

What the A.A. Service Manual has to say about the General Service structure and why the role of the General Service Representative is key*

The Twelve Traditions make clear the principle that A.A., as such, should never be organized, that there are no bosses and no government in A.A. Yet at the same time, the Traditions recognize the need for some kind of organization to carry the message in ways that are impossible for the local groups—such as publication of a uniform literature and public information resources, helping new groups get started, publishing an international magazine, and carrying the message in other languages into other countries.

The Conference structure - an overview

The U.S./Canada Conference structure is the framework in which these “general services” are carried out. It is a method by which A.A.’s collective group conscience can speak force-fully and put its desires for Conference-wide services into effect. It is the structure that takes the place of government in A.A., ensuring that the full voice of A.A. will be heard and guaranteeing that the desired services will continue to function under all conditions.

The story of the development of general services and the Conference structure is told in the historical material that appears at the beginning of this manual. Today, general services include all kinds of activities within the Conference structure, carried on by groups, districts, area committees, delegates, trustees, the General Service Office and the Grapevine. Usually, these services affect A.A. as a whole.

An Upside-Down Organization

Alcoholics Anonymous has been called an upside-down organization because, as the structure chart shows, the groups are on top and the trustees at the bottom. Bill W. wrote in Concept I: “The A.A. groups today hold ultimate responsibility and final authority for our world services....” Then, in Concept II, Bill made it clear that the groups “delegated to the Conference complete authority for the active maintenance of our world services and thereby made the Conference... the actual voice and effective conscience for our whole Society.”

Communication Through the Structure

Keeping a balance between ultimate authority and responsibility and the active, day-to-day functioning of world services means there must be constant communication among all elements of the structure.

THE GROUP: The communication process starts with the group, which lets its group conscience—for or against change, approval or disapproval of a proposed action—be known to its elected general service representative (G.S.R.). The G.S.R. makes sure the group’s wishes are heard and fully considered at the district and area levels, and that they are part of the delegate’s thinking at the Conference. After

each annual Conference, the G.S.R. is responsible for making sure that group members are informed about what went on at the Conference and made aware of the full range of Advisory Actions.

THE DISTRICT: Groups are organized into districts, collections of groups located near one another. The G.S.R.s of these groups select district committee members (D.C.M.s), who become part of the area committee.

THE AREA: The U.S./Canada Conference is divided into 93 areas, made up of a state or province, part of a state or province, or in some cases parts of more than one state or province. At the area assembly, a delegate is elected to represent the area at the annual Conference meeting.

THE CONFERENCE AND THE DELEGATE: At the annual Conference meeting, matters of importance to the Fellowship as a whole are first considered and discussed by one of the standing Conference committees, then brought to the full Conference in the form of committee recommendations. All Conference members then have the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the recommendations before they are voted on. Committee recommendations that are approved become Conference Advisory Actions. After the Conference, the delegate reports back to the area, working through D.C.M.s and group G.S.R.s. At the same time, any Conference Advisory Actions that were referred to the trustees are sent to either the appropriate trustees' committee, G.S.O., or the A.A. Grapevine for implementation.

Why Do We Need a Conference?

The late Bernard B. Smith, nonalcoholic, then chairperson of the board of trustees, and one of the architects of the Conference structure, answered that question superbly in his opening talk at the 1954 meeting:

“We may not need a General Service Conference to ensure our own recovery. We do need it to ensure the recovery of the alcoholic who still stumbles in the darkness one short block from this room. We need it to ensure the recovery of a child being born tonight, destined for alcoholism. We need it to provide, in keeping with our Twelfth Step, a permanent haven for all alcoholics who, in the ages ahead, can find in A.A. that rebirth that brought us back to life.

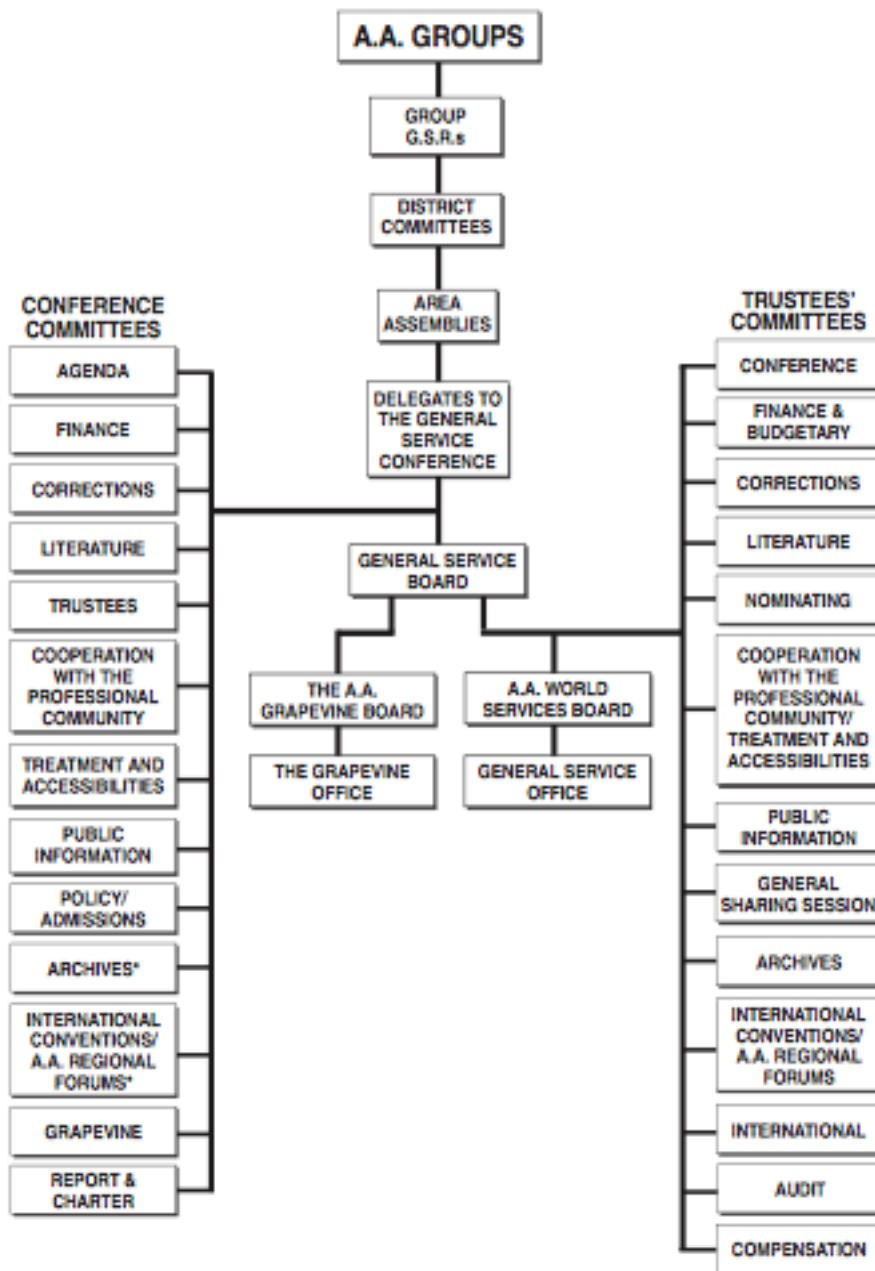
“We need it because we, more than all others, are conscious of the devastating effect of the human urge for power and prestige which we must ensure can never invade A.A. We need it to ensure A.A. against government, while insulating it against anarchy; we need it to protect A.A. against disintegration while preventing overintegration. We need it so that Alcoholics Anonymous, and Alcoholics Anonymous alone, is the ultimate repository of its Twelve Steps, its Twelve Traditions, and all of its services.

“We need it to ensure that changes within A.A. come only as a response to the needs and the wants of all A.A., and not of any few. We need it to ensure that the

doors of the halls of A.A. never have locks on them, so that all people for all time who have an alcoholic problem may enter these halls unasked and feel welcome. We need it to ensure that Alcoholics Anonymous never asks of anyone who needs us what his or her race is, what his or her creed is, what his or her social position is.”

- **This information was excerpted from the A.A. Service Manual, pages S15-S20.**

The General Service Conference Structure (U.S. and Canada)



*Secondary committees.