

Received from Area 29 – Maryland

Considerations for an Informed Group Conscience About Re-Opening Meetings As of May 20th

Dear Friends in the Fellowship,

We know that many members are excited by the prospect of meeting in-person again. There is a temptation to rush to re-open meetings. Baltimore Intergroup has put together suggestions and guidelines for your groups to consider when making an informed group conscience about how to re-open safely once our respective jurisdictions allow it.

These suggestions were compiled with the guidance of the Baltimore Intergroup Advisory Committee. We've also had conversations with and input from several other intergroups and central offices across the country to determine best practices to protect A.A. members going forward.

In addition to suggestions for groups to consider, there are also 'musts' that groups need to abide by to stay within the regulations and mandates of our state. While there are no 'musts' in the A.A. program, there are legal musts in the larger community. Fortunately, our programs of recovery has taught us how to be responsible citizens both in A.A. and the world.

To protect A.A., groups should be mindful of the Traditions. Tradition 1 tells us *"Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity."* When making group decisions, we say, *"Each group is autonomous."* However, the second part of Tradition 4 is just as important: *"except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole."* **These traditions remind us that we must ensure that our group decisions do not negatively impact our fellow members or A.A. as a whole, and that we as individuals act in ways that ensure our common welfare.** Traditions 1 and 4 are important now more than ever. We have to consider the health and well-being of other A.A. members, and we need to protect the positive reputation and goodwill of A.A. in the community.

Here are considerations for your groups to discuss:

WHEN CAN A.A. GROUPS SAFELY RE-OPEN MEETINGS?

- A.A. must abide by the mandates of local jurisdictions where our groups meet. As an organization and as individuals, we are not exceptions to the law.
- Since different areas have been hit more severely by COVID-19, Gov. Hogan has allowed each state jurisdiction to mandate its own restrictions regarding re-opening. As of May 20th:
 - Baltimore City has extended its strict **STAY AT HOME** restrictions, including **PROHIBITING GATHERINGS OF MORE THAN 10 PEOPLE.**
 - Baltimore County and Anne Arundel County **PROHIBIT GATHERINGS OF MORE THAN 10 PEOPLE; RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS REMAIN CLOSED.**

- Howard County has similar restrictions, though it allows churches to hold outdoor gatherings of less than 10 people.
- Carroll County and Harford County have re-opened to the extent that the governor allows—churches can be at 50% capacity [with attendees 7 feet apart \(per Maryland’s faith-based recommendations\)](#).
- We will keep you abreast as these restrictions change. [See here for re-opening plans for each county.](#)

WHAT IF OUR GROUP IS READY TO RE-OPEN BUT THE CHURCH OR FACILITY WHERE WE MEET IS NOT?

- This should go without saying, but groups must have permission from their churches and facilities to resume meeting on the premises—either inside or on the grounds or parking lot. Unfortunately, we are aware of one group who has continued to meet in-person inside the church without the church’s permission. We do not condone this, even if the intent is to help newcomers.

WHAT SAFETY PROTOCOLS SHOULD GROUPS HAVE IN PLACE?

- Groups should be aware of the state restrictions and guidelines churches and facilities have in place, as well as each facility’s individual requirements. [Here are some of the public health safety guidelines recommended for faith-based institutions by the State of Maryland for Stage 1 of the re-opening:](#)
 - Limiting the number of people into the space
 - Recommended distancing of 6 to 7 feet between individuals (see the link above)
 - Wearing face masks
 - Non-contact temperature taking at the doors (preferred) or voluntary temperature taking at home
 - Sanitizing contact surfaces before and after each meeting
- Intergroup suggests contacting your church or facility to determine its safety requirements and adopting them as group policy.

WHAT IS CONTACT TRACING AND HOW CAN GROUPS PARTICIPATE WHILE MAINTAINING ANONYMITY?

- [Contact Tracing is a control measure employed by local and state health department personnel as a key strategy for preventing further spread of COVID-19.](#) Public health staff work with a patient to help them recall everyone with whom they have had close contact during the timeframe while they may have been infectious. Contact tracers already practice a version of our principle of anonymity. They must abide by HIPAA laws, which means that when someone tests positive for COVID-19, contact tracers warn others of their potential exposure as rapidly and sensitively as possible, while protecting patient privacy and identity.
- Why should groups be concerned with contact tracing? To ensure that our common welfare comes first, groups that meet in-person should have a contingency plan in place

if a member tests positive for COVID-19. Contact tracers will be contacting the church and the group no matter what, so it's important that groups be prepared ahead of time with a way to protect everyone's health and anonymity.

- What is the plan for contacting the church or facility where the group meets if someone gets sick?
- What is the plan for contacting other A.A. members who were at a meeting on the same day as an infectious A.A. member who didn't realize he or she was sick at that time?
- What is the plan for contacting the church and other A.A. members if someone is tested but is still waiting for results? What if the member's test comes back negative?
- To ensure our common welfare, one suggested contingency plan can be accomplished effectively while maintaining everyone's anonymity.
 - Groups could list attendees by first name and phone number for each meeting. That would make it easier to alert everyone about the potential for infection should someone get ill or if someone is tested. Group should later destroy each meeting list after enough time has passed.
 - If an A.A. member tests positive, he or she does not have to break anyone's anonymity when talking with contact tracers. When a contact tracer asks the infected person who he or she has been in contact with, the sick member can say, "I attended 'spiritual meetings' or 'community meetings' (or another generic term) that meets at 'such-and-such' church. Here's the phone number of the primary contact for that meeting who can put you in touch with everyone else that was at that spiritual/community meeting on that day."
 - The contact tracer would then call the group secretary or primary contact to explain that someone from the meeting at such-and-such church has tested positive for COVID.
 - The group secretary can give the list of first names and phone numbers to the contact tracer who would be in charge of notifying everyone. OR, the secretary could notify everyone. Either way, no one has to know the name of the person who is sick (since HIPAA would prohibit the contact tracer from naming the patient) and no one would have to say anything about being a member of A.A.
- If an A.A. member is tested and is still waiting for results, one recommendation is to inform the church or facility where the group meets as well as everyone at the meeting so those people know to self-quarantine.
 - In the event that a person's test is negative, we recommend notifying members and the church so people can be released from self-quarantine. We can do all of this in a way that assure anonymity and is compliant with HIPAA.

WHAT IF GROUPS WANT TO COMBINE IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL MEETINGS?

- Some groups have talked about the possibility of combining in-person meetings with Zoom meetings to form a "hybrid" meeting. If your group is leaning toward this option, here are some considerations:

- Is everyone at the in-person meeting comfortable participating in a video Zoom meeting?
- Would it be better to disable the video capability but allow the phone function?
- [Maryland has recording laws that groups must abide.](#) While Zoom meetings *should not* be recorded, it is still important that groups abide by the electronic communication portion of the statute to be safe. This means everyone participating in the meeting must give their consent before any electronic communication is started. In Maryland, implied consent is enough to make the call legal, meaning, anyone who stays at the meeting is giving consent. Making a statement and having clear signage would comply with Maryland's recording law. One recommendation is for group secretaries to make an announcement at the beginning of the meeting such as, "This is to inform everyone that there is electronic equipment being used to connect to Zoom so that others online may participate." (The link above is not an endorsement of the website, but is meant for information purposes only.)

ARE THERE WAYS TO CARRY THE MESSAGE THAT WE HAVEN'T CONSIDERED?

Fortunately, newcomers have been getting sober in Zoom meetings. What this pandemic has taught us is that there are many ways to connect—not just locally, but internationally—and there are lots of ways to carry the message. While we all miss meeting safely in person, we have more tools available to us to stay sober. We can attend meetings anywhere in the world; we can invite speakers from afar to chair our meetings; we can attend workshops, round-ups, and other events from the comfort of our homes. Phone and online meetings do not replace the need for in-person meetings, but they've added to all the ways that we can carry the message of hope and recovery to still suffering alcoholics and old-timers, alike. So, our decisions to re-open should be made carefully and deliberately. A higher power guides us through this process if we ask for help.

Finally, our sincere thanks to all of you who forward this message to your A.A. friends and home group members in the fellowship. We look forward to seeing you one of these days soon, and we wish everyone continued sobriety and good health.