevine video created for the Convention, and more.

The virtual experience will also help us reaffirm the International Convention’s goals: to rededicate ourselves to the primary purpose of A.A.; to share the success and growth of the A.A. program around the globe; and to let the world know that A.A. is alive, flourishing and available as a community resource internationally. The plan is to go live the week of June 29, 2020, to coincide as closely as possible with the original Convention dates, and to make the site available throughout the month of July. Please stay tuned for updates on aa.org.

