

'Infrastructure'

From the 2006 *Conference Agenda Report* IDT Essay

The fourth and final issue discussion topic from the 2004–2006 conference cycle, “Infrastructure,” is related in some ways to each of the three other topics. A strong infrastructure facilitates both the atmosphere of recovery in our meetings and the image we present to the world. Leadership, of course, is integral to that strength. In this context, leadership is part of what motivates us to work for NA—not just being of service in a general sense, because everyone is of service in some way or another, but committing to carry out the duties of a position within our infrastructure. Our ability, as a fellowship, to carry the recovery message depends on this kind of commitment, and “it’s all about carrying the message.”

The material in the 2004 *Conference Agenda Report* about “Infrastructure” echoes this idea and touches on the relationship between infrastructure and the other issue discussion topics:

We struggled for a word to describe this topic, and we chose “infrastructure,” which the dictionary defines as the base or foundation of an organization, and for NA that means many people working together. The primary purpose of an NA group is to carry the message to the addict who still suffers, and a broad foundation of trusted servants and service committees help to make that possible. Accurate meeting lists, reliable phonedlines, and members who provide information to the public—to name just a few services—all help addicts to find our program. ...

There is a direct connection between the strength of local services and our fellowship’s overall ability to carry the message. The growth and continuation of our program of recovery depends on each level of service to provide specific, ongoing support. ...

The work we do together will determine how accessible we are to addicts, the impression we make on society, and how well we carry our message. We look forward to discussing these issues at the conference.

It makes sense that our discussions about infrastructure would be taken up with the relationships among these other topics and challenges. “Infrastructure” is not just about the structure itself. The prefix “infra” means below or beneath, and infrastructure is concerned with what underpins the different elements of our service structure and the relationships between these different elements. This *Conference Agenda Report* opens with a quote from our Basic Text that reminds us, “Everything that occurs in the course of NA service must be motivated by the desire to more successfully carry the message of recovery to the addict who still suffers.” That desire to carry the message infuses all

that we do; it is the foundation upon which our service structure rests, and what animates our infrastructure.

Our service structure was originally designed to meet the needs of a much different fellowship. At the time when our service structure was first being developed, NA was smaller, more homogenous, and less geographically far-flung, to point to just a few of the ways in which we've changed over the decades. Although the principles that motivate our service remain, and will always remain, the same, it seems time that we reexamine what we do and how we do it and see if what we have meets our needs. This is another instance where form *should* follow function but often does not. There is no perfect structure that will address all of our needs, but what we have heard from these discussions is that there certainly could be improvement.

Most of us didn't come to NA with many models of how to have good relationships on a personal level, and the learning curve we experience in our individual recovery is reflected in the infrastructure challenges with which we grapple in service. We struggle with making service attractive, with keeping members involved and engaged, with taking responsibility for the health of NA's infrastructure, and with using our resources wisely, to name just a few of our challenges.

Many of the same principles and practical solutions that come up when we discuss "Atmosphere of Recovery" on a group level are applicable when we ask how we can make service more attractive. Sometimes we seem to think the best approach is to badger members into involvement, but of course, that doesn't work for very long. The fact of the matter is that service really isn't very attractive in many cases, and we would better serve our fellowship to think about why that is and try to make the necessary changes so that service can appear and feel as rewarding to others as we ourselves have found it to be.

The same sorts of efforts that make our recovery meetings attractive can go a long way toward making our service meetings more appealing. When we offer members opportunity, support, and affirmation, they are more likely to get and stay involved. When we've discussed infrastructure at workshops throughout the cycle, one thing that has come up repeatedly is the ways in which we can infuse our service meetings with an atmosphere of recovery. There are those among us who would love to see the false distinction between "service" and "recovery" disappear. That is, some of our members talk about "service-based recovery" or "recovery-based service." Perhaps thinking about the two things—service and recovery—as inextricably intertwined, rather than inexorably opposed to each other, would go some of the way toward approaching our infrastructure as part and parcel of our recovery program. Let's start sharing about the spiritual benefits of being of service.

It's easy to get caught up in the perception that service is a burden or a chore instead of the privilege that it is. When we take a step back and think about our infrastructure in terms of purpose and plan, it reminds us that, indeed, it's all about carrying the message.

The key level of service, our area committees, is the linchpin of our service structure. Our area service committees are usually the principle vehicles for the delivery of NA services. Certainly we have encouraged regions and zones and have tried to support them in whatever way we can, but our developmental efforts need to be aimed primarily at the area service level. How can NAWS, as well as regions and zones, help to support the hands-on efforts of our local area committees? Many service committees never ask themselves the basic questions: What are the most pressing needs of NA locally? What services should we provide? What are we doing to support and help our groups? We often fail to ask ourselves whether the structure of our committees is the best setup by which to provide services. The blueprint for our infrastructure was developed more than a quarter century ago; since then, most of the changes we have made in that structure have constituted fine tuning more than significant retooling. It's not surprising, then, that sometimes it feels like our structure isn't necessarily best-suited to provide the services we most need. We have heard repeatedly in our discussions about the need to create a more attractive environment and to plan and coordinate our efforts better.

The first thing to ask ourselves is always: What are we trying to accomplish, and does our current service structure meet those needs? Our vision statement provides a touchstone for the work we do at world services. We share a vision, and it helps to ground us when we are planning and executing our work. Similarly, a shared sense of purpose can help to focus work on an area level. During the next conference cycle, world services will be working on more tools for the group and area, but even without those tools, we can think about taking a more strategic approach to meeting the challenges of our infrastructure. Many, perhaps most, international organizations engage in some kind of strategic planning, but Narcotics Anonymous has an advantage over most other organizations in that we already share a primary purpose and a set of foundational principles. From that primary purpose, we can develop a set of goals, and then take a careful look at our infrastructure to see if it is best structured to fulfill those goals. In the questions that follow, one of the crucial things to ask ourselves is: What would the most effective infrastructure look like?

Questions for Discussion

13. Is the current structure in your local NA community best suited to carrying the message? What about the current structure could be better suited to carrying the message?

14. What are we trying to accomplish (what is most needed in your community) and how can we best meet those needs (how is the service structure meeting those needs)? What are the underlying principles involved, and what is the basic minimum structure required?

15. What are we doing for those we serve? If we are an area, what are we doing for our groups? A region, for our areas? A zone, for our regions?

16. What can I do to make service more effective? Why should I be of service