Service System

We want to start by clearly saying: The Service System Proposals are not a mandate. The most important aspect of the proposals is the broad principles that underpin them—things like group support, planning, and collective decision making. The proposals offer a model to help communities improve how they put these principles into practice. In an international fellowship as large and far-flung as Narcotics Anonymous, one size will never fit all. We are working to get a more practical understanding of the different ways that communities implement the ideas in these proposals.

We have just finished a field test of the local aspects of the Service System Proposals, and these experiences should help us to create a frame with enough shared experience that communities can make choices about what will best help them carry the message. This essay attempts to explain some of the basics of the proposals, with the understanding that local communities will adapt the details of any system to fit their specific needs.

Background

First, to back up a bit: The Service System Project grew out of a need to try to address some of the struggles that service bodies throughout NA have reported over the years—too few trusted servants, a poor atmosphere of recovery at service meetings, duplication of efforts, poor communication, and the list goes on. If you are involved in service, chances are you are familiar with many of the issues. Most of us have encountered them in our service experience.

But where to start? We began where one must always begin—we looked to the Traditions and Concepts. And we realized we must start with a shared vision, as a fellowship. So our first task was to offer "A Vision for NA Service," which passed unanimously at the 2010 World Service Conference.

We asked ourselves, "How can the service system help NA achieve our vision and better carry the message?" Our Basic Text is clear: "Everything that occurs in the course of NA service must be motivated by the desire to more successfully carry the NA message to the addict who still suffers."

We felt the most important job of the service system is grounded in the Fifth Tradition, to support the groups in achieving their primary purpose.

And so we proposed a forum to help support the groups.

Group Support Forums (GSFs)

The group support forum is a place to discuss group problems and successes away from budgets and motions. It is the service equivalent of one addict helping another. Here, newer members can get introductory or basic information about NA, including how the service system works.

Group support forums can also be a place for literature distribution, workshops, and training sessions, and for finding members to serve on H&I panels, planning picnics, and other neighborhood-based activities. The exact activities of a group support forum will vary from place to place, but the key is that it focuses on the needs of the groups.

All interested members, not just group representatives, are encouraged to come. It's a friendly, discussion-based gathering where newer members can get their feet wet and learn more about NA, and veterans can share their experiences and actively mentor others.

The proposals describe group support forums as neighborhood-sized—the idea was that each local service conference as described in the proposals (or today's area service committees) would have several small GSFs within it. A smaller-sized group support forum means less distance to travel for those who are interested, and it can be easier to keep discussion informal and more like a conversation in a small group. After field testing, however, we found that some communities prefer a group-focused meeting that includes all of the groups in their community to improve communication across the community. In these communities, holding a group support forum has simply meant changing the focus of the majority of what were their area service committee meetings, leaving four meetings a year for planning and business and the others for group support.

In communities with smaller group support forums, many of those GSFs have a delegate who attends the local service conference and reports on the groups in the GSF. In some cases, groups have elected to attend the group support forum and not the local service conference, delegating that responsibility to the GSF delegate. More often, groups attend both the group support forum and the local service conference. Along with being group-focused, flexibility is one of the foundational principles of the proposals, and again, each community will adapt the ideas according to their needs.

Local Service Conferences (LSCs)

We've already mentioned that two of the foundational principles of the Service System Proposals are "group-focused" and "flexible." The other three foundational principles—"purpose-driven," "collaborative," and "geographically based"—are each integral to the local service conference and the local service board. These two bodies together oversee most of NA's service delivery.

The proposals describe the local service conference as a quarterly, plan-driven meeting attended by all of the GSRs and/or GSF delegates, along with trusted servants of the LSC and interested members. One of the meetings of the local service conference is an annual assembly where all interested members of the community gather to set service priorities for the year ahead. This annual planning assembly ensures that the groups get to set the general direction of services. The other local service conferences are opportunities for communication, oversight, and careful selection of leaders.

As much as possible, the discussions and decisions at the local service conference are concerned with strategic direction and oversight. Administrative decisions and details are delegated to the local service board, which is then accountable to the local service conference. The combination of the local service conference and the local service board balances the delegation spoken of in the Third Concept with the group responsibility and authority called for in the Second Concept.

The proposals suggest the local service conference meet quarterly, and the local service board and the committees and workgroups meet monthly in order to fulfill their functions. In practice, some communities have found they prefer having all GSRs meet together more often than quarterly. Some have quarterly service conferences and hold group support forums with the whole community the other

eight months of the year, as mentioned above. Others alternate service conferences and group support forums, whether those GSFs are neighborhood-sized or consisting of the whole community. These are just a couple of alternatives.

Decision making is consensus-based where practical, although voting may still be the preferred way to handle items like elections or urgent decisions where the body fails to reach consensus. (You can find more information about consensus-based decision making in "CBDM Basics," which is posted in the Field Testing Tools section of the Service System Project webpage: www.na.org/servicesystem.

Local Service Board (LSB)

The local service board is more detail oriented than the local service conference. The board does the day-to-day work to accomplish the goals and realize the vision directed by the conference. The local service board administers the work prioritized by the LSC planning assembly. The conference consists of the architects; the board is made up of the builders and contractors.

The local service board reports to, and is overseen by, the local service conference. The board creates plans and a budget, which are approved by the LSC to carry out the work of the plan. The hands-on service delivery may be accomplished by workgroups led by coordinators or by committees. The board will make recommendations to the local service conference depending on what seems to make the most practical sense. Form should follow function.

In short, the Service System Proposals suggest a separation between these three types of concerns: 1. Group issues and needs are handled at the group support forum. 2. Strategic decisions and general oversight of local services are handled at the local service conference. 3. Day-to-day administration of local services is handled by the local service board.

One of the more controversial elements of the Service System Proposals is the idea that service bodies are, where practical, defined by geographic boundaries. This is, in fact, one of the five main foundational principles of the proposals. For the local service conference, in the US, that would mean county, town, or city boundaries.

The reasons for this recommendation are threefold: 1. To avoid duplication of services; 2. To make sure all parts of a state or nation are covered by a service body; and 3. To make NA more visible to addicts who are trying to find us, as well as members of the public who refer addicts to us. All aspects of PR efforts, including H&I, outreach, and fellowship development, are enhanced when service bodies conform to recognized geographic boundaries.

Still, it's important to recognize that for some ASCs, being defined by geographic boundaries could mean unifying with a neighboring service body—possibly a daunting task. What seems crucial is better communication and collaboration with our neighbors with an eye to having a conversation about *possible* unification down the road.

The first step for many communities would be to simply open communication with neighboring service bodies. Most areas do not have a full awareness of what their neighboring areas do. Bringing trusted servants together, whether through a shared learning day or a series of meetings with trusted servants of the areas, will help open the lines of communication, and communication is a necessary first step toward any possible collaboration—another foundational principle of the Service System Proposals.

Over time, neighboring service bodies may want to consider sharing services where it makes sense to do so (e.g., sharing a phoneline where two service bodies occupy the same area code; cooperating to do public outreach to a school system when two service bodies exist within the same county).

Eventually, at some point that may lead to discussion and ultimately decisions about whether it makes sense to combine neighboring service bodies. And it may not. Again, these are decisions that will be made locally and collaboratively.

Conclusion

The proposed system involves a number of changes. In any transition to a new system, communities may want to take the changes piece by piece rather than all at once—an evolution rather than a revolution. Change can be difficult. Nonetheless, we owe it to ourselves and to those we serve to do what we can to improve our ability to carry the NA message. Our Basic Text tells us, "We must realize that we are not perfect. There will always be room for growth." Just like our personal program, our service delivery will never be perfect. There will always be room for growth.

At the 2008, 2010, and 2012 World Service Conferences, the Fellowship of NA through their elected delegates approved the Service System Project plan to explore alternatives to improve our service delivery. In 2012 the Conference passed a series of resolutions related to the Service System Proposals.

By voting on the motions below, the Fellowship of NA, through their elected delegates, will take the next step and decide whether they agree in principle to move forward in the direction of a service system that includes group support forums, local service conferences, and local service boards. Typically, these ideas would not even be offered in the form of motions until there was a service manual or something similar to consider for adoption. However, despite unanimous support of the Service System Project plan in 2008 and 2010, strong support for the project plan in 2012, and adoption of a series of resolutions related to the project at the 2012 WSC, there still seems to be some sentiment that the project lacks clear support. We offer these motions in the spirit of unity. Hopefully, this is a step forward together to try to evolve into a service system that helps us better carry our message.

If these motions pass, the Conference will then vote on a transition plan—probably similar to a project plan—that will be included in the Conference Approval Track material mailed out at the end of January 2014. It will outline the various ways that we think NAWS can help the Fellowship consider some of these ideas and decide what suits their local circumstances best. It will also lay out ways to discuss implementing in stages rather than all at once.

The Service System Proposals also include ideas about state-, province- or nationwide service bodies, as well as conference seating and the role of zones. None of those aspects of the proposals are up for decision at this World Service Conference.

Motion 4: To agree in principle to move in the direction of a service system that contains group support forums: discussion-oriented gatherings focused on the needs of the group, as described by the characteristics below.

Characteristics of a GSF:

Essential:

- **Discussion-oriented**
- **Group-focused:** Focused on the needs of the group; decisions related to area business are not made here. Some limited functions like finding volunteers for H&I panels, planning picnics, etc., may take place.
- **Training-oriented:** This is a venue ideal for orienting new members, holding workshops, and training trusted servants.
- **Open to all:** All interested members, not just group representatives, are encouraged to attend.

Recommended:

- **Neighborhood-sized**: The original Service System Proposals see group support forums as significantly smaller than local service conferences or area service committees. There would be several for each LSC. However, we have found through field testing that some communities prefer to bring all of the groups and interested members together for one communitywide group support forum.
- **Meets monthly**: Again, the original Service System Proposals suggest monthly meetings of the group support forum, but in field testing many communities adopted a different meeting schedule. Some had group support forums meeting eight times a year in months when there was no quarterly local service conference. Others alternated GSF and LSC meetings, with each meeting six times a year.

Intent: To establish a direction for the future development of service material.

Motion 5: To agree in principle to move in the direction of a service system that contains local service conferences: strategic service-oriented planning conferences as described by the characteristics below.

Characteristics of a local service conference:

Essential:

- **Plan-driven:** The LSC works according to a planning cycle which begins with an annual planning assembly. All interested members gather at the planning assembly to set the priorities for the cycle ahead and provide the input that will shape the resulting project plans and budget.
- **Form follows function**: Utilizes a thoughtful mixture of project-based services, services performed by committees, and services organized by a coordinator. How services are delivered (whether by committee, project workgroup, or a coordinator) is a decision made by the local service conference.

- **Strategic:** Discussion and decisions are as much as possible concerned with strategic direction and oversight. Administrative decisions and "micromanagement" are delegated to the local service board.
- **Consensus-based**: Utilizes consensus-based decision making where practical (i.e., voting may still be the most logical way to handle elections or instances where the body fails to reach consensus and a decision must get made).

Recommended:

- **Meets quarterly:** The proposals suggest the local service conference meets four times a year for planning and oversight and the local service board meets monthly. In practice, when field testing, some communities determined that having the local service conference meet every other month better served their needs. One meeting of the LSC a year is devoted to the annual planning assembly.
- **Defined by county, city, or town boundaries:** The reasons for this recommendation are threefold: 1. To avoid duplication of services; 2. To make NA more visible to professionals and addicts who are trying to find us; and 3. To make sure all parts of a state or nation are covered by a service body. Making sure these three things happen is more important than a policy about service body boundaries, particularly given the potential difficulty in unifying with a neighboring service body. What seems crucial is better communication and collaboration with our neighbors with an eye to having a conversation about possible unification down the road. The third item, making sure that all parts of a state or nation are served by NA, is something that probably cannot be adequately addressed in most places until we get to the state/nation/province part of the service system.

Intent: To establish a direction for the future development of service material.

Motion 6: To agree in principle to move in the direction of a service system that contains local service boards: a body overseen by the local service conference that administers the work prioritized by the LSC, as described in the characteristics below.

Characteristics of an LSB:

Essential:

- **Responsible to the LSC:** Reports to and is overseen by the local service conference.
- **Carries out the priorities of the LSC:** The board oversees the work to accomplish the goals set by the local service conference. They present a budget and project plans to the LSC for approval, and they coordinate the service work of the committees, workgroups, and coordinators.
- **Meets monthly:** It seems practical to meet on a regular basis, though not all meetings of the LSB must be face-to-face. Some LSBs may choose to hold some meetings online for convenience.
- **Administers the LSC meetings:** The local service board is responsible for putting together the agenda and facilitating the LSC meetings, including organizing the annual planning assembly to get information from the whole NA community.

Recommended:

- **Consists of admin body and service coordinators:** The proposals initially conceived of the local service board as a monthly meeting of the trusted servants elected by the LSC (the admin body) as well as the subcommittee chairs, project coordinators, and other service coordinators. In practice, there may be meetings where not all of these trusted servants are needed.

Intent: To establish a direction for the future development of service material.

Important Points that Relate to All Three Motions Above:

These motions are not a mandate. The Conference cannot tell communities how to deliver services locally. World Services has no ability to mandate or enforce how structures, processes, people, or resources are set up on a local level, nor do we desire such ability. As described in *A Guide to World Services*, World Services' purpose is "communication, coordination, information, and guidance." It is in the service of that purpose that we have undertaken the work of the Service System Project.

The essay that precedes these motions explains the service system proposals and some of how they have evolved in more detail. The ideas for the three bodies called out in the motions—the group support forum, local service conference, and local service board—came from the desire to overcome some of our persistent challenges in local services. Here is an incomplete list of some of the problems the proposed system (group support forum, local service conference, and local service board) is designed to solve:

- *Area service committees are responsible for both meeting the direct needs of the groups and administering the services of the community. Solution: The group support forum and local service conference split these responsibilities so that each can have a single focus.*
- *The time at many service bodies is taken up with administrative details and reading of written reports. Solution: The local service board handles most of the administrative detail of service, freeing the groups to participate in setting goals and strategic direction at the local service conference.*
- *Services are often unplanned and unbudgeted. Most area service committees perform the services they do from year to year because those are the services they've always performed. At no point do they stop to set goals and consider the big picture. Solution: Having an annual planning assembly allows the whole community to set goals, to improve services, and to budget and plan for the year as a whole.*
- *Addicts and those who refer addicts to NA often cannot find us. Our service body names and boundaries often make no sense. Solution: Service bodies that follow established geographic boundaries—or, failing that, better communication between service bodies—will help us in our public outreach efforts.*
- *Services are often duplicated. Solution: Sharing services or reunifying with neighboring service bodies can help us use our resources more wisely.*
- *Some members don't want to get involved, either because they do not want to make a long, ongoing commitment or because they find the atmosphere at a business meeting intimidating or uncomfortable. Solution: Group support forums and project-based services give members more opportunities to get involved.*

Over the course of this conference cycle, we have been field testing the service system proposals, and have gathered a lot of helpful information about how communities can adapt the ideas in the proposals to meet their local needs. (See Appendix B for the complete field testing report.) We are still in the beginning stages of a potential transition to a new system, and are not asking for the adoption of a policy or service manual. We are only establishing a direction on the material to be developed.

We have produced a video synopsis of the service system material in the *Conference Agenda Report* and posted it for download. We hope this helps people better understand the material. You can download the video from the link on the conference webpage: www.na.org/conference.