

Best Practices for Virtual NA Meetings – Draft for review

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This document is the second draft of a new piece of service material for virtual meetings.

The Local Service Toolbox Project has two current focuses: 1. best practices for virtual meetings and 2. how virtual meetings are connecting to the wider world of NA, including service delivery. This draft is related to the first focus.

We have posted a short survey to gather input on this draft and posted it here www.na.org/toolbox until the end of November, 2021.

This draft contains guidance on a range of topics related to virtual meetings that we believe the Fellowship is looking for shared experience about. Please view what follows as a work in progress. Your input will continue to improve this draft.

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Introduction

This pamphlet uses the term “virtual meetings” to mean any NA meeting that is not held in person. This includes meetings that meet on the internet and via phones. Virtual meetings can be offered by NA groups, by service bodies, and may also occur informally between friends.

Virtual meetings have been in existence for many years in NA. Before the creation of the internet, meetings took place over the phone and through the mail. Online platforms have expanded the availability of virtual meetings and allowed for a more conventional structure, but the basic function of providing meetings to addicts who are unable to attend them in person remains the same. For geographically isolated members, those who may have physical difficulties, or those who do not speak the dominant language of the community in which they reside, virtual meetings provide a viable option

for recovery. Many members have also found that virtual meetings enable them to connect with other addicts and NA communities that they would otherwise not be able to do.

The 2020 pandemic resulted in virtual meetings being the only option for recovery meetings in many NA communities and heightened the need for new service material to provide guidance. This pamphlet is intended to provide suggestions for best practices in virtual meetings based on the experience of NA members. These may not all apply to every type of virtual meeting platform. *The Group Booklet* is also a useful source of guidance for organizing virtual meetings as many of the suggestions in the booklet are relevant to all NA meetings regardless of where or how they take place.

Virtual meetings can help to carry the message in the same way as in-person NA meetings, or as a service provided by a service body. The role of virtual meetings within the service system is not discussed in this piece of service material, which instead focuses on providing guidance for hosting an NA meeting in a virtual environment.

Choosing a meeting platform

There are many options for platforms to host a virtual meeting, just as there are many options for venues for in-person meetings. It is advisable to discuss the choice of platform as a group, rather than have an individual make the decision. It may also be a good idea to attend other virtual meetings before making a choice so as to gain experience of how the various platforms function.

There are several factors to consider when choosing a meeting platform:

- Is the cost of the platform reasonable?
- Will meetings be accessible in a range of geographical locations and on various types of devices?
- Are members, and potential members, familiar with the platform and is it easy to use?
- Does the platform have a large enough meeting capacity for the expected attendance?

Desirable features may include:

- The meeting can be joined simply by clicking on a hyperlink
- The audio portion of the meeting can be accessed without internet service
- There are features on the platform that help to secure the meeting from disruption
- A screen-sharing feature to enable literature and other material to be shown

Listing meeting information

Groups may wish to consider potential security issues when deciding where to list information about meetings. Disruption in meetings can result from listing a meeting too publicly, but it should also be easy for an addict to find one when they need it. Some options for where information about virtual meetings can be listed include:

- NA websites, including the options on this page www.na.org/virtual
- Social media groups
- In a cloud-based document that can be shared
- Meeting flyers (hard copies and electronic) that can be distributed

Information to include in a listing:

- Type of meeting platform
- Meeting ID, password, and phone number for audio-only connections

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- Time (including time zone) and day
- Language meeting is conducted in, and translation/interpretation services if provided
- Format and topic

It may also be advisable to provide basic instructions on how to use the platform alongside the list of meetings. Links to short instructional videos, pamphlets, PowerPoints, and workshops on the basic features of the chosen platform and tips for using it successfully are all options to achieve this.

Meeting Etiquette

A few simple, and commonly agreed upon, standards for behavior can help to preserve the atmosphere of recovery in a meeting. Many of these are the same as would be expected in an in-person meeting, such as not tolerating drugs or drug paraphernalia, or abusive and predatory behavior. (See IP #29: *An Introduction to NA Meetings*, for more information about general NA meeting etiquette:

www.na.org/ips)

Other options that could be requested in virtual meetings include:

- Avoiding constant movement or other visual distractions
- Muting microphones when not sharing
- Raising hands to share
- Limiting the use of the chat feature during the meeting to avoid distractions
- Not eating, smoking, or vaping on-screen

Keeping a virtual meeting secure and dealing with disruption

It is an unfortunate reality that virtual meetings can be subject to disruption more easily than in-person meetings. This may simply be due to a member's unfamiliarity with the meeting platform, but may also be a deliberate effort by non-members and can involve highly disturbing images and sounds. By planning ahead and becoming familiar with the features of the meeting platform, virtual meetings can be set up to provide a number of safeguards to minimize or eradicate these issues before they occur. The procedures for dealing with disruptive or abusive members in a meeting, and people that are not NA members who log in to meetings with the intent to disrupt them, are largely the same. Three essential precautions are:

- Disable any features that allow attendees except for the meeting's trusted servants to share content on the screen
- Disable the ability to record the meeting
- Ensure all attendees are muted when they first join the meeting

Other options include:

- Disable virtual backgrounds or turn off participant's video if necessary
- Do not allow attendees to unmute themselves – this may be particularly necessary in larger meetings to avoid audio chaos. Assign task of unmuting to a co-host.
- Disable or limit the use of the chat feature

These actions can be taken before a meeting:

- Discuss and agree on standards of behavior for the meeting, and on measures to deal with disruption and abusive behavior
- Assign the task of monitoring the meeting for disruptive behavior to trusted servants

- Provide training for the meeting's trusted servants
- Stay current on changes to the platform features

And these actions can be taken during the meeting:

- Include guidance for acceptable behavior in the meeting format
- Communicate privately with disruptive members using the chat feature
- Place disruptive people in a waiting room if the platform provides this feature
- Remove the person from the meeting – this option should be reserved for disruptive non-members, or only as a last resort for NA members
- Report disruptive non-members to the platform provider

Tips for attending a virtual meeting

Common practices:

- Mute your microphone when not speaking
- Use first name and initial for your screen name
- Familiarize yourself with the meeting platform before the meeting time
- Be aware that different meetings may have different practices regarding the use of cameras, sharing, features like chat boxes, and how to make financial contributions
- Join the meeting early and ask questions if you need to

Tips for dealing with an unstable internet connection:

- Turn off the camera to preserve bandwidth
- Connect to the router via a wired connection as opposed to Wi-Fi
- Use a phone to access the audio part of a meeting
- Leave and rejoin the meeting or try a different device
- Ensure updates to the meeting platform software have been installed

Maintaining personal anonymity

The guidance in this section applies to both an individual's privacy, and to the privacy of the other members attending the meeting. Hosting an NA meeting on the internet does not necessarily present a conflict with the Eleventh Tradition as not everything that is online can be considered as being "at the level of press, radio, and films", but there is a concern for some members that the ease with which a virtual meeting can be accessed makes it difficult to maintain a reasonable level of privacy for those attending it. It clearly requires less effort for a person that is not an addict to join a meeting on a virtual platform than it does for them to walk in to an in-person meeting, but neither method of hosting can be considered entirely private. In fact, some NA meetings are held in public places such as parks, while others are held in more private places. The same choices are available to virtual meetings by adjusting the settings of the platform. If these concerns exist then there are steps that can be taken to make meetings more private.

- Settings that record the meeting and save it to a cloud or to the host's computer should always be disabled, as should the ability for attendees to record. Disabling the option to save the chat could also be considered.
- Members may be asked to attend the meeting in a private place and to use headphones to protect the privacy of others.

- Some groups may disable the use of cameras to ensure that member's identities are kept private, while others may ask for cameras to be turned on (in some cases only for a short time) to verify their identity.
- Log in to a meeting using a first name and initial only, rather than a full name. This can both preserve a member's personal privacy, and help to avoid unwelcome advances. If allowing attendees to rename themselves results in people using inappropriate or obscene names then it might be advisable to disable this feature and assign this task to a trusted servant.

Groups are encouraged to discuss these options and determine what is most appropriate for their meetings:

- List the meeting information as publicly as possible so it can be found easily by any addict wishing to attend or list the meeting information only on NA websites and in private social media groups to discourage disruptive intruders
- Provide a one-click link to join meetings or list meeting IDs and passwords separately
- Restrict the ability for attendees to rename themselves or require members to name themselves appropriately
- Ask for cameras to be turned on to confirm identities or turn cameras off to allow members to protect their privacy and to prevent inappropriate profile pictures being shown
- Disabling chat feature to avoid distraction and inappropriate messages or leaving chat feature enabled so it can be used to share phone numbers with newcomers and welcome them.

Welcoming newcomers and helping them get connected

New members may need some extra help to get connected and start building relationships in NA. This can be thought of as "in-reach" (as opposed to outreach) and can help to strengthen and grow the meeting. Suggestions for this include:

- Create service positions or tasks aimed at welcoming new members
- Include a verbal welcome to newcomers in the format and reference the Third Tradition
- Structure the meeting so there is time before and after it to talk with new members
- Share phone numbers and other contact information with new members via the chat feature or by emailing them as a document
- Show new members where NA materials and links to other meetings can be found online
- Send welcome packs of literature and keytags via the mail
- Use social media or chat groups to communicate outside of the meeting
- Organize social activities that can be virtual or in-person where possible

Sponsorship

In addition to the suggestions offered to help new members get connected, meetings can also use these additional ideas to encourage sponsorship:

- Ask those willing to sponsor to identify themselves and stay after the meeting
- Create a list of potential sponsors that can be shared with members upon request
- Encourage sharing about sponsorship and use IP #11, *Sponsorship*, as a meeting topic
- Allow sponsors to use the meeting platform to meet with their sponsees, including the breakout room feature if available

- Share information about long-distance sponsorship services provided by service bodies

Signing meeting attendance cards

Meetings may choose to provide some form of verification that a member attended. One simple method employed is to create an email address that can be used for this purpose. Many email providers offer the option to set up automatic replies to emails. This can be activated during the meeting time and set to send a simple response with the meeting's information.

Other methods include sending a text or manually sending an email in response to requests for attendance verification.

Additional guidance on this topic can be found in NAWS Bulletin #31, *Meeting Attendance Cards*, which is available here www.na.org/bulletins.

Making meetings accessible for members with additional needs

Virtual meetings can provide a unique opportunity to carry the message to addicts who would otherwise find it difficult to attend NA meetings. This may be due to being physically unable to attend an in-person meeting, because of impaired vision and hearing, or other personal circumstances. In particular, blind and deaf members may need extra help to fully participate in virtual meetings. This help may include some of these ideas:

- Post readings in text format rather than as images so that text-to-voice software used by blind members can read them
- Provide American Sign Language (ASL) or other forms of sign language interpretation in meetings and include instructions in the meeting format for how to access the service
- Provide subtitles during meetings
- Provide information about literature in audio and ASL formats posted at www.na.org/asl and www.na.org/audio
- Ask members with additional needs how the group can help
- Designate a contact person in the meeting who can help provide additional assistance

Virtual meetings that are accessible may also wish to consider cooperating with service bodies that are attempting to build relationships with organizations that provide services to addicts with additional needs.

Practicing the Seventh Tradition

However a virtual meeting is hosted, whether by an NA group or by a service body, or even as an informal gathering of friends, there are opportunities to practice the principal of self-support. Practicing the Seventh Tradition in a virtual environment requires some different approaches to passing a basket in an in-person meeting, but these can be managed successfully. The guidance contained in NA service material related to the qualities of a treasurer and the prudent financial procedures they should follow still apply in virtual meetings. It may not always be possible to follow all the suggestions, such as having two members count the Seventh Tradition collection. If this is the case, care should be taken to closely adhere to the other guidance offered, particularly when electing a treasurer.

There are three main approaches to the Seventh Tradition in virtual meetings. The first is most similar to in-person meetings – members send their contributions either directly to the treasurer or to a group bank account via one of several cash transfer apps. Members are encouraged to review the settings of

these apps to determine if an option is available to make donations without revealing their full name if they have concerns about their privacy. The challenge for meetings with members attending from more than one country is that not all apps are available in every country. It can also be prohibitively expensive to transfer funds internationally. Some meetings offer multiple methods of making contributions to get around this challenge.

One word of caution is to carefully consider local tax laws if a personal bank account is used to receive contributions as some personal tax liability may result from this.

The second approach is that members can send contributions directly to service bodies. This may be a local service body, particularly if the meeting is using a platform paid for by that body, or directly to NA World Services. Some Fellowship websites have created contribute buttons to make this easier. Instructions for how to make payments may be displayed onscreen during the meeting or via the chat feature. Members may be encouraged to participate by including a self-support statement in the meeting format or periodically choosing the Seventh Tradition as a discussion topic for the meeting.

The third approach is simply not to collect financial contributions during the meeting, and instead ask the members attending to find other ways to support NA.

There are several locally created resources posted here under the “Seventh Tradition” heading that may be helpful – www.na.org/virtual.

Distributing literature and keytags

Several options for distributing literature and keytags can be used in virtual meetings:

- NA pamphlets and booklets are posted in multiple languages at www.na.org/ips and can be accessed by members and shown onscreen during meetings as needed
- Hard copies and electronic versions of literature, and keytags and medallions, can be sent directly to members by mail and email
- Literature, keytags, and medallions can be purchased directly from NA service offices and other outlets, including NA World Services at www.na.org/orderlit.
- Members may be directed to in-person meetings to obtain hard copies of literature

Please remember that the NA Fellowship has determined that posting and distributing pdfs of literature is not appropriate and jeopardizes the protection of the Fellowship’s intellectual property. Please honor this group conscience and only post links to the material posted on na.org rather than posting the material directly on local websites or distributing it via email.

Additional service positions for virtual meetings

Most virtual meetings have multiple co-hosts to assist with the technical administration of the meeting and to take over the host role if the host has technical problems. Other co-host tasks may include:

- Muting and unmuting attendees
- Screen-sharing literature and keytag images
- Checking for raised hands
- Monitoring the waiting room and the chat feature
- Monitoring the meeting screen to minimize disturbances
- Greeting new members.

Other additional positions or tasks may include:

- A literature person who mails welcome packets, literature, and key tags and manages literature sales
- A virtual trainer to ensure the trusted servants in the meeting know how to use the platform
- Someone to manage keeping the meeting's information updated on websites and other places where it is posted
- A coordinator for virtual activities
- A social network coordinator

Additional suggestions for virtual meetings

Meeting formats: In general, virtual meetings adopt similar formats to in-person meetings, although groups may consider simplifying these where possible. Many virtual meetings choose to focus their meetings around a piece of NA literature. It may also be helpful to include a brief technical orientation in the meeting format.

Business meetings: Just like in-person meetings, virtual meetings that are held regularly benefit from regular business meetings to ensure that any decisions made about how the meeting is run are made through a process based in group conscience.

Hybrid meetings

The term "hybrid" describes meetings that have both in-person and remote attendees. Hybrid meetings allow groups to increase their attendance by having members from other places attend virtually, and to provide outreach to addicts who would not otherwise be able to attend an NA meeting.

These are a few simple steps to set up a hybrid meeting:

- Establish accessibility – does the meeting location have telephone or internet capabilities?
- Choose a host device based on accessibility – this device is responsible for streaming the audio and video signal to and from remote participants and could be a laptop or a smart phone
- Establish quality audio input by choosing the right type of microphone - audio quality is the highest priority, and sometimes the biggest challenge, for a hybrid meeting:
 - cardioid and dynamic microphones gather sound from directly in front of the microphone
 - omni-directional and condenser microphones gather sound from the whole room and may be more suitable for a hybrid meeting
- Establish clear audio output – the type of speaker needed varies depending on the size of the room and the host device
- Decide whether video of the meeting will be provided to remote participants, and whether they will be visible to the in-person meeting

Groups are encouraged to work with the resources they have, and to experiment and test different set-ups. More detailed experience from groups that are successfully providing hybrid meetings, can be found here www.na.org/virtual.