

Information to Consider When Holding Either Virtual or Hybrid Meetings in the Virginia Area

Date: February 2021

Every member of the Virginia Area AFG has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. To help determine the best approach for each Group to move forward and meet either in a Face-to-Face (FTF), Hybrid (combination of FTF and electronically or Virtual to Area has collected information and current guidance to many of the Area's questions. We are providing the following information based on the World Service Office guidance and questions from Area members. This information has been compiled after consulting with other Areas and includes input and guidance from staff at the World Service Office (WSO).

Background Information on Virginia Area meetings:

1. To be registered with the Virginia Area an Al-Anon or Alateen Group must have a physical presence and a Group Contact Person or CMA. This will tie the Group to a District within the Virginia Area and allow for the Links of Service to be established.
2. The Area recognizes that the pandemic has forced all Groups to adjust the way meetings are held. For this reason, unless directed by the District Representative, no Group will be de-activated during the pandemic. Meetings can be temporarily suspended or move to a virtual or hybrid format depending on the Group's decision.
3. During the pandemic physically attending meetings had to be suspended. Each Group was encouraged to hold a virtual Group Conscience, to determine if they would/could continue to meet virtually. This decision was conveyed to the Area Group Records Coordinator to update the Area's database as either: Suspended, Temporarily Virtual, or Hybrid
4. If a meeting decides to be virtual permanently, it can no longer be a member of a District or the Virginia Area. However, it can register as an Electronic meeting with the WSO.

5. For safety reasons only virtual or hybrid Alateen meetings that have 1 AMIAS present can in the Virginia Area. If possible 2 AMIAS's are recommended, but not required.
6. Electronic meetings use the same meeting format as FTF Group meetings. Only the method of sharing is different. Any Al-Anon-related topic may be used for a meeting. Additional information can be found in the Electronic Meeting Guideline (G-39), Fact Sheet for Electronic Meetings (S-60), or the 2018-2021 Service Manual. All of these are available on the Members' Web site.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Question 1: Our face-to-face (FTF) meeting switched to a web-based platform due to the COVID pandemic. How long can we stay with that format before we have to go back to FTF?

Answer: Using a virtual platform as a substitute for FTF meetings was intended to be temporary. Currently, there is no time limit imposed by the Virginia Area on these temporary meetings. It is possible that Groups in our Area could continue to meet only virtually for many more months, if/until all of the members of the Group feel confident that they can meet in person without any concern about COVID-19. Some ongoing considerations regarding meeting virtually are:

1. Registration--Your meeting would continue to use its current WSO ID# in all communications with the District, Area, and WSO.
 - The link to the meeting's virtual component could be posted on the VA Area and WSO websites, as well as a Service Center or District website if applicable.
 - The link might also be shared among regular group members (not on a public site) provided that there is some way for newcomers in your geographic area to access the link.

2. Access/Newcomers--At the present time, many meetings have posted links to their temporary virtual meetings on the VA Area and Service Center's websites.

- Members are encouraged to discuss (in a business meeting) the Group's procedures for safely sharing the link to their virtual meeting. We want to ensure that newcomers in your geographic area can find and participate in your meeting, just as you would if you were still meeting FTF.
- One way to accomplish this is to create a Group email address specifically for newcomers and others to contact the group in order to be given the link to your meeting and/or a password (if necessary).

Special Note: Some Groups may be using the special features of virtual meetings to limit attendance to only the members who had previously attended their FTF meeting, and to screen out members they don't know. While it is critical to address safety concerns and not post the links to your meeting publicly, it is even more important that the primary purpose of Al-Anon continue to be front and center for all groups: to welcome and give comfort to families and friends of alcoholics. Our Traditions are clear: the only requirement for membership is that there be a problem of alcoholism in a relative or a friend. Excluding Al-Anon members or newcomers from meetings is not in keeping with Al-Anon's Traditions and principles.

Question 2: We have members concerned about returning to their FTF meeting due to a variety of factors, such as their age, health conditions, young children at home, etc. What are things our Group needs to consider regarding "re-opening" FTF meetings?

Answer: Have public health officials in your area given the "ok" for Groups of people to begin meeting FTF in your city/county? If so, what are the local restrictions (i.e., number of people, face masks, physical spacing, use of hand sanitizers, etc.?)

- Has the facility at which you meet re-opened? If so, do they have their own restrictions that are more rigorous than the public health restrictions? We

have heard of some facilities requiring that: no food/drinks are allowed in the room; all people entering the room must have their temperature taken; all surfaces, handles, doorknobs must be wiped down with disinfectant wipes before/after the meeting, or documenting attending members' contact information, for the purpose of contact tracing.

- Do you have enough Group members willing to be of service and responsible for the additional tasks involved with COVID-19 restrictions/requirements?
- Does the room in which you meet allow you to maintain the “social distancing” requirements of your locale and/or meeting location? What happens if more members arrive than your limit?
- How will you handle literature, both selling it and using it? Will literature for readings be passed from member to member to read aloud? Will members be required to wear gloves if handling literature?

Masks. Each member and Group needs to follow the guidance of the state and the facility they hold the meetings in and adhere to the current mask wearing policy. For FTF meetings where an individual refuses to comply with mask policy they should be asked to leave and attend virtually if that is an option.

Question 3: Can we hold a “hybrid” meeting (a meeting that is both FTF and electronic), at the same day and time/simultaneously as the previous FTF meeting? And can we do that indefinitely?

Answer: Your currently registered in-person meeting could potentially go back to meeting FTF and attempt to add a simultaneous electronic component. Some groups may wish to experiment with a “hybrid” model until it is safe to meet only in person. Before doing so, it is crucial that your members discuss at a business meeting: “How do we hold a hybrid meeting and honor our legacies without diluting our program or compromising our principles?” Below are only a few of the many issues your Group will need to consider:

- Does the meeting location support the technology (such as Wi-Fi) that would be needed? Is there a member willing/able to attend the FTF meeting to handle the technology issues? Will this member attend consistently?
- Do you have enough members to handle the Group's service roles

regarding technology (including new ones added due to COVID-19)?

- **Participation:** Will everyone be able to hear each other? How will members signal that they want to share? Will all members have equal access to sharing?

- **Representation and Voting:** The issues we addressed above in Q&A #1 apply here. Since the electronic meeting will become an adjunct to the FTF meeting, it would be appropriate to consider:

- How and with whom will you share the access to the virtual link?

The meeting link might be shared only locally.

- How to ensure that local newcomers can find both your FTF location and its electronic link?

- How will you determine if members who want to join virtually do live within the Virginia Area?

- If you have members attending virtually who live in our Area, but not in your District, how will you handle their voice and vote?

- How will you protect the anonymity of members both in the FTF and those joining virtually?

- How will you handle the 7th Tradition so your meeting is self-supporting and able to contribute to our service arms? Will you have enough contributions to pay rent at the physical location as well as pay for the virtual platform?

Note: The Virginia Area offers free access to the Area's WebEx accounts. The group will need a volunteer or volunteers to be trained to function as the Meeting Host. The Area can supply training).

Note: There is no WSO process or policy in place at this time to register a new Al-Anon/Alateen meeting that meets both FTF and electronically simultaneously (at the same day/time). Face-to-face meetings and permanent Electronic Meetings are part of two separate service structures (see Question 4).

Question 4: Our Group members like meeting virtually and want to continue doing that permanently without returning to meeting FTF. Can we do that?

Answer: Yes, you can. However, if your meeting is considering this alternative--only meeting virtually now and in the future--please read through the points below carefully so that you understand how that will impact your group and your connection to your District and the Area.

1. Your Electronic Meeting would become a completely new meeting.

- a. Your current, FTF meeting will be disbanded. Your former WSO identification number will become “Inactive.”
- b. You would register your Electronic Meeting (EM) as a new meeting with WSO and not be part of a District or the Virginia Area.
- c. Your new EM would be given a new WSO identification number.
- d. The link to your EM would be posted on the WSO website only, along with all of the other EM meetings listed here: <https://al-anon.org/al-anon-meetings/electronic-meetings/>.

2. Access to your new, EM meeting:

- a. All EMs are posted on the WSO website and are accessible to all members and have no geographic boundaries.
- b. This meeting would be open/accessible to all Al-Anon members around the world.

3. Representation of your meeting:

- a. Your EM would register with a Current Mailing Address (CMA)--a Group member who becomes your link/connection with the WSO. The CMA participates in quarterly conference calls with the WSO. WSO also requires that any electronic group also register with a Meeting Host, who handles technological matters.
- b. Your group would no longer have representation at the local level, as you will no longer be “local” but “international.” your EM Group, as a Group, will not have a voice or vote at District/Area meetings. EMs do not have GRs, only CMAs and Meeting Hosts. The direct link of service for the Electronic Meeting is to the WSO through the EM’s CMA.

c. A new electronic meeting has the choice to register as an Electronic meeting using their preferred platform, or may register on the new WSO Al-Anon app.

4. Literature

a. When Electronic Meetings register, they agree to abide by the Traditions just as FTF meetings do; only CAL is used during EMs.

b. EMs can request a yearly license to quote CAL, limited to “short excerpts (maximum one paragraph) from Conference Approved Literature (CAL) in text format in their meetings.” See Electronic Al-Anon Meeting Guidelines (G-39).

5. 7th Tradition

- a. All funds beyond those needed to pay for the EM electronic link would go directly to WSO, the only service arm serving the EMs. These are only a few of the issues which our members will be “reasoning out” with one another.

Question 5: Due to the size of our virtual meetings we are considering merging with another Group. Can this be done to form a larger virtual meeting.

Answer: Yes, but both meetings would have to disband and follow the guidance above in question 4.

Question 6: If a meeting is now virtual due to pandemic safety concerns and wants to resume FTF meetings, but does not know when this will occur, should it be disbanded?

Answer: No. In the Virginia Area a Group Records form is submitted stating that the Group is ‘Temporarily Virtual’ and then its status is updated on Area databases and it retains its presence within a District and the Area.

Question 7: Can Alateen meetings occur virtually in the Virginia Area?

Answer: Yes; if the virtual meeting has 1 AMIAS present to ensure that the virtual environment is safe for the Alateens then a meeting can occur in the

Virginia Area. Two AMIAS's are recommended, but not required. Additional virtual Alateen meetings can be found on the WSO website: <https://al-anon.org/>

Question 8: Is there recommended literature for virtual meetings?

Answer: Yes. The following items are available for download by any electronic meeting, whether it be temporary or permanent. Please access the WSO website and follow these prompts to locate and download it. These CAL selections are free to download by going to: al-anon.org.

● Pamphlets: Free downloadable: <https://al-anon.org/for-members/members-resources/literature/downloadable-items/>

1. Are You Troubled by Someone's Drinking? (S-17)
2. Did You Grow Up With a Problem Drinker? (S-25)
3. Detachment (S-19)
4. Welcome Checklist for newcomers

Other Items available to download for free:

1. Fact Sheet for Electronic Meetings (S-60)
2. For registered, permanent Electronic Meetings: <https://al-anon.org/for-members/group-resources/group-records/electronic-meeting-change/>

- If you find that you still have questions, please contact your District Representative or an Area Officer.

We greatly appreciate you sharing this important information with your group. Please feel free to contact us at:

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