Field Test Summary

The Service System Project field test ran for eight months in nine communities across the United States. Demographically, these ranged from large NA communities in wholly urban areas to those with smaller urban centers and surrounding suburban and rural groups. The size of the communities covered a wide range, as did their experience level in relation to the project. Three of the communities tested just the group support forum, while the other six tested both the group support forum and the local service conference and board.

The Group Support Forum (GSF)

Group support forums in the testing communities varied widely in size, from three participating groups per GSF to 17 in one community. Some of the larger, urban-based group support forums could potentially have been much larger if all groups had participated. The number of GSFs within the test communities ranged from two per community up to seven. Some communities maintained a stable number throughout the test, while others saw some realignment and consolidation of GSFs. Two communities had no functioning group support forums by the end of the test.

Participation at the GSF meetings ranged from two members up to 23. In general all the attendees were trusted servants, either GSRs or group support forum facilitators and delegates, but three of the communities reported regular attendance by members with no service position as such. Participation from interested members with no service position was perhaps more common in rural areas where ASC or LSC attendance involved more travel. A couple of communities had good experiences either with sponsors who encouraged sponsees to attend or members who would bring carloads of other, newer members to GSFs. In one field testing community having a pot luck at the group support forum seemed to increase participation, but two other communities that had food at their GSFs didn't seem to benefit from it. This appears to be another example of the need for flexibility and doing what works in individual communities.

Participation from the total number of groups in their individual communities again varied widely. Some had close to 100% participation while others were around 10%. There appeared to be some correlation between a low level of participation in the ASC or LSC and a low level of participation in the group support forum. In some cases, however, having GSF meetings seemed to make service meetings more attractive to GSRs because there wasn't as much time taken up at the ASC or LSC with reading of group reports.

The composition of each group support forum was primarily established by geographic proximity, with three interesting variations. One area created a GSF for rural groups and one for urban groups; one GSF was composed entirely of daytime meetings; and one GSF was made up of Spanish speaking groups. Group support forums were mostly scheduled either before or after regular recovery meetings, but again, there were variations. However, it was almost universally agreed that a consistent time and place for the group support forum meetings, and disseminating this information widely, was essential to their success.

One community has each of its three group support forums meet at the same time in separate rooms at a central location, enabling them to distribute literature to all the groups at one time. Another community is switching to such an arrangement now

that the formal field test is over. Both of these communities are considering having GSFs meet separately for part of the meeting and then come together for a full community meeting in the other part of the meeting. In another community, the group support forum for rural groups meets directly before the local service conference or local service board (where they receive literature) in order to minimize travel time for those groups. GSF meetings can run from 30 minutes up to 120 minutes, although one hour seems about average. Most communities reported minimal or zero expenses associated with GSF meetings, as they met at already-established meeting venues. Expenses of more than a few dollars were paid through the local service conference.

Most of the testers adopted the two-track model (where groups send a delegate to both the GSF and the local service conference or ASC). At least two communities saw some group support forums switch to the two-track model from a linear model (where groups send a delegate to the GSF, and the GSF in turn sends a delegate to the LSC or ASC) partway through the test because the linear model seemed to undermine the group-focused nature of the GSF at least to some degree. Nonetheless, three communities reported a mix of linear and two-track. Some rural groups that had previously been unrepresented at their ASC were represented by a GSF delegate, and two communities reported that the group support forums had delegates who presented reports at the area service committee or local service conference. Most seemed to like the idea of a GSF delegate to the ASC or LSC.

About two-thirds of the communities have group support forums that meet monthly. Two communities reported GSFs that meet eight times a year on the months with no quarterly ASC, and one community has GSFs that meet every other month, alternating with the LSC, which is also bimonthly.

The meetings of the group support forum were facilitated in a variety of ways: by local service board members, by facilitators selected by the GSFs themselves, and by experienced members with no formal service position. Some facilitators were selected on the fly, and others were elected into a standing position. The GSFs themselves focused primarily on the discussion of group issues and finding solutions to them, but also offered other topics and workshops. These included the organization and running of the GSF itself, literature and service topics such as the Third Tradition and service pamphlets, and fund flow and literature distribution. They also provided an opportunity to make the usual group announcement about events, service vacancies etc.

In several instances, communities found that focusing exclusively on challenges and successes experienced by recovery groups made it hard to maintain enthusiasm for the GSFs. There seems to be increasing interest in formalizing topics in some way— perhaps having regular workshops and training sessions determined in advance on issues like Issue Discussion Topics, introduction to PR or H&I, community surveys prior to the local service conference annual assembly, etc. In general, the idea of instituting more training and workshops in addition to a forum for group issues seemed to be a popular way to increase value to the fellowship and maintain interest in the group support forums.

Getting group support forum meetings started produced some common challenges, such as disseminating basic information about what the GSF meeting was for, where and when they were being held, and that everyone (not just group service representatives) is welcome to attend. This is a point that is underscored repeatedly

by the testing communities: better communication about GSFs is key to their success. There were some reports of members resistant to change, or opposed to any ideas from the service system project. In field testing the group support forums as well as the local service conferences, "personalities" continue to be a challenge for some of our communities.

Communities that seemed to have the most success with group support forums planned their start-up over a period of time. One community provided a detailed account of the process that took place over several months leading up to the establishment of GSFs. This began with an area discussion of the pros and cons of the ideas; a map was created outlining the boundaries of the proposed group support forums and facilitators were selected; and finally mock GSFs were held at the area service committee before holding them on their own in separate locations. Another community had a group support forum meeting within the area service committee to familiarize everyone with the idea before establishing them in neighborhoods.

Maintaining the group support forums seemed to require an ongoing commitment from trusted servants that was exaggerated by the short time frame of the field test itself. Rather than allow group support forums to grow organically within a community – several testers mentioned the idea of starting with one GSF and allowing it to divide – the field testers were asked to establish several all at once. This produced a shortage of facilitators and some burn-out of trusted servants. The one community that didn't seem to experience this had been developing group support forums for nearly a year prior to the field test and had a small group of trusted servants committed to the task. This echoes the suggestion from most of the testers that an essential part of starting and maintaining group support forums is having a strong base of experienced members within the community who are committed to the process. This could include definite steps such as creating a "GSF support team" and training facilitators in advance, which at least two communities did. Other suggestions for helping GSFs to become established and to grow were more basic and included having fun, providing food, creating a welcoming atmosphere, and inviting groups that aren't yet involved. At least two different communities have focused outreach efforts for groups who do not participate in either area service or group support forums, and some communities felt we could better use technology to support isolated groups. Several field testers mentioned the need for facilitation training in advance of establishing group support forums. Several others noted the importance of continuity of those who attend the GSFs. GSFs with stable, returning members seemed to be more successful.

Understanding the purpose of the GSF at the group level was also considered essential prior to them starting. Again, most of the testers suggested slowing down the process to ensure members and groups were on board, and sharing information through workshops, outreach or ad-hoc committees, attendance at group business meetings, and one-on-one with other members.

Several of the communities appear to have had to adjust their expectations of the groups within their community. For example, meeting more than once a month seems too much for many groups, as does the idea of obtaining their literature from somewhere other than this monthly meeting (although it should be noted that many groups do not obtain literature from their ASC at present). For some communities, having literature distributed at the group support forum has been instrumental in their success, though at least one community seems adamant that keeping literature

distribution away from the GSFs allows them to maintain their "meeting after the meeting" quality. For some rural groups, distance remains one of their primary challenges, although several communities reported that rural groups have derived some concrete benefits from group support forums. These include connection through a GSF to their local service body where one had not previously existed, a stable supply of literature and flyers, and a stronger connection to other NA groups and the broader NA community. Nonetheless, it appears we still need to work harder to help our rural or isolated NA groups to feel better supported.

Communication seems to have improved—often incrementally—in the majority of cases; the group support forum allowed information to pass from service bodies to groups, and between groups. Eliminating group reports from the business meeting and having a GSF report to highlight the most important elements was also cited as an improvement by a couple of testers. Others thought that the separation of groups into separate group support forums, and no longer being required to attend monthly meetings all together as a community, negatively affected communication. In a couple of cases, communities are talking about returning to a full community group-focused meeting rather than separate neighborhood meetings now that the field test is over.

The Local Service Conference (LSC) and Local Service Board (LSB)

Six communities tested the local service conference and local service board. One of these had been operating as a local service conference for a year prior to the field test.

The service system proposals suggest monthly meetings of the group support forum and local service board, and quarterly meetings of the local service conference. Four of the communities adapted this suggested schedule in some way. One continued to operate an area service committee which met on the months that the local service conference did not. Another rurally-based local service conference met on alternate months, which offered a considerable benefit particularly in the winter when travel is more difficult. Two communities had their GSRs continue to attend a service meeting every month, meaning there was not as much of a distinction between the local service board and local service conference meetings as described in the proposals. Both cited improved communication and a better functioning meeting as the reason for having GSRs gather monthly. One of these two communities initially tried quarterly attendance by GSRs, but quickly reverted to monthly attendance. Both of the communities also had separate monthly group support forum meetings with low levels of participation, which may suggest that anything more than one meeting a month is difficult for most groups to support. The exception to this was the group support forum for rural groups that met prior to the local service conference.

Of the two communities that followed the schedule suggested in the Service System Proposals for the local service board and the local service conference, one has their group support forums meet only on the months when there is no local service conference. They also utilize a central location for the group support forums to meet on the same evening. They are exploring the option of having a brief meeting for all the group support forum attendees prior to their separate GSF discussions so they are also moving towards some form of monthly gathering for the entire community. The other community that followed the model returned to monthly area service committee meetings once the field test was completed, but is considering the a similar arrangement where group support forums would meet at the same time and

same location and after having GSF meetings, get together as a whole group for a workshop drawn from the group support forum discussions. In general it seems that most of the testers felt that the ability to communicate to all the groups within the community at a single monthly gathering was necessary for successful communication.

The local service board consisted of the admin body from the ASC in each community. Some were able to widen participation to include some subcommittee chairs and project coordinators, but each community struggled to entirely engage all of the trusted servants. Each LSB met monthly, with one of the more rural communities meeting online every other month to minimize travel. Another community that had previously held a separate policy committee meeting each month combined this with the local service board meetings, reducing the number of service meetings each month. The same community also utilized an online discussion group for the local service board and found it helpful.

Participation by groups at the local service conference was generally the same as at the ASC, except for one community that reported an increase in attendance due to increased involvement in projects, and one that reported a sharp drop, possibly because two of the LSC meetings were scheduled on holidays. Most communities are hopeful that over time the changes will improve attendance, communication, and collaboration. The test demonstrated the need to remain flexible and make refinements as needed. For example, having a representative from the group support forum to the local service conference, even for two-track group support forums, is an idea many communities favor. One rural community also suggested ensuring that trusted servants were reimbursed for expenses related to attendance at the local service conference, as these were likely to be higher because of the distances involved in cases where area service committees combine to form a local service conference. They also have started rotating the location of the local service conference in an effort to encourage attendance.

Most testers reported using the same decision making process as they used prior to the field test, except for one that shifted to consensus-based decision making. Of the six local service conference testers, four practice CBDM (one for 8 years now). One hasn't yet made the switch to consensus-based decision making as they tried early on to "kick the hornet's nest" and it seemed like a change that could wait until further along in the transition. Another describes themselves as in the "infancy" of adopting CBDM. Of the four who practice consensus-based decision making, two let all present participate in the decision-making process, one allows only GSRs to participate, and the other allows all elected trusted servants to participate. Some communities say that adopting CBDM early on was crucial to making the rest of the transition to a GSF/LSC system.

Literature distribution and fund flow largely remained unchanged. Two communities tried having local service board members distribute literature at the group support forum meetings, but found it to be too stressful to maintain. One of these communities switched to having all the GSFs meet at the same time and venue each month where they could also collect their literature and pass on contributions. This system is working very well for them. One of the rural communities utilized some of their group support forums to pass on funds. This community does not distribute literature at the local service conference; instead, groups order literature for themselves.

The short timeline was a problem for all the field testers. Several communities wished they had the opportunity to better plan the transition to a new system, including better preparation for the planning assembly. Most mentioned the need to hold workshops to engage and inform GSRs and groups about the change, while some mentioned that an improved survey tool to prepare for the planning assembly might be helpful. Two communities shared their experience of implementing a gradual process of change at their area service committees prior to the field test. Often this included simple changes, such as no longer "holding GSRs hostage" by starting to distribute literature at the beginning of the ASC so that GSRs who were only there to pick up literature were free to go. At this same ASC they made improvements to GSR training and tried to ensure a friendlier atmosphere. All of these sorts of changes led to a group-focused portion of the ASC, which then created a good foundation for forming group support forums.

The planning assemblies themselves were generally successful, with several communities reporting participation by NAWS as one of the success factors. A couple of communities talked about comparing the planning assembly to their personal experience: They explained planning and projects to members by comparing them to the inventory steps in personal recovery. Service bodies can use an inventory process to improve as well. Shifting to a plan-driven system had several reported benefits, including establishing projects that answered community needs, improved understanding of financial procedures and accountability, and better training and mentoring of GSRs as a result of their involvement in the planning process. A couple of communities mentioned that they passed budgets on a local level that included projected income and expenses for the first time. One community also highlighted the change for GSRs from passively listening to reports to more fully participating in the agenda-setting and decision-making process, and felt this was beneficial not only for the GSRs but also for the groups within the community.

Some of the challenges reported, other than the short timeline for the field test, included changing the way services were delivered by established subcommittees, maintaining participation, and countering opposition to the project itself and the process of change from some local members. Some of the field testers talked about incorporating more workshop-type activities into an area service committee prior to a transition to begin to familiarize trusted servants and others with the workshop process at a service meeting.

Several communities mentioned that introducing projects has increased interest in service on the part of some who would rather not commit to a monthly subcommittee meeting, but appreciate a shorter, well defined task.

All communities seem to utilize a mixture of standing committees, coordinators with resource pools, and workgroups. Local service board members seem to be the main source of project coordination, which in some cases put an undue strain on those members, but also led to several projects primarily focused on internal tasks, such as redrafting guidelines and supporting the GSFs. Devoting projects to these sorts of tasks, which are related to the transition to GSFs, LSCs, or LSBs, seemed to be a successful strategy for these communities. Long-standing services such as H&I generally continued to be provided by subcommittees, with any shift to project-based provision being mostly in the area of activities and events.

Different communities experienced varying levels of success with the projects they adopted after the planning assembly. Some were completed as planned, while other communities struggled first to create plans, and then to follow through on them.

There is a mixture of thoughts about policy among the field testers. Some favor initial projects or workgroups devoted to policy creation for the transition and new system. One community cautions that the ASC should make a clear decision to set aside area policy for the transition. Another community suggests that those making a transition should build on what is working and develop policy as you go along to reflect those changes and best practices.

Some communities feel that creating group support forums first is important, with some suggesting that the area service committee should be divided into local service conference and group support forum sessions prior to establishing separate group support forum meetings. Others feel that creating a planning assembly and a series of local service conferences is the right first step. Regardless, all communities see pre-planning and building of community support and awareness as central. Several ideas for this were offered including:

- Team-building within the local service board
- Better preparing subcommittees to transition
- Educational workshops at the ASC prior to transition

Regardless of what elements of a local service system are changed first, everyone seemed to agree that change should not happen all at once, as it was confusing and involved an unsustainable workload for local leaders. At the same time, for most of these communities, exploring changes, even ideas that may ultimately have been rejected, was a positive process. The idea that GSRs go to a service meeting to create priorities and participate, not just listen and vote was very positive for many groups, as was the idea that the way we do service isn't set in stone. The field test gave some communities the opportunity to approach service with creativity and innovation.