

The GSR's Role in Conference Agenda Item Review

“The GSR is the link between the group and ‘A.A. as a whole.’ This link becomes a channel through which news, information, opinions and ideas can flow back and forth. Importantly, this also gives the group a voice in the affairs of the Fellowship. The GSR is that voice.” – A.A. Service Manual, Page 7

Most GSRs understand how this concept works at the district level and at the area level. As soon as GSRs receive the agenda for an upcoming district or area meeting, they acquaint themselves with those items the body is being asked to consider. They also study any background material attached to the items.

GSRs go to their groups and explain all this information to the members, answer any questions the members have to the best of their ability, and then work with the group to ascertain what the members think about these items. GSRs strive to come away from that meeting with “yes” or “no” answers for each item that’s up for a vote. Then they come to the district meeting or the area meeting prepared to vote their group’s conscience. After the vote, GSRs go back to their group members and inform them of the outcome.

A GSR’s responsibilities in regard to the General Service Conference are very similar. Here is a brief history of the General Service Conference to put everything in context.

Our A.A. service structure got its start in 1937 when the New York and Akron A.A. groups gave the authority to our co-founders, Bill W and Dr. Bob, to create services to spread the A.A. message worldwide. Bill and Bob were aware that they couldn’t do this by themselves, so they established the Alcoholic Foundation in New York City. The trusted servants recruited to help – the Trustees of the Foundation – agreed with our co-founders that ultimate authority for A.A. services had to reside in the groups, but Bill and Bob acted in an advisory capacity.

Then Dr. Bob became ill in 1948, and the question arose: What would happen after Bill and Bob, the link between the Trustees and the groups, died? It was from this vital question that the answer became clear: The groups needed to delegate service authority to a “go between,” and thus, the General Service Conference was born.

The first General Service Conference was held in New York City in April 1951 with 35 delegates on the first panel. The idea was that it would be done on a trial basis for five years. The idea worked extremely well. A permanent Conference charter was confirmed at the second International Convention in 1955, and it was there that Bill handed over leadership of A.A. to the General Service Conference, giving the Fellowship responsibility over its own affairs.

So, fast forward to today. We know from reading the A.A. Service Manual that the Conference plan continues to be:

“... a method by which A.A.’s collective group conscience can speak forcefully and put its desires for worldwide services into effect. It is the structure that takes the place of government in A.A. It ensures that the full voice of A.A. will be heard, whether it represents the great majority or a minority. The

Conference plan was established as a guarantee that our movement-wide services would continue to function under all conditions. The plan provides a practical successor to the founders of A.A.”

So: Just as it's the GSR's responsibility to share district and area agenda items, the GSRs are responsible for sharing with their groups the agenda items that will be discussed at the Conference, which our delegate makes available on the South Florida Area 15 website as the time for the annual General Service Conference approaches. These agenda items are organized by committee, such as Corrections, Literature, and Public Information. The number of items varies for each committee.

For each agenda item, there is background material, which can number in total more than 1,000 pages. In addition to sharing the agenda items, GSRs share with their group members as much of the background as they can to assist the members in arriving at an informed group conscience on those items. It is the GSR's further responsibility to be present at the Area 15 assembly in April to share that group conscience with our delegate.

Here is some general information about what happens at the General Service Conference:

A delegate serves on each Conference Committee. There are currently 93 delegates in the U.S. and Canada, and there are approximately 10 delegates per standing committee.

The Conference usually happens every April in New York. All of the delegates gather for a week-long meeting, attending sessions that include committee meetings, presentations, workshops and trustee elections. Each Standing Committee also meets and discusses everything on its particular agenda.

When it's time for a vote in the Conference Committees – remember, the Conference Committees are comprised of delegates from the 93 areas of the U.S. and Canada – whose voice will the delegates be carrying?

They'll be carrying the voice of the members of their areas – the area standing committee chairs, the DCMs and the GSRs – which is in keeping with our founders' wish that the link from the groups to the General Service Office stays intact.

So, what happens after all the decisions have been made? The Conference can make a suggestion for action. It can choose to make no recommendation. It can defer an item to the next year's Conference. Or, it could decide to ask for more input from the Trustees or from the Fellowship.

The 93 delegates are then responsible for reporting back to their areas the outcome of everything that happened at the Conference. The General Service Office prepares a final Conference report, which is shared with the Fellowship.

This is the point where even seasoned GSRs sometimes fall short. They've made that heavy lift of learning about the agenda items. They've studied the background material. They've presented the information to their groups, ascertained their group conscience, and carried that group conscience to the Delegate at the Area assembly. Is their job finished?

No. Post-conference, it's the GSR's responsibility to go back to their groups and explain all those outcomes, to close the loop that began months prior. In all, the GSR's role in the Conference agenda process begins when Conference agenda items are released and continues until the GSR reports back to his or her group on the outcome of the Conference.