

TELEPHONE SERVICE NEWSLETTER

SEPTEMBER 2021

Welcome to an update on information and news about the telephone service. If anyone would like a paper copy of this newsletter, please email the editor at telephones6.sc@aamail.org or text your name and address to 07813 515423 and this will be sent in the post.

National Telephone Sub-Committee (NTSC) Member Intro

Hi, I'm Peter G. I joined the committee earlier this year. My journey into AA and sobriety started with a phone call to my local helpline. I was given the number by my GP the day before my rock bottom and guided to my first meeting by the responder I spoke to that morning. I had no idea how significant that call would be for me or how much my life would change as a result of it. After a year's sobriety my sponsor suggested I try telephone responding. I loved it and it is service that I have continued throughout my sobriety. I have been TLO for Mid Surrey Intergroup and RTLO for South East Region. I enjoyed both service positions immensely and learned a lot along the way. My role at the NTSC is currently focused on safeguarding and how it's best integrated into the telephone service structure - this is a continuation of the research I helped carry out as a member of the safeguarding working party that was formed in 2020 to assist the NTSC.



The Mayflower Hotel lobby telephone from where Bill W rang Dr Bob for the first time

Please note that iPhone upgrades from V13 onwards activate, by default, a new iPhone feature — "Silence Unknown Callers". This feature silences calls from numbers which are not in your Contact List! Please deactivate this if you use an iPhone on the Helpline.

If you are in Scotland, this has been added to the Handbook.

Previous newsletters have referred to everyone as Responders, but the Editor understands that in Scotland you are known as Operators, so will now use the two interchangeably.

A-Z Directory of Helpline Numbers – There is a plan for this fantastic resource to be available online through the AAGB website (which should make it easier to update). However, it is hoped still to have a printable copy available for those who prefer this.

RTLO SEMINAR

The annual Regional Telephone Liaison Officers seminar was held across Friday 6th and Saturday 7th August via Zoom. It was an excellent and inspiring meeting, with plenty of feedback from the various regions around the UK. Also attending were two online responders from Chat Now - Chris and Casey - who regularly give out Helpline numbers as part of their interaction with the newcomer.

AA Email Addresses

Are you a TLO? Do you use an aamail.org email address, as requested by GSO? This is partly for continuity when you rotate out and partly to help the Fellowship adhere to GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation). It is straightforward to set up. Just visit <https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/members> then click on the Helpdesk link and fill in a request form. You will then be sent your new address from GSO.

Competition Time

This is my last newsletter – a new committee member will be taking over before the next issue in Spring 2022. I decided to end with a competition. What do you suppose this caller is saying to the Helpline? Please send ideas to me at telephones6.sc@aamail.org. Winning caption will be printed in the next newsletter (at new editor's discretion!) and the prize will be a choice of book from the AA literature shop Lisella W, Editor



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

This important subject has appeared regularly in previous newsletters and has become a hot potato in all walks of life, including Helplines. A small group of RTLOs: Bob S, Jan V and Peter G – were asked to look into the practices for telephone responding from a safeguarding perspective. Thank you to all the Helplines for assisting them, by responding to the questionnaire. The results of the group's hard work so far were presented in a Draft Report at the August RTLO meeting. Below is an extract from the section on Safeguarding obligations of Telephone Operators and recommendations:

Obligations

- All operators are current "sober" members of AA, recruited within the Fellowship as volunteers. They are unpaid and are not subject to employment or contractual obligations. There is a "Vetting/Selection criteria" as outlined below but this varies region to region.
- Calls vary but can generally be placed into the following three categories, 1. From a suffering alcoholic, 2. From family and friends of the alcoholic and 3. General enquiries. It is generally agreed that the call from the suffering alcoholic engages the highest risk of safeguarding issues.
- A safeguarding obligation denoted as "*measures to protect the health, well-being and human rights, which allow people -especially children, young people, and vulnerable adults to live free from abuse, harm and neglect.*"
- By the very nature of the illness, a suffering alcoholic will fall within this general definition as does a volunteer telephone operator/responder.
- In considering the protective measures necessary in respect of minimising the risk of abuse, harm and neglect, an assessment is required of that interaction.
- Such interactions will vary but can be generalised as very limited. The role of telephone operator is very much a "call handler" who secures sufficient information to "dispatch" the enquiry to a 12 stepper at a locality near to where the "suffering alcoholic lives". It is the 12 stepper who rings the "suffering alcoholic" back and it is this interaction that can be varied.
- The telephone operator is in possession of the above information which in turn is conveyed verbally over the phone to an available 12 stepper. Any risks are discussed during this process.
- On that basis the themes are: recruitment, selection, suitability, training, call risk management and appropriate action taken when reporting perceived safeguarding issues.

Recommendations:

- Requirement of one year sobriety.
- Requirement for full name and address of all operators confirmed and retained on AA confidential data base for use by Helpline only. Held in accordance with GDPR.
- Requirement that Operators are current members of AA as a self-regulating group eg Home Group, Supported by Home Group Chair, GSR or seconded by another member
- That the NTSC progress the creation of a Training Template combined with a Safeguarding Reporting and Procedural Flow Chart to be deployed by each AA Helpline for implementation.



These recommendations were proposed and unanimously accepted at the RTLO meeting. GSO has appointed a specialist safeguarding barrister to look at the legal implications of telephone safeguarding as it relates to our current practice. It is hoped that the result of all this work will be to continue as we are, but with the added reassurance that every appropriate protection is in place for us all.

The National Number – the times, they are a changin'

The national telephone number was introduced at Conference's instigation in 1998 and has proved a great success. In the intervening years the technology upon which the system is based has changed dramatically, and in 2021 Conference recommended that it would be appropriate to review the whole system. As designed, calls to the national number would be forwarded to local responders via the local exchange groups (our telephone areas) at which they were received. The system worked well with the landlines used at the time. Mobile phones were uncommon in 1998. That situation has changed dramatically. Now some 90% of all calls are received from mobiles and, as all responders will know, they can be received by any telephone area, regardless of where they originate.

Two other major changes in telephone technology are also taking place. As most responders will be aware, the old BT call distribution system is being phased out and replaced with internet (VoIP) technology. This has many advantages, including much greater flexibility. Less well known is the fact that the basic BT network system (PSTN) upon which the whole telephone area system is based is also being replaced by VoIP. This makes traditional exchanges, and hence exchange areas, obsolete.

The NTSC is studying the various options available to make the most of these changes, and to streamline the service, improving its efficiency and effectiveness. This could, for instance, include the establishment of a team of national responders as a "first line" amongst other innovations.

We have to change, so let's make the most of it. Please participate and let the committee have your views.

Message of thanks to Responders from Jonathan, Armed Services Liaison Officer

Just recently I found myself deeply grateful to telephone responders not once - but twice. I'm an AA Armed Services Liaison Officer for my Intergroup, so this note of appreciation might come as a bit of a surprise in a telephone service newsletter.

As all you telephone responders know, you should find some ex-military AA's listed among your directory of 12th Steppers. So, if you hear a suffering alcoholic happen to mention during their call that they have some connection with the forces, you can suggest one of our specialist 12th Steppers (it's completely up to them of course whether they want that person or not).

A couple of my Intergroup responders went one better. Taking a call from an Army Welfare officer wanting local meeting details so one of their soldiers could attend, they also suggested to the Welfare man that they might usefully talk to the local ASLO - that is, me. From these conversations not only were the suffering alcoholics 12th Stepped, but in both cases the officer came to a local AA meeting as a visitor for hands-on experience, and I have since been to their bases to give talks for officers and senior NCOs about alcoholism. One of these bases had resisted all attempts to establish contact for at least three years, so without the telephone responder there wouldn't be this now flourishing relationship. So many thanks from South East Anglia Armed Services to the RTLOs, TLOs and Responders.

Gentle reminder that we are a Helpline not a Chat Line. How long would you have waited if ringing in for the first time? Better to keep calls short and leave the talking to a 12 Stepper

SOME MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES WHEN ON THE HELPLINE

Thanks to all for the big response but apologies that several contributions have had to be shortened or even omitted, to fit the theme

Claire, West London

I once did telephone service when I was really tired. My slot is Friday evening. It was gruelling and my defects were out to play. I managed to be kind and courteous on the outside but my insides were completely different: judgemental, unkind and impatient. It was awful. I always make sure I've had a nap now and observe HALT. I need to be at my best to let HP guide me and truly transmit a message of recovery.

Mark, East London

I've been doing telephone service for ten years. An experience was not one by me, but by a member who I was on shift with. A family member called AA to thank us for giving their son five years of recovery. The son had other issues and passed away. The dad wanted to thank AA for all the help his son received and called us to give us his appreciation. That taught me; I can forget what sobriety had given me but my family never will.

Paul E, South Wales

Some shifts are busy. Recently I've done two shifts with no calls at all. But that's fine, because I'm still here - sober, available and willing. Some calls are straightforward while others are tricky because the caller may be drunk, phoning out of duress or just continuing to fight everything. But no call is a nuisance call because they all take me back to those awful days when family members rang AA in desperation asking for help, wanting to know what they could do for me. That's why I find calls from family members the most poignant. It is a privilege to do phone service and a great reminder of my story. God bless.

Ed, Kensington and Fulham

I just find telephone service very rewarding. Most of the time we don't know if a chat, guidance to an AA meeting or even a 12 step call is successful, but the possibility that someone may be on their way to recovery is enough for me. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

David, South Midlands

As a telephone responder I am very grateful to be able to pass on the message AA has to offer to problem drinkers. I am able to identify with callers when they talk about their desperation.

Robbie, Norwich

The phone service was there when I first reached out for help. As soon as I achieved 12 months of sobriety, my sponsor declared (not suggested) that it was time to start giving back and show my gratitude by becoming a responder. That was over 27 years ago, and I've manned the phones weekly ever since. In my early days it was a great reminder of where I had come from and what was out there for me should I ever be foolish enough to think 'maybe it wasn't that bad' or 'perhaps I'm not an alcoholic'. Today, talking to callers in all stages of this illness and in desperate need of help, nothing is different, since a thimbleful of alcohol could send me right back out there, so the message never changes.

Rory, Oxford

I have been a responder for about six months, on one weekly morning from 8-1. Sometimes I get calls from people in the local area and sometimes from people all over the UK: I have had queries from as far apart as Fife and Cornwall. There are days when I get few or no calls, and others when there are a lot. The best moments are when I help a caller. For example, recently a caller wanted to go to an AA meeting and had the address but couldn't find the location. So I was able to arrange for him to get a call from the meeting location just before the meeting started, so he could attend. There are always different queries: it's not the same every time, and I feel that I do service and it helps my own recovery.

Libby, Severn Intergroup

I do telephone service on Tuesday afternoons. In the main, it has been a very positive experience, although increasingly I receive calls from outside the area we serve. However, I can easily look up the number of the helpline which is nearest to the caller. Of course, as with many aspects of life sometimes things don't go as planned! I have been sworn at, had the caller put the phone down on me and often it is a relative of the alcoholic who calls; a worried mother, daughter or partner. I did receive a "nuisance" call. A man who told me, "I know where you live, and I'm coming to get you".

Libby (ctd)

Of course, there was no way he knew where I lived, so it didn't faze me, although I did report the matter on. It transpired that the calls had come from Belmarsh Prison. The caller had upset a few responders, but as a retired army officer I hadn't found the calls upsetting. Instead, I felt sorry for the man. He obviously needed help, but I wasn't the one to offer it. It is my understanding that the number was blocked, and since then I have received no worrying calls.

Amanda H, Cardiff

For many years our telephone service in Cardiff consisted of a phone next to our AA room, manned by two members. When it transferred to the Helpline, I volunteered. It was amazing to hear people often in despair and pain, not knowing anything about the disease of alcoholism and here was I the other end of the phone, sober and in AA. Often in the early days, with few 12th steppers, I ended up meeting someone on the phone and taking them to a meeting. It brings it home to me each week, when I hear someone not knowing why they are baffled by their drinking and don't know what to do or how to stop. This service has been invaluable for me and certainly helped me stay sober and be Grateful. God Bless AA and all telephone responders and the suffering alcoholic.

Richard F, East London

During the winter on Zoom, I had one shift when I finished feeling somewhat a failure, having had two very difficult calls. I sat there wondering if I was really suited to this service at all! Actually, the shift having started at 6pm, I had managed to navigate a first time caller to an 8pm meeting on Zoom immediately and even introduced her to a female friend in the Fellowship who I knew was part of that meeting. I then had confirmation that she had indeed attended. But it was the two negative calls that dominated my emotional state later that night. It was only when my sponsor reminded me of the old adage "if they're ready you can't say anything wrong, and if they're not ready you can't say anything right!" that I could apply the correct perspective on the experience.