

Phoneline Basics



A call to an NA phoneline, also known as a helpline, may be someone's first interaction with Narcotics Anonymous. These calls are vital; a phoneline call can make a major difference in whether or not an addict makes it to an NA meeting. We need to respond to callers in a way that makes them feel like they matter. We can encourage volunteers to bring their experience and their public relations awareness to this important service opportunity.

This resource outlines ways a service body can evaluate its resources, choose a helpline provider, train and prepare helpline volunteers, and coordinate services in a way that makes local helplines more successful.

Key topics

- Phonelines & Core PR Principles
- Planning and Preparation for Service Bodies
- Discussing and Addressing Known Challenges
- Putting Your Plan into Action
- Resources



PHONELINES & CORE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRINCIPLES

Cooperation, Not Affiliation

Helpline teams contribute to building relationships with people and organizations outside of NA. These include groups that regularly encounter addicts such as law enforcement, advocates for the homeless, and social welfare organizations that have an interest in helping addicts to live drug-free. Our cooperation with other organizations demonstrates that NA is a viable program of recovery as they raise NA's profile in the community.

We take care to align our actions with the guidance of our Traditions. By focusing on our primary purpose, we foster unity and harmony with each other and the community around us. Acting according to our principles helps instill public confidence in the effectiveness of the NA program. This makes it more likely that members of other community groups will share the local NA helpline number with potential members.

Questions to consider:

- How might cooperation with outside organizations be an asset when operating a helpline?
- What cooperative actions can committees and groups take to increase access to the helpline number?

Attraction

Our actions speak powerfully to potential members, to professionals, and to the public. When we provide reliable, responsible, and consistent helpline services, we demonstrate our program of recovery in action. Small but consistent actions build our reputation, so it's important that our phonelines operate as intended.

Offering a helpline number obliges us to make sure each call is answered, whether by an NA volunteer, an answering service, or an automated system. The important thing is that callers learn they can count on us and know that we care. We respond to messages promptly and return calls requesting help or information about NA. In all of these ways and many others, our helpline services provide opportunities to attract the addict who still suffers to our meetings.

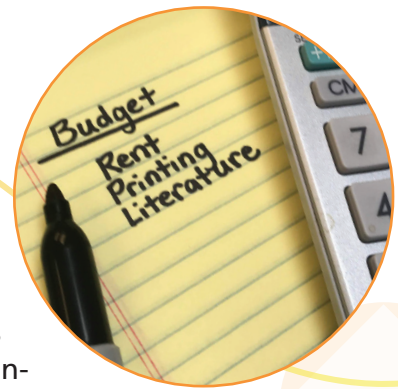
Questions to consider:

- Are helpline volunteers trained to carry a clear, concise message for Narcotics Anonymous?
- How can we make helpline service an attractive NA commitment?
- How can technology support our efforts to be reliable and consistent?



PLANNING AND PREPARATION FOR SERVICE BODIES

As with other aspects of NA service, form should follow function in phonline service. Service bodies often start by evaluating the needs of the geographic area and the resources of the local NA community. This kind of inventory will help you determine which service provider might be the best fit. The following section focuses on ways to assess the service body's resources and how to train volunteers. Ideas for how to choose a service provider are covered later in this resource.



Financial and Human Resources

Consistent and reliable phonline service helps us develop and maintain positive relationships with the public. With that in mind, service bodies often start planning for phonline services by assessing their resources, both financial and human. Understanding our resources is important in planning phonline services.

Most projects depend as much on ideas, information, conscience, and members' time and willingness as they do on money. If we have the funds needed to carry out a project but lack the time or ideas, we'd best wait until we've gathered all the needed resources before proceeding. If we don't, we will have wasted NA service funds.

*Twelve Concepts for NA Service,
Concept Eleven*

The service body will want to look at its budget to determine what they can realistically afford. Trusted servants will want to evaluate the service body's long-term financial ability before shopping for a service provider. This will allow the service body to select a phone service package that fits its budget for the long haul.

Assessing available human resources will also help to determine what kind of phonline service provider best suits your NA community. A service body that is financially healthy but lacks willing trusted servants may choose to enlist help from a professional answering service. A service body with a larger pool of trusted servants may decide that a call-forwarding option will work best for them.



In some cases, it's difficult or impossible to accomplish service tasks solely with members serving on a voluntary basis. Phonline service is a common example: We want to ensure that addicts seeking help have a chance to talk to NA members, but many communities contract with an outside company to ensure that calls are always answered and properly forwarded...We contract for those services we need to ensure that addicts seeking help can reach us.

*Guiding Principles: The Spirit of Our Traditions,
Tradition Eight*

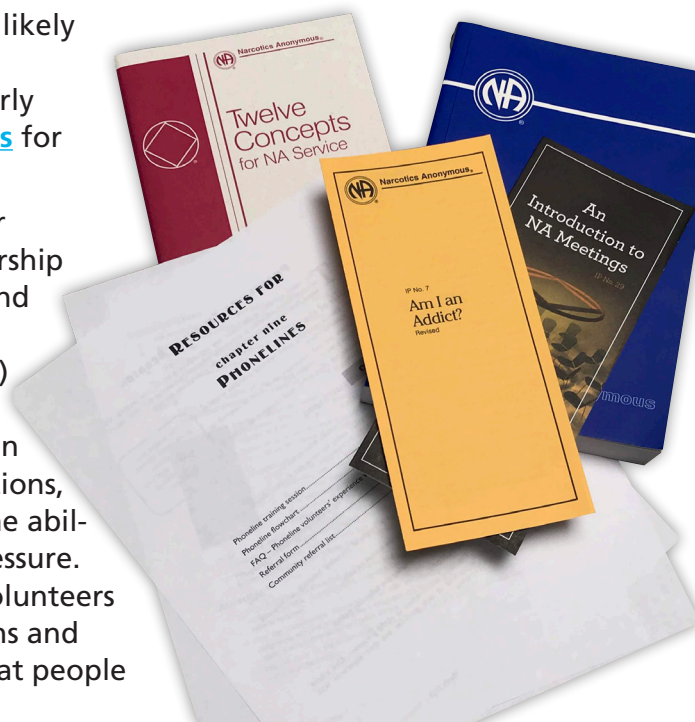
“Flexibility and creativity can help a service body to expand the pool of willing volunteers.”

We can also think about ways to make serving on the helpline more attractive to more members. Flexibility and creativity can help a service body to expand the pool of willing volunteers. Some phone service packages make it possible for members to serve on the go or from the privacy of home. Two- or three-hour time slots may be more appealing to members than longer shifts. Using the service body website to sign up for phonline slots can also encourage members to be of service. Committees may benefit from discussing these and other options as ways to attract helpline volunteers.

Training and Preparing Trusted Servants

When considering how to train and prepare phonline volunteers, it’s helpful to look at who calls our phonline: addicts (both potential members and current NA members), nonaddicts, family members and loved ones, and professionals. Our training and preparation can work to address the opportunities and challenges that arise with each of the above audiences. The following checklist can help a service body develop training that inspires phonline volunteers to help addicts find an NA meeting and to provide information about NA:

- Responsiveness is a key principle for phonline service. This means that trusted servants are trained to engage with callers in a sensitive, appropriate, and helpful manner.
- Training for phonline service will include all those who represent NA on the helpline: trusted servants, special workers (if there is a service body office), and employees of an answering service (if one is used). The service body can schedule continual and ongoing training.
- The service body can require that volunteers attend an initial hands-on training. This training can be supported by a written document of the service body’s expectations of phonline volunteers.
- An ongoing training program might provide NA literature (such as the *Am I an Addict?* pamphlet), discuss NA principles, practice mock phone calls, and offer presentations to new volunteers by more experienced members. Once trained, volunteers can be provided with basic materials such as a brief description of NA, updated meeting lists, and community referral phone numbers (see Referral section).
- Employees of an answering service would most likely benefit from a current meeting schedule and a short, one-page training handout that is regularly updated. (Visit www.na.org/phonlineresources for an example.)
- The service body may want to identify particular qualities of an ideal phonline volunteer. Leadership qualities such as integrity, the ability to listen, and sound judgment (see the Concept Four essay in *Twelve Concepts for NA Service* for more details) are essential in providing phonline service. Other qualities relevant to helpline service are an understanding of the importance of public relations, the ability to relate well to other people, and the abilities to communicate and to stay calm under pressure. These traits are important because phonline volunteers often have to perform in high-pressure situations and because they are likely to be the first contact that people have with NA.



- Volunteer guidelines that address issues such as avoiding or explaining NA jargon (such as “it works when you work it,” “home group,” “get a sponsor”), how to get volunteer time slots covered, and how to respond reliably to requests from the public will help support trusted servants in their commitment.
- Volunteers can be trained to use NA literature to present an accurate and positive message of recovery as well as to clarify that the NA program is separate from treatment centers or other twelve-step programs.
- Volunteers could offer website information to callers in an effort to provide the caller with literature to read about NA recovery. Additionally, callers seeking meeting information may be offered the mobile meeting app.
- Committees will want to establish a cleantime requirement for volunteers in light of available human resources. A strong training program will prepare members for this kind of service, even those who haven’t been clean for long.
- Phonline volunteers need to be instructed to make no commitments on behalf of service bodies or the NA Fellowship as a whole. If a professional or member of the public contacts an NA helpline, volunteers should provide as much information about NA as they can, solicit information from the public contact, and follow up with the appropriate trusted servant such as a committee chairperson or the service body’s media contact person.
- The committee needs to train phonline volunteers on how to handle difficult calls, such as calls from addicts who are under the influence of drugs, prank calls, and calls from those who suffer from mental illness. One strategy is to continually bring the conversation back to how the caller can get to an NA meeting and end a problem call before the situation escalates.
- The committee can be prepared to quickly respond to a variety of phonline calls made by the public, including simple requests for information or calls made about problems created by the behavior of NA members.
- If phonline volunteers receive a call from a person in crisis, they should be very clear about their limitations; phonline volunteers are not counselors or crisis workers. Threats to commit suicide, a drug overdose, or talk about being a victim of violence are all examples of crisis calls. Refusing to refer such callers to qualified outside crisis agencies or police could have legal implications, depending on local laws. In any case, individuals in crisis should contact someone better positioned to help. See the referral section below for more information about referring callers to outside organizations.



The purpose of our services is to help the fellowship fulfill its primary purpose: to carry the message to the addict who still suffers. Honest, open, straightforward communication is essential to both the integrity and effectiveness of the NA service structure.

Twelve Concepts for NA Service, Concept Eight

DISCUSSING AND ADDRESSING KNOWN CHALLENGES

Meeting Recommendations

NA is frequently contacted by potential members and professionals looking for meetings they believe will allow for identification. Many volunteers have been faced with the question: Do you know a meeting that would help this person? We know that our Traditions encourage a spirit of anonymity and that anonymity allows us to meet equally as addicts. Yet we also know that first impressions count and that the principle of attraction is important to an addict's ability to hear the NA message, we can stop using, lose the desire to use, and find a new way to live. Trusted servants can respect callers' requests and recommend meetings where they are likely to find addicts with whom they may identify. We do not, however, automatically assume that because someone is of a certain age, gender, ethnicity, or sexual identity, they will want a meeting recommendation.

Service bodies will probably want to discuss this issue and implement guidelines for how to recommend NA meetings to callers. Some service bodies have common needs meetings in which the group serves the needs of a specific population in that service body, such as young people's meetings, women's and men's meetings, and so forth. These groups make it easier for a service body to make meeting recommendations.

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If there are no common needs meetings in a service body but there are meetings where, for example, a larger population of young people regularly attends, then phonline volunteers can suggest these meetings to a caller asking for a recommendation. This may allow potential members to more easily identify and connect with NA. In making these recommendations, phonline volunteers can explain that many NA members feel a sense of unity within a very diverse fellowship,

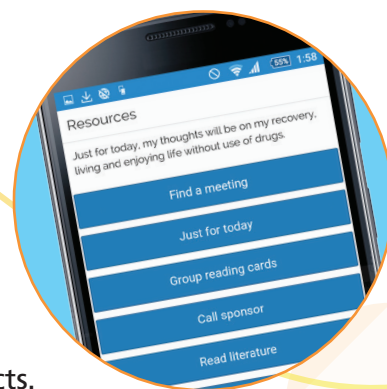
making it clear at the same time that any addict can attend any meeting regardless of how it is listed in the schedule; for example, in a young people's meeting, there may be older members there.

Twelfth Step Calls

Step Twelve's call for us to "carry this message to addicts" is at the heart of phonline service. Phonline volunteers emphasize getting potential members to meetings because, as the Basic Text states, "The group is the most powerful vehicle we have for carrying the message." On occasion, a caller may require an extended conversation; that, too, is a chance to practice the Twelfth Step.

Another way we might practice the Twelfth Step involves making arrangements for members to pick up a caller and take him or her to a meeting. We carry NA's message through these Twelfth Step calls. These can be a very rewarding service experience that gives members the opportunity to make a newcomer feel welcome.

The service body has the responsibility to ensure that volunteers are willing and trained to do Twelfth Step calls. The most important concern is that NA members remain safe. Before training volunteers to respond to Twelfth Step calls, the service body should discuss and determine its policy on these calls. For example, in some urban locations it might be more convenient to use public transport instead of a car, so instead of giving a ride a helpline trusted servant might provide clear



directions on how to get to the nearest subway station and then another volunteer could meet the newcomer there. The following points can help service bodies consider how to create guidelines for responding to Twelfth Step calls:

- A Twelfth Step call can mean that two or more addicts provide a ride to an NA meeting or that volunteers simply talk with the caller, helping the potential member get to a meeting on their own.
- Trusted servants need to understand that any romantic or sexual overtures are inappropriate when performing Twelfth Step calls or when representing NA in any fashion including on the phonenumber.
- When possible, members should meet those requesting a ride to a meeting in a public place.
- In some service bodies, phonenumber volunteers do not perform Twelfth Step calls. Instead, there is a Twelfth Step call list containing the contact information of members who have volunteered to respond to Twelfth Step requests.
- Due to the likelihood of being exposed to drugs and addicts who are under the influence of drugs, some service bodies require those who make Twelfth Step calls to have a minimum of five years clean.
- The service body will need to discuss what is appropriate for trusted servants performing Twelfth Step calls. A service body may decide to create guidelines for the variety of requests often received during Twelfth Step calls (such as a ride to a meeting or to a detoxification center after attending an NA meeting).
- The service body may want to choose volunteers who have service experience and who have gained the ability to be productive members of society. This may reduce the likelihood of incurring legal problems. Those members under legal constraints (such as parole or probation) are usually not appropriate for making Twelfth Step calls. A guideline that requires trusted servants to have current auto insurance may be another way to prevent legal problems.

Our identity as a fellowship is founded in anonymity and selfless service, carrying the message one addict to another.

*It Works: How and Why,
Tradition Six*

Referrals

Many phonenumber calls are from nonaddicts or potential members looking for services other than what NA provides. There may be liability issues, which vary from place to place, that make it important for us to offer emergency numbers at a minimum. Volunteers should keep a list of numbers to provide to callers in crisis, including numbers for those facing medical emergencies or contemplating suicide.

When asked about drug detoxification or treatment center referrals, we can provide a list of any and all locally available services. We don't give referrals to one specific treatment center or detox unit; that would cross the boundary of cooperation into an endorsement. In order to avoid any appearance of affiliation, we might provide a list of numbers of all local nonaffiliated referral agencies. In the United States, for example, the federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) operates a national helpline.

“Committees may choose to build relationships with other community organizations since we often share the goal of helping addicts live without the use of drugs.”

Service bodies may want to research what independent referral agencies serve their NA community, taking time to verify that the phone numbers are valid. Committees may choose to build relationships with other community organizations since we often share the goal of helping addicts live without the use of drugs.

Family members and loved ones of addicts frequently call our helplines. The service body can decide to provide numbers for Nar-Anon and Families Anonymous or other similar information. We don't recommend one program over another or offer our opinions about any of these programs; we simply provide contact information. Not providing this information can be harmful to our public relations and may spoil a chance for an addict to find NA. The service committee may want to create a document for trusted servants that describes why NA does not endorse or affiliate itself with outside organizations (see the sample at www.na.org/phonelineresources). We provide contact information for other organizations in a spirit of cooperation.

Coordinating Services

When thinking about how we coordinate phonelines, we can look at how best to structure and support these services. The service body may decide to delegate the responsibility of the phonenumber to a coordinator, who is accountable to the service body. A phonenumber coordinator could be responsible for gathering and training volunteers and planning guidelines for following up on any NA requests made through the phonenumber.

Collaboration with other committees and service bodies can also help in the coordinating of phonenumber services. Service bodies often work collaboratively with each other for support. In an effort to strengthen services, some service bodies organize multiple efforts into a single public relations committee. PR committees often include the helpline coordinator and volunteers, along with trusted servants focused on complementary efforts like the meeting directory and other public information work. These complementary efforts sometimes include H&I under what we refer to as the "PR umbrella."

Service bodies can share their best helpline practices with other service bodies. Committees from neighboring service bodies can share what is working—and what mistakes they've made—with their phonelines. A trusted servant who regularly checks the phonenumber can report if the phonenumber service is functioning properly. Malfunctions may have to do with the answering service, training methods, or a shortage of volunteers. Working cooperatively within the service body and/or with neighboring service bodies can help to strengthen the way the phonenumber functions.

Cooperative Phonenumber Services

Some service bodies have created a single phonenumber service to serve multiple NA communities on behalf of two or more service bodies. Such cooperative phonenumber services allow neighboring service bodies to combine their resources and share the responsibility of providing helpline services. This usually eases the burden on the financial resources of the individual service bodies, since costs will be shared. This approach also offers the opportunity to recruit members from several NA communities, another benefit of the cooperative model.

There are some challenges with coordinating a single helpline for multiple NA service bodies. One of the biggest challenges is establishing a single point of accountability. It is important to decide issues such as who will pay the phone bill and who will coordinate volunteers. Training volunteers also can become slightly more challenging since members from multiple communities will need to be prepared to identify meetings and services in neighboring service bodies. To support this effort, some NA communities have elected to publish a cooperative meeting schedule that lists all meetings served by a shared phonenumber. How callers experience multiple city or area telephone codes may also be a consideration.

PUTTING YOUR PLAN INTO ACTION

Choosing a Phoneline Service Provider

Choosing a phoneline service provider depends on the needs of the service body. Chapter Three of the *Public Relations Handbook*, "Effective Services," offers detailed information about assessing the needs of the service body. A service body may be financially healthy but lack human resources. Where that's the case, it may make sense to spend a little more on a phoneline system in order to offset a shortage in human resources. As always, a service body will want to make a smart business decision when spending NA funds. One way to make an informed decision is to research the cost of various providers and evaluate how they might meet the service body's needs. For example, a service body might decide to accept collect calls, which may or may not be accepted by a service provider. A service body can list the costs with the various advantages, disadvantages, and total monthly cost in order to get a picture of their choices.

Because of the ever-changing nature of technology, the following list is not exhaustive but contains some examples of the types of phoneline services a service body may consider:

- NA members answering calls
- Call-forwarding services
- Answering machine or voice mail
- Customized caller response with live transfer option
- Professional answering services
- Voice over internet protocol (VOIP) providers that allow you to manage calls online
- Calls placed directly from the service body's website
- Toll-free and/or custom number
- Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD) or Text Telephone (TTY)

Each of the options listed has various advantages and disadvantages, depending on a service body's human and financial resources. As technology changes, so will our phoneline options. What's important is for the service body to base its choice on a realistic assessment of its own abilities and needs. The following is an example of how a service body might determine the pros and cons of various phoneline options. This same process can be used for any type of phoneline service being considered by the service body.

*When we work to ensure the vitality of NA, we're not working just for ourselves
but for those yet to join us.*

*It Works: How and Why,
Tradition One*





NA Members Answering Calls

Advantages

1. Excellent ability to communicate with addict
2. Accurate information
3. Trained members handle calls

Disadvantages

1. Requires major effort on part of ASC
2. Expensive
3. Reaching the majority within a geographic service body in local calling adds expense
4. Requires significant fiscal responsibility and liability for service body

Total Monthly Cost: \$_____

Answering Machine or Voice Mail

Advantages

1. Accurate information
2. Least expensive
3. Requires minimal effort on part of ASC

Disadvantages

1. No ability to communicate directly with addict
2. Requires fixed location
3. Requires fiscal responsibility and liability for service body
4. An answering machine or answering service is usually checked every two or three days. The service body needs to be sure to indicate that in the recorded announcement.

Total Monthly Cost: \$_____

Other Considerations

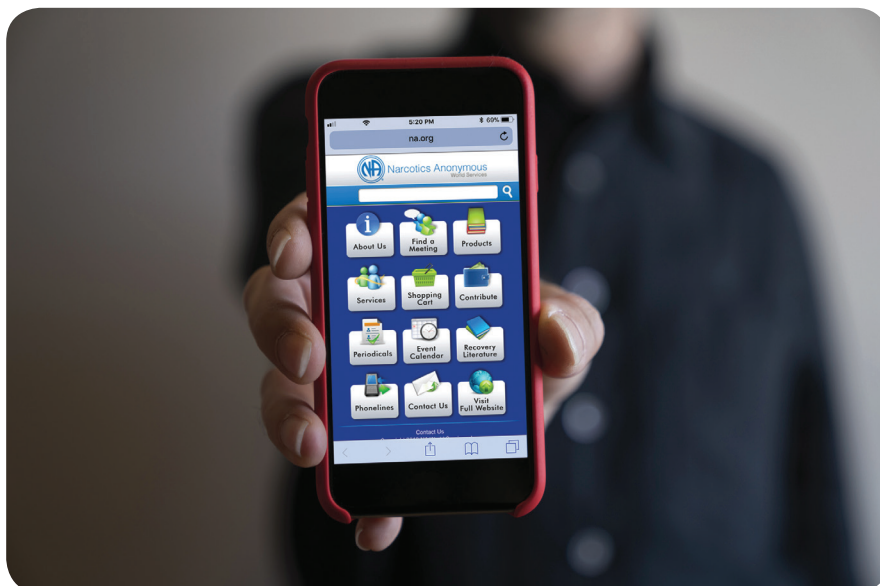
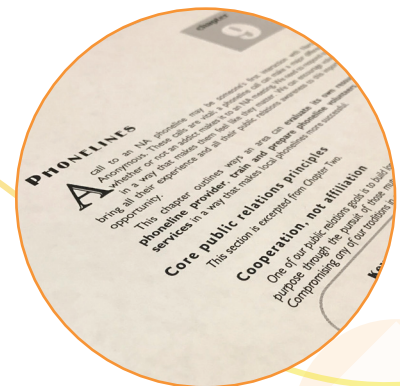
As you think about ways to get your helpline number to those who might need it, you might consider the following:

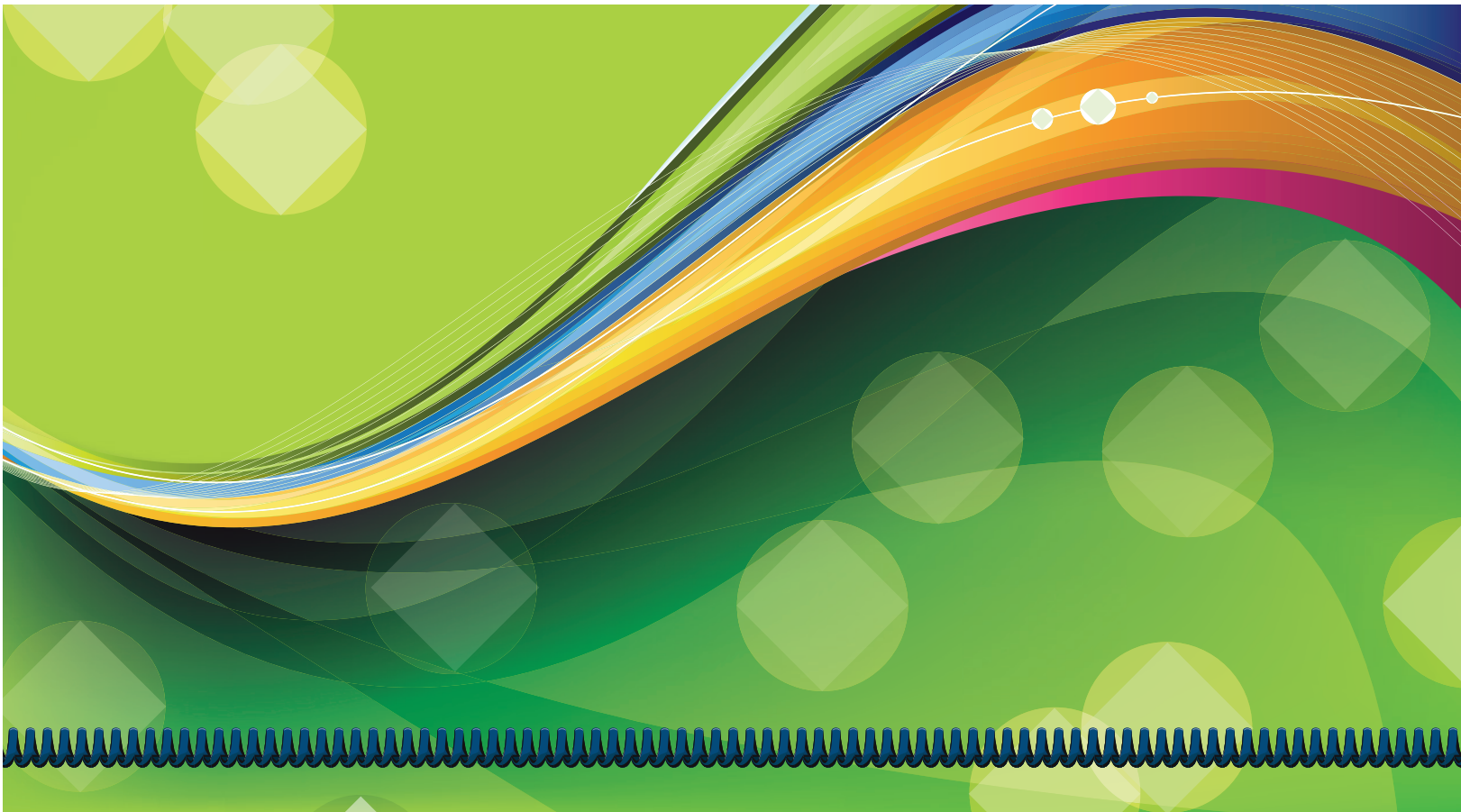
- When listing the phonenumber in a directory, be sure to use a geographical marker instead of or in addition to the service body's name. For example, instead of listing a phonenumber as "The Biggest Heart of NA Service Body," use the city or town name. The names of our service bodies don't always communicate the geographical location of meetings to those outside of the program. We want those outside of NA to be able to locate the phonenumber in their community.
- Service bodies may decide to list the NA phone number in the community resource or crisis section of a telephone directory or online reference. Listing the NA phonenumber in this section may require the service body to undergo a more extensive process, but can add credibility to NA as a community resource.

Strong phonenumber services have a positive impact on our ability to effectively carry the NA message. They help us help addicts. Our phonenumber services are an opportunity to form cooperative relationships that may benefit potential NA members. In order to keep phonenumber services strong and working, service bodies often track how many newcomers got to NA through the helpline and perform an annual inventory of the service's effectiveness, reviewing technology, costs, and feedback from NA members. Our ability to respond to callers in a sensitive, caring, and helpful way can make a real difference in whether or not an addict gets clean and finds recovery in Narcotics Anonymous.

Resources

For additional resources on phonenumber services, see Chapter Nine of the *Public Relations Handbook* and its resources, available at www.na.org/phonelineresources.





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