Best Practices for Virtual NA Meetings – Draft Outline to post for review

March 2021

This document is the next step in creating new 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 outline is related to the first focus.

We have posted a second, shorter survey to continue gathering experience for the second focus, the role of virtual meetings within the service system, and how they are connected to it. The survey will be posted here www.na.org/toolbox from early March to 31 May 2021.

This draft outline contains a list of topics that we believe the Fellowship is looking for shared experience about, along with some notes for each one to indicate the main points of the content. Please view what follows as a work in progress. Your input will improve this draft.

We encourage you to send us your thoughts in response to these questions:

1. Are there any topics that should be added?
2. Are there any topics that should not be included?
3. Do you have any experience or ideas for the content of any topic that is not already included? (Please make sure to indicate which topic your thoughts relate to.)
4. Do you have any other thoughts or ideas to offer?

Please email your thoughts to toolbox@na.org. The initial deadline for input to this outline is 31 May, 2021, but please send your thoughts as soon as you are able to. As we receive input and the outline develops, we will post revised versions of this document on the project webpage at www.na.org/toolbox and extend the deadline as needed. If you check back frequently, please pay attention to the date at the top of this document.

Introduction

- What is a virtual meeting?
    - We are using 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. Suggestions in this tool may not apply to every type of virtual meeting platform.
    - Virtual meetings can be offered by NA groups, by service bodies, or as events hosted by a group or a service body. Virtual meetings may also occur informally between friends.
- Brief history of virtual meetings
- References to the guidance in *The Group Booklet* and the relevance of this guidance to virtual meetings
- How can virtual meetings help to better carry the message?

Choosing a meeting platform

The importance of discussing the options as a group, rather than an individual making the decision, and gaining experience of different options by attending other virtual meetings

Factors to consider – cost, accessibility in terms of geographical location and type of device, familiarity with the platform, ease of use, meeting capacity.

Desirable features may include:
- The ability to join the meeting via a simple link
- Access to the meeting without internet service
- Ways to help secure the meeting from intruders
- Screen-sharing to show literature and other material

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 and basic instructions on how to use it
- Meeting ID, password, and phone number for audio-only connections
- Time (including time zone) and day
- Language meeting is conducted in, and translation/interpretation services if provided
- Format and topic

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 for virtual meetings that groups might wish to request include:
- Avoiding constant movement or other visual distractions
- Not eating, smoking, or vaping on-screen
- Remaining muted when not sharing
- Raising hands to share
- Limiting the use of chat during the meeting to avoid distractions

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

Suggestions for groups:
- Include a brief technical orientation in the meeting format
- Always create a co-host in case the host loses their connection and to assist in the meeting
- Designate experienced group trusted servants to assist before and during the meeting
- Provide links to training tools such as pamphlets, training videos, PowerPoints, and workshops on the basic features of the chosen platform and tips for using it successfully

Keeping a virtual meeting secure and dealing with disruption

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. Virtual meetings can be set up to provide a number of safeguards to minimize issues before they occur. These may include:
- Disable any features that allow attendees except for the meeting's trusted servants to share content on the screen
- Disable recording options
- Disable virtual backgrounds or turn off participant's video if necessary
- Ensure all attendees are muted when they join the meeting
- 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 to trusted servants from the group
- Provide training for the group's trusted servants
- Stay current on changes to platform features

And these 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

Maintaining personal anonymity

This topic applies to both an individual's privacy, and to the privacy of the other members attending the meeting.

Settings that record the meeting and save it to a cloud should 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. Groups are encouraged to discuss these options and determine what is most appropriate for their meetings.

Log in to a meeting using first name and initial only, rather than a full name. This can both preserve a member's personal anonymity, 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.

Group decisions:
- List meeting information as publicly as possible so it can be found easily by any addict wishing to attend or list meeting information only on NA websites and in private social media groups to discourage disruptive intruders
- Provide 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
- Cameras on to confirm identities or 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 a group. 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
- Show new members where NA materials and links to other meetings can be found online
- Send welcome packs of literature 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

Groups may choose to provide some form of verification that a member attended one of their meetings. One simple method employed is to create an email address for the group 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 for groups 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) interpretation in meetings
- Provide subtitles during meetings
- Provide information about literature in audio and ASL formats
- 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

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. Different methods are available in different parts of the world that enable members to send contributions directly to group treasurers, or to a group's bank account if one exists.

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 be possible to have two members count the Seventh Tradition collection as suggested in the *Treasurer's Handbook* if contributions are sent directly to a personal bank account. If this is the case, care should be taken to closely adhere to the other suggestions offered in the handbook.

Groups may suggest that contributions be sent directly to service bodies if the group is unable to manage electronic payments, or if they have minimal expenses. Some service bodies have created contribute buttons on websites to make this easier. Instructions for how to make payments may be displayed onscreen during the meeting or via the chat feature. Groups may choose to encourage members 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.

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 groups
- Literature, keytags, and medallions can be purchased directly from NA service offices and other outlets

When reproducing and distributing electronic versions of literature, care should be taken to follow the guidelines for these practices agreed upon by the Fellowship. Information about this can be found here www.na.org/fipt. The most common caution is not to distribute NA copyrighted material outside of the meeting.

Additional service positions for virtual meetings

Most virtual meetings have multiple hosts to assist with the technical administration of the meeting and to take over the host role if the host has technical problems. Other tasks may include:
- Muting and unmuting attendees
- Screen-sharing literature
- Checking for raised hands
- Monitoring the waiting room and the chat feature

Monitoring the meeting to minimize disruptions and greeting new members are also commonly assigned tasks.

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 group's trusted servants 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 organized by the group
- 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.

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 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 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.