

Thought Force Report
February 3, 2018 NCWSC

Thought Force Chair: John M.

Thought Force Members: David B. Rosanna H. Sidney R. Yvonne P.

Framing: The following background on the Do Not Refer topic is from conversations at the WSC since 2005 and provides the framing for this committee's work in answering the Chairperson's charge.

2005 Discussion about Do Not Refer begins at the World Service Conference.

"The Committee discussed "cult-like" groups and sponsorship. Committee members shared their experience with these groups, where Sponsors decide for others what meetings to attend and how to dress and behave. This type of direction is based on "lineage" of sponsorship. Members in these groups are afraid to speak up, leave the group, or question the way the group is being "run." Delegates suggested that longtime Al-Anon members visit these groups and share a different view of sponsorship. Experience was shared that focusing energy on the negatives of these groups often gave them more power. The Committee recommended that the World Service Office (WSO) create a bookmark on what sponsorship is and is not."

2005 World Service Conference Summary, Group Services Report p.14

2006 *CHOSEN AGENDA ITEM NO. 2*

How does the fellowship help newcomers understand that Al-Anon sponsorship does not include: Pyramid sponsorship—Sponsor, grand-sponsor, great grand-sponsor? Need for prior approval to be in a group? Being told not to attend other meetings? Fear of leaving a group, alienation, snubbing, or ridicule?

Joyce B., the Panel 45 Delegate from Utah, introduced this topic with a brief presentation. Her comments follow: "To me sponsorship is a very special and intimate relationship. The following is on page 12 of Sponsorship, What It's All About (P-31), 'Often, a Sponsor is the first person to give us unconditional love.' ... That's good and necessary. However, it can be personally devastating to have someone use that trust and willingness for his or her own purposes... "Last year, one of the Chosen Agenda Item Workshops (of which I was a participant) was 'In what ways can we support and/or protect those members affected by the increasing number of high-pressure groups (dictatorship rather than sponsorship)?' At that point, I was surprised to learn that there are an increasing number of groups throughout the United States who practice sponsorship in this way.

2006 World Service Conference Summary p. 37

2009 *CHOSEN AGENDA ITEM NO. 2*

How can Areas, districts, and groups look at unhealthy groups in a positive way?

A few years ago, our Delegate brought to the World Service Conference the increasing problem of high-pressure groups in our Area. She spoke about someone she sponsors who had just left “the group” after 21 years under the thumb of a Sponsor. This woman and her family were severely affected by her group membership in every aspect of their lives: spiritually, emotionally, financially, socially, and had a very warped view of Al-Anon and A.A. Another former member told me she had decided to leave the group, but her husband wasn’t going to. Divorce papers were waiting for her immediately. The Sponsorship—Working Together to Recover bookmark (M-78) was an immediate response to bring the situation to the member’s attention. It’s important to remember that the problem still exists, and it is our responsibility to be informed and aware. In my Area there are several large high-pressure meetings. There are affiliated meetings all over the country. Using the name of Al-Anon, they shut members away from others, arrange marriages, approve the types of jobs members can hold, require members to recruit new members, and require members to pay dues. One solution is to love and support the members and welcome them to Al-Anon when they leave the group.”
2009 World Service Conference Summary p.41

2011 Thought force to support areas in dealing with groups whose activities fail to consider Al-Anon or Alateen as a whole.

One of the Chosen Agenda Items (CAI) at the 2009 World Service Conference was: How to support Areas that deal with unhealthy groups in a positive and productive way? There were similar discussions at the 2005, 2006, and 2008 World Service Conferences, as well as articles in The Forum. Following the 2009 presentation, there was a lengthy discussion from the Conference floor. It was noted that this issue continuously surfaces and is a source of frustration in many Areas. Several Conference members asked that a Thought Force be appointed to come up with ideas that might address this issue. The topic was brought to the July 2009 Board of Trustees (BOT) meeting for discussion. It was felt that the word “unhealthy” is judgmental and subjective because most groups do not consider themselves unhealthy. Further conversation resulted in the question that appears in the charge. The Thought Force was charged with identifying the issues that may lead to the practice of activities that fail to consider Al-Anon or Alateen as a whole and develop a variety of strategies that will assist the Areas in dealing with these groups in a positive and productive manner. The practices included:

1. High-pressure groups.
2. Unregistered groups.
3. Unfilled group (district and Area) positions.
4. Failure to follow the intent of the Group Registration Process.
5. Alcoholics Anonymous (“Big Book”) study groups.
6. Speakers from high-pressure groups.
7. Lack of trust at all levels.

8. Outside literature used in meetings.
9. Modification of the wording of the Steps, Traditions, Concepts of Service, and General Warranties of the Conference.
10. Failure to financially support Al-Anon as a whole.

For the presentation, the Thought Force used the practice of “Outside literature used in meetings” as a model for discussion in the Areas. The Thought Force presented several strategies to deal with the practice of using outside literature in meetings.

Outside literature used in meetings

Strategy A: Emphasize Conference approved changes to the “Digest of Al-Anon Alateen Policies” in the Service Manual Anon’s message in focus and encourage unity, only Al-Anon/Alateen Conference Approved Literature (CAL) and Al-Anon/Alateen service tools are displayed, distributed, and used at Al-Anon and Alateen meetings, conferences, and conventions. These items reflect the informed group conscience of the Al-Anon Family Groups as expressed by its other outside materials can distort the Al-Anon approach.”

Strategy B: Literature references, such as “Obedience to the Unenforceable” (The Al-Anon Family Groups–Classic Edition, pgs. 166-167), can be featured on the Members’ Web Site and in The Forum and other communications.

Strategy C: Publicize the availability of the pamphlet, Why Conference Approved Literature? (P-35)

Strategy D: Create workshops based on Why Conference Approved Literature? (P-35)

Strategy E: Create workshops based on the 2010-2013 Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual, “Digest of Al-Anon and Alateen Policies” section, “Conference Approved Literature and Service/Tools/Materials,” pgs. 99-106.

Strategy F: Create workshops based on the CAL Corner from The Forum.

After the members of the Thought Force presented each strategy, Conference members discussed the topic and answered the following questions: Which strategy did you They are all well and good, if you can get your foot in the door in regard to these groups. How do you get this message to other members? • Letting them know there antonymous. How do you bridge the gap? • When we had a group that was committed to using outside literature, we went to that group and said, “What you are doing is lovely, but we would ask you not to call it Al-Anon.” • We have had the same kind of difficulties in getting groups to consider this topic. I referenced page 100 of the Service Manual that shows how to identify CAL. It helps when the message comes from other people in the fellowship and not just the Area officers. • I like Strategy D: create workshops based on Why Conference Approved Literature? (P-35). I suggest we have a Task Force to create workshops, so we appeal to the people who want our help. • I explain to newcomers about the CAL symbol and how it identifies CAL. • I have

asked for a group conscience within my group that chooses to use outside literature. Now I would like to have the district's assistance. • I am one of those who likes the A.A. "Big Book," and I don't think it helps to hear that this is what is in the Service Manual. I have found that experience, strength, and hope are the best way to do this. Point out that using the "Big Book" perpetuates our focus on the alcoholic instead of ourselves. • Anytime someone says, "You should . . .," I stop listening. • A strategy would be to have a dialogue with the members of the group to find out why CAL is not adequate for the group and encourage dialogue with the Area. • Sometimes it's just the member who is chairing the meeting who reads from something that is not CAL. How do you address that, without being rude and interrupting in mid-sentence? • We used to have tapes of convention speakers; one day I brought it up that these tapes aren't CAL. • In our Area, we have a problem with the "Big Book," mainly in meetings that have a large population of dual members. What we try to do at the Area World Service Committee is to educate the members on what they can do. When they're at A.A. meetings, we agree that they use the "Big Book." We have our own basic book, *How Al-Anon Works*, that we can use at our meetings. • I have been known as an Al-Anon cop. Instead of interrupting while speaking, I speak one-on-one with the member to explain and educate. It's not just my responsibility, we're all responsible—not just those in service, but all members. • The problem with this conflict is that we keep going head-on. Maybe it's time to change the conversation to "what are the benefits and what are the negatives of not using CAL?" In that conversation, I would hope that you could share that it was Lois, assisted by Bill, who edited *Al-Anon Family Groups* in 1955 and that they and our early pioneers believed that Al-Anon should have its own literature. • I also thought about changing the conversation and having a meeting on unity. That is the point of using only CAL. • Using the outside literature seems to be a symptom of the isolating group that has only learned one idea out of the Traditions and that is "group autonomy." • I would like us to see us tie our cultural competence and linguistic competence into this topic. ***World Service Conference Summary 2011 p. 52-53***

2011 The following questions were asked of the Delegates at the WSC in 2011 (Please note use of the term delist is used in place of Do Not Refer):

1. If your Area has a delisting criteria and procedure, please share that with us. Specifically, what principles were discussed when making the decision to delist? Who makes the decision not to list or refer members to a group? How does your Area feel about this decision/process?
2. If your Area has criteria and procedures for relisting a group that has been delisted, please share that. How are the principles applied? Who makes the decision? Have you worked through this process? What was the result? What are your Area's thoughts about this decision/process?

3. What, if anything, might the World Service Office do to support Areas in regard to referring members, newcomers, and professionals to groups that an Area has determined do not follow Al-Anon's principles?

2011 Additionally, several Areas are requesting assistance from the WSO regarding referrals to meetings that have been determined to be in violation of Al-Anon philosophy or Traditions. Historically, the Policy Committee and the WSO have not become involved in Area issues. During the discussions, numerous ideas were considered:

1. Should WSO code groups "do not refer" on our list to support Areas that have also coded meetings "do not refer?"
2. Would this violate Traditions and/or Concepts? • What criteria are needed to delist and relist meetings?
3. Would WSO be considered the 'Big Brother'?
4. WSO is here to support Areas, but would this overstep boundaries?
5. How does this relate to the spiritual idea of "talk to each other and reason things out"?

After discussions, a Thought Force was formed to explore options on how the WSO could handle this situation. **2011 World Service Conference Summary, Policy Committee Report p. 89**

2011 A 2011 WSC Thought Force identified several practices within meetings that fail to consider Al-Anon as a whole such as, but not limited to high pressure groups, AA Big Book study groups, modification of the language in the Legacies and several other practices.

2012 "The Policy Committee continued the discussion about groups that do not adhere to Al-Anon's Twelve Traditions. Some Areas have requested that WSO not refer callers to these meetings. Hence, this topic has been referred to as "do not refer." Normally, neither WSO nor the Policy Committee gets involved with Area issues. However, the concern on how this affects Al-Anon as a whole has resulted in further discussion at the Policy Committee. The Committee recognized that many Areas have not held discussions with their members, and do not currently have policies or a process in place to address these groups. Therefore, the Committee is facilitating a discussion at the 2012 World Service Conference to identify a list of principles that Areas can utilize when determining whether or not a group is adhering to the Twelve Traditions; principles the groups can use to more fully comply with the Twelve Traditions; and principles the Area can utilize to support groups to successfully adhere to the Twelve Traditions. Once Areas have had this discussion, the WSC will be clearer in what role, if any, the World Service Office should play in supporting the Areas and the groups." **2012 World Service Conference Summary, Policy Committee Report**

- **The principles Areas can use to discuss and develop policies for groups not adhering to the Legacies.**
 - **The principles the Area can use to support groups to successfully follow the Legacies.**
- Principles above personalities. Groups that set themselves above the group conscience of Al-Anon Family Groups as a whole are acting as a personality rather than abiding by the principles. There's an ego factor when a group says, "We can do whatever we want."

- There needs to be a neutral, clear guideline so there isn't a subjective method of making such decisions. Example: you have to use CAL. Once you're in grey areas of interpretation, you have opened the door for people to impose their personal views and personalities get involved.
 - Presume goodwill. Use dialogue.
 - Tradition Four allows a group to continue to operate outside of the Traditions as long as they are not using the Al-Anon name.
 - Our district is in the process of doing an inventory because of the use of outside literature in meetings. Using A.A. literature is really an endorsement of A.A. in our meetings. I need to be willing to be uncomfortable.
 - The spiritual principle that comes to mind is the sharing as equals.
 - I need to use all the Traditions, and all of each Tradition.
 - We need to not be personally punitive as stated in Warranty Four.
 - It is important to avoid public controversy.
 - We need to consider all our Legacies.
- The Policy Committee is asking you to take this discussion back to your Area and have a discussion on how to handle groups operating outside of the Legacies. To clarify for those who weren't here the last few years, this is a topic that came from the Delegates, not the WSO. We asked what practices did the Area have in place to delist the groups and what the groups need to do to be relisted. If the Areas have a process in place and the WSO sees it as fair and balanced, then the Policy Committee would discuss whether they would have a "Do Not Refer" policy. We may consider not referring, but not delist. The WSO was trying to get the talking points for the Areas that need help to develop a policy, but the WSO is certainly not demanding anything. At this point, the WSO does not have a policy in place. The WSO continues to serve all groups.
- 2012 World Service Conference Summary, Policy Committee Report p. 48***

2013 "At the 2011 WSC there was a request for the World Service Office to develop a procedure of not referring newcomers to Al-Anon groups that service arms believe are operating outside of the Legacies. The Policy Committee discussed this request in depth and brought a presentation to the 2012 WSC that would encourage service arms to identify principles that are important for an Area to consider when developing a policy to deal with groups that are believed to be operating outside of the Legacies and also to identify principles that are important for the Area to use as they encourage, support, and educate the groups to return to operating in a manner that is within the Legacies. After discussions of the principles, Areas would then be able to develop a principle-based policy when determining whether or not a group is adhering to the Twelve Traditions. These spiritual principles may also provide guidance to the groups to more fully comply with the Twelve Traditions. Once Areas have had this discussion and have a policy in place, the Policy Committee would discuss what role the World Service Office would play in supporting Areas and groups who implement a "do not refer" policy.

2013 World Service Conference Summary, Policy Committee Report

2014 "Several Areas are working on composing criteria for groups in their Area to be listed on Area meeting schedules. Areas, districts, and AISs are encouraged to be sure that such guidelines are principle-based and can be applied to all groups."

2014 World Service Conference Summary, Member Services Report p. 102

2017 In 2017, at the February NCWSC meeting, the Chair asked, “Who would be interested in starting the Do Not Refer discussion with a Thought Force?” The response was substantial unanimity to do so. A sign-up sheet went around the room, the Thought Force was formed, and I was appointed chair. We began meeting in April every Sunday by conference call for one hour. Members were asked to submit a report on their specific area of research followed by Q&A.

The Charge

Consider the 5 KBDM questions and apply them to the following charge:

- 1) Why has our Area found it necessary to form this Thought Force?
- 2) Is our Area affected by various practices not using our 3 Legacies and Al-Anon principles?
- 3) What ought our Area do with groups who are not abiding by the 4th Tradition?

KBDM Question #1: What do we currently know about the needs, wants and preferences of our members that relates to this discussion?

Through research, 6 out of 27 Districts responded that:

- Some groups choose to use outside literature, A.A. Big Book, A.A. promises, ACA Inc. literature.
- Some groups choose to endorse outside issues; changing the wording of the Steps or Traditions during the meeting.
- Some groups choose to call themselves Al-Anon but are not registered.
- Some groups choose to use “high pressure” sponsorship; also known as pyramid sponsorship.
- Some groups choose to endorse outside practices; meditation meetings, showing non-CAL film.
- Some groups choose to exclude members; men only, women only.
- Some groups choose to use religious materials during the meeting.
- Some groups are comprised entirely of AA members.

KBDM Question #2: What do we know about both our resources and strategic position that is relevant to this issue?

- **Resources:** CAL, Service Manual, Our Three Legacies, Current and Past Delegates, Trustees and Trusted Servants, NCWSC & NCWSA Minutes, AIB Questions, NCWSA Website, NCWSA Guidelines and Bylaws, World Service Conference Summaries and the World Service Office.
- **Strategic position** is defined as a strategy that determines the character of the organization. NCWSA is the second largest Area in North America and as such, our choices influence Al-Anon as a whole.
- “The WSO will register a group with the understanding that the group will abide by the Al-Anon Traditions and not affiliate with or endorse any outside entity or practice. Joint meetings for Al-Anon and A.A. members, meetings comprised of only A.A. members and

groups that practice specific therapies, such as guided meditation are not in keeping with Al-Anon principles and do not qualify to be registered as an Al-Anon meeting.”

Service Manual p. 31 WSO Registration Process

- “No changes are to be made in the Al-Anon or Alateen Traditions, the Steps, the Concepts of Service or the General Warranties of the Conference Charter without written consent of three-quarters of the Al-Anon Family Groups.” ***Service Manual p. 172 Charter***
- We currently have NCWSA Conflict Resolution Guidelines B-27 and ***Using Al-Anon Principles to Resolve Conflict Kit P-70***.

KBDM Question #3: What do we know about the current environment and culture that relates to this issue?

- We know there are 7 Area Assemblies that have already approved Do Not Refer Policies including California (South), Ohio, Missouri, Virginia, Tennessee, Idaho, New York (South).
- Al-Anon’s Declaration of Unity puts it this way: “Each member of the fellowship is a significant part of a great circle of hope. While respecting each other’s individuality, our common welfare must come first. Our recovery depends on our mutual need and an atmosphere of trust.” ***How Al-Anon Works p. 107 Tradition One***
- “To keep Al-Anon’s message in focus and encourage unity, only Al-Anon/Alateen Conference Approved Literature (CAL) and Al-Anon/Alateen service tools are displayed, distributed, and used at Al-Anon and Alateen meetings, including meetings at conferences and conventions. These items reflect the informed group conscience of the Al-Anon Family Groups as expressed by its World Service Conference since 1961.” ***Service Manual p. 104 Use of Materials at Al-Anon Meetings***
- Tradition Four says Each group should be autonomous, except in matters that affect another group or Al-Anon or AA as a whole. The spiritual principle here is *freedom with balance*.
- “Although our “unenforceable” legacies offer some flexibility in interpretation, it is important to keep Al-Anon’s foundation firm.” “We are asked to be obedient to the unenforceable.” ***Paths to Recovery p. 164 Tradition Four***
- Three Obstacles to Success: Dominance, Gossip and Discussion of Religion. ***Service Manual p. 24***

KBDM Question #4 What are the ethical implications of our choice? What are the pros and cons?

- “That no conference action ever be personally punitive or an incitement to public controversy.” ***General Warranty Four***
- “We protect our Fellowship and its principles, but not through revenge or punishment of individuals.” “Peace is our goal, and we believe that our best defense is to set a good example.” ***Paths to Recovery, General Warranty Four p. 326-327***
- “In keeping with the Traditions and Warranty Five of Concept Twelve, local, Area, or WSO service entities have no authority to close a group or engage in other punitive actions against a group because they disapprove of the manner in which a group practices the Al-Anon program.” ***Service Manual, Autonomy of Groups p. 101***
- “It has been said, Al-Anon is prepared to give away its knowledge and experience – all except the Al-Anon name itself.” ***Service Manual, General Warranty Four p. 223***
- “It is within the autonomy of the Area to establish a policy on how to handle groups that are not Al-Anon. It is not punitive to remove a group from a District or Area meeting list if the group is not Al-Anon. Hopefully the Districts would work with the Area under such a policy.

For a District to just remove a group on its own because they do not like what they are doing is punitive.” *World Service Office, Member Services*

- “Each group conducts its internal affairs as it wishes, only abstaining from acts that might injure Al-Anon or AA as a whole.” *Service Manual, General Warranty Five p. 225*

KBDM Question #5: What do we not know about this issue that we wish we knew?

- **Under the current situation with no Do Not Refer Policy:**
 - We don’t know how the Al-Anon program will be affected by groups that choose not to follow Traditions.
 - We don’t know how members will be affected by groups that choose not to follow Traditions.
 - We don’t know how many Areas are going to adopt a DNR Policy and when WSO will finally stop referring to problem groups.
- **If the Area adopts a Do Not Refer Policy:**
 - We don’t know if a Do Not Refer Policy will work for us.
 - Is WSO going to not refer anymore and what would their policy look like? The WSO only follows the will of the groups at the direction of the WSC but how many Areas would have to adopt a DNR Policy before the WSO begins to implement their own protocol to follow the will of those Areas.
 - Would an effective Do Not Refer Policy address the problems facing Al-Anon today?
 - We don’t know how a Do Not Refer Policy will be communicated to non-represented groups in our Area.

Research Revealed:

- When asked what approaches have been successful or unsuccessful in communicating with these groups, the Districts that responded said ...
 - The groups feel what they are doing does not harm other meetings or Al-Anon as a whole.
 - The groups just listened but were not interested in discussion or changing.
 - In the past, one District’s dialogue resulted in removing six meetings from their list that chose not to follow the Traditions. Eventually, some of those meetings closed and some agreed to change and were added back to the list.
 - That there is a need for members to become aware of and understand the purpose and importance of following the Traditions, Concepts and General Warranties.
 - That until the Northern CA fellowship becomes more informed about the purpose and importance of following our Legacies, there will continue to be dilution and distortion of the Al-Anon program.
 - That while we currently have a conflict resolution process in place (B-27) and conflict resolution tools (P-70), Districts are unable to reach a resolution with groups that choose to not consider the Traditions or Al-Anon as a whole.

Recommendation:

- It is the recommendation of this Thought Force that NCWSA create a Task Force to establish a working Do Not Refer Policy, with an appeal process, to support Districts in helping meetings remain consistent with Al-Anon Traditions and policies as presented in the Service Manual.
- An effective policy will clearly outline how to communicate to a group why they are put on a Do Not Refer list and what is needed to get back on their District and Area meeting lists and websites.

Closing

- This report was presented at the **August 2017 NCWSC**. Members were asked if they wanted to move forward with a Do Not Refer Task Force which would develop a policy to be presented for approval at Assembly. NCWSC members voted with substantial unanimity to move forward with forming a Task Force to write a policy.
- Thank you for letting us be of service to the fellowship of NCWSA.
Respectfully submitted by John M., Do Not Refer Thought Force Chair