

Guidebook for Returning to In-Person Meetings

The Greater Hollywood Area of Narcotics Anonymous

**While answering
these questions,
please keep in
mind our primary
purpose, to carry
the message of
recovery.**

This document is meant to be a guide or set of tools for your group to better make decisions about its needs.

These are not rules! We are simply offering our research and suggestions to aid you in better carrying the message of recovery.

Atmosphere of Recovery

A key reason for the creation of this guide was to address concerns from members who were anxious about returning to in-person meetings or doing so for the first time. Covid-19 is an unprecedented event in NA's history, thus we as a fellowship should take great care in fostering a welcoming, caring, and safe atmosphere of recovery.

Addicts who got clean for the first time online may have never been to an in-person meeting. Furthermore, there are many addicts who have been to in-person meetings before the pandemic and may have concerns about returning. How will your group help alleviate possible stresses and anxieties about returning to in-person meetings?

- Many meetings have a men's and women's representative who announce themselves at a meeting for any newcomers. They provide NA information, phone numbers, or just help in welcoming newcomers into the program. These commitments could be expanded to include supporting members transitioning to in-person meetings for the first time.
- Consider leaving time at the end of or after your meetings to talk about and answer any questions regarding your transition before it occurs.
- We encourage all sponsors to reach out to their sponsees and see how they feel about returning to in-person meetings and provide them the support they need.

Although LA County Public Health has allowed NA to return to regular activities, the virus is still around. Remember that each group is autonomous in its decisions, and everyone has their own personal boundaries. It is important to respect this. How will your group promote health and safety for its members?

- At this time, we encourage a face mask requirement for all indoor meetings. This recommendation is consistent with California Department of Health (CDPH) guidance and supported by scientific studies of Covid-19 and other respiratory illnesses. *More information can be found in the appendix on Health and Safety.*
- Personal boundaries regarding physical contact will vary from addict to addict. It is important to remember that not everyone will be ok with hugging right away. Try to be supportive of this, consider that an atmosphere of recovery is very dependent on the comfort levels of addicts in your meetings. Consider mentioning this in your format.
- Groups should consider whether the facility they intend to meet at is well-ventilated and sufficiently large to allow for a degree of physical distancing. Crowded, poorly ventilated indoor settings have been consistently associated with a significantly higher risk of Covid-19 transmission. *For more information, refer to the appendix on Health and Safety.*
- Your group may have questions and concerns about how to proceed with certain commitments while keeping members' health in mind. *For more information regarding each commitment, refer to the appendix on Health and Safety.*

During this process, your group may encounter significant challenges. An important question to ask is: Is an immediate return to in-person meetings critical to your group's Primary Purpose of carrying the message of recovery?

- It may be in your group's best interest to remain online while you work out these issues.

Do you know your facility's rules and how you will implement them into your own?

- This is important to find out before returning! Be sure to fully understand your facility's rules related to Covid-19. If your group conscience doesn't match the facility's rules, then a discussion should occur on if it's the right location for you. After all, your group may be autonomous in its decisions, but violating a facility's rules and being evicted could affect other meetings or NA as a whole.

Hybridization

Many groups are considering going hybrid. This is where an in-person meeting uses technology to have online members join in. This is a difficult task to pull off effectively and there are several important things to consider. Keep in mind that a group's primary purpose is to share the message of recovery. If you cannot provide a good experience for those online and in person, a hybrid format may not be appropriate. Discuss with your group on whether you can achieve this effectively.

Will the meeting be able to reliably provide the technology to host the online meeting?

- A hybrid meeting in its simplest form requires a microphone, a speaker, a camera, a streaming device, and an internet connection. While one member may be able to offer these things for use in your meeting, be sure to consider a backup plan. What if that member cannot attend one week, how will you still provide a good experience for those attending online?
- Consider the cost of the tech needed. If your group wants to purchase these things, can your 7th tradition provide for it?
- Will the meeting be able to provide a stable internet connection throughout the entirety of the meeting? In order to provide a good experience for the online members, it is important to maintain a strong internet connection! Drop-outs and lag could severely hinder your group's ability to spread the message to its online members.

Will you be able to use this technology to create a good and effective experience?

- How will you display the online attendees on a screen? You can use a projector, a TV monitor, or if it is a small enough meeting, just a laptop screen.
- You will need to ensure that both online members and in-person members can clearly hear each other. You will need a speaker and microphone set up that is appropriate for the size of the room. Just using a phone is likely to be insufficient.
- If more than one device is logged on at the in-person meeting, feedback can be an issue. To avoid feedback, all devices should be muted and silenced except for one. Consider using an integrated system for both microphone and speaker.
- What the camera sees is also an important consideration. Some meetings have someone operating the camera to show who is speaking while others use a podium-style camera setup.

How will your meeting's structure change in order to work successfully both online and in person?

- One of the great things about going hybrid is that it likely creates more commitments for members to take on! You will at least need someone in person to manage the technical aspects of the call. Having someone separate from the secretary to do this will make things far less complicated. Consider if you have enough member support to successfully manage a hybrid meeting.
- We have heard of meetings where every in-person member was also logged onto the virtual meeting. This was chaotic and difficult to manage. We recommend having a single point of communication managed by one member. You can even request in your announcements that members stay off their phones.
- In our personal experience, logging on to a hybrid meeting for the first time can be confusing, especially if the meeting has not started. We recommend creating a simple “sign” to display to the virtual room, either by screen-sharing it as a document or setting it as a profile picture on one of your squares. The sign can have important information such as how the meeting is run, its rules, or anything else!

Has the meeting considered creating a commitment to help maintain the atmosphere of recovery for the online portion of the meeting? Consider the scenario of the virtual meeting being “bombed” or subject to harassment, how can the meeting ensure this situation can be addressed in a timely manner?

- Consider creating an online co-secretary commitment for managing the call as we do in virtual meetings.
- Virtual Software settings are useful tools in preventing problems, like turning off direct messaging, muting participants when they enter a room, unmuting by request only, turning off recording and disabling screen sharing.

Will the meeting ensure to the best of its ability that addicts attending in person are not privileged over those that are attending online?

- Consider alternating shares between live and online participants during your sharing portion or use some other system to make the sharing opportunities equal.

Some addicts have expressed concern with anonymity while being on camera during physical meetings, how will you address these concerns?

- Podium-style sharing is a great way to mitigate this issue. The camera will only be pointed at the sharing spot and a sharing member can choose to be on it or not. Virtual Software settings are useful tools in preventing problems, like turning off direct messaging, muting participants when they enter a room, unmuting by request only, turning off recording and disabling screen sharing.
- Splitting the room can be another way to handle this. Perhaps one side of the room agrees to being on camera while the other does not.
- A simple warning may also suffice. You can make an announcement at the beginning of the meeting that it is hybrid and there will be a camera for streaming purposes only.

Facilities



If your meetings are changing location, have you considered the needs of your group when picking a new facility?

- Location: Your group served a specific area of Hollywood before the pandemic. If you were to move to a new facility, would it be far from the last one? Will that adversely affect the community or hurt in carrying the message to certain addicts?
- Ventilation: If you are considering the health aspect of Covid-19, ventilation and size should be your primary concern. The better the air flow, the safer your members will be. *Refer to the Health and Safety Appendix for more information.*
- Does the facility provide technology to aid in being a hybrid meeting? Some facilities are currently equipped for this or are working to be and could really help with the cost and management of being a hybrid meeting.

We hope that this guide helps your group in making the decisions it needs to have a smooth transition to in-person meetings. Thank you for participating and we hope to see you at your meeting soon!

-The Ad-Hoc Committee
on Re-opening

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HEALTH AND SAFETY APPENDIX

None of the information or suggestions provided are the opinion of Narcotics Anonymous per Tradition 10. To help groups make informed decisions about their meeting policies around health, safety, and meeting-level commitments, we have compiled the following information from various public health agency guidelines as well as the scientific literature.

Vaccination

Southern California's vaccination rate is currently sitting at approximately 60% and the vaccination rate has been slowing since the April peak,¹ therefore we suggest that all meetings considering a return to in-person attendance base their plan around the assumption that a portion of their members will be unvaccinated and thus fully vulnerable to COVID19. Since Narcotics Anonymous is not in the business of healthcare and there is no reasonable way to verify the vaccination status of meeting attendees, we feel it is simpler, safer, and thus more prudent to create a single set of recommendations for all members attending an in-person meeting rather than setting different conditions for vaccinated and unvaccinated members.

Ventilation

Groups should consider whether the facility they intend to meet at is well-ventilated and sufficiently large to allow for a degree of physical distancing. Crowded, poorly ventilated indoor settings have been consistently associated with a significantly higher risk of COVID19 transmission.^{2,3,4} Simple questions a group can ask to assess their meeting place: does the room get warmer as the meeting goes on? If someone were to light a cigarette in the meeting would the room quickly fill up with smoke? Is the seating crowded enough that a 'traffic jam' occurs during the break or at the end of the meeting? Does the meeting rely on recirculating fans (i.e. portable floor fans or household ceiling fans) to provide cooling? If the answer to any of these questions is "yes" the facility in question may be too small or too poorly ventilated for the number of attendees and the group should consider delaying a return to in-person meetings or finding an alternate meeting place.

Masks

We encourage a face mask requirement for all indoor meetings. This recommendation is consistent with California Department of Health (CDPH) guidance and supported by scientific studies of COVID19^{6,7} and other respiratory illnesses.⁸ While masks appear to provide some protection to the person wearing them, they also *reduce the risk of transmitting COVID19 to others* and it is this second benefit (reduced transmission) that we feel strongly aligns with the principle that “our common welfare should come first.” Masks are effective at reducing COVID19 transmission, inexpensive, and carry zero risk. Thus, from both a cost-benefit and risk-benefit perspective, they remain one of our best options and should be one of the last things we stop doing. Disposable masks can be purchased for as little as \$4 per 50 pack and we feel it would be an appropriate use of 7th tradition funds to provide masks free at meetings for any attendees who do not bring one.

Commitments

The risk of COVID19 transmission from contaminated surfaces appears to be low in the community setting^{9,10} and thus handing out chips or literature likely represent low-risk activities. Good hand hygiene practice further reduces the risk. Some common activities such as passing medallions or phone lists around a meeting may increase risk and we suggest alternatives such as pre-printed phone lists that can be handed out by the secretary or literature person. It is unclear the extent to which transmission from shared food and beverages presents an elevated risk, though having someone aggressively blow on a cake immediately before serving it seems unwise in this context. Individually packaged refreshments likely reduce the risk posed by sharing food but may not represent a prudent use of limited 7th tradition funds. We suggest meetings consider foregoing coffee and cake for now.

Transmission Prevention

One of the unique considerations for 12 step meetings, as compared to religious groups and social clubs, is that we attend different meetings with different people on a routine basis. In this regard, everyone in Southern California NA is probably connected to everyone else in Southern California NA by “two degrees of separation” under normal circumstances. This web of interconnection is one of NA’s strengths during normal times but represents a risk of rapid spread should we experience localized outbreaks or another surge in transmission. Individuals may want to consider taking a mixed approach to their own meeting attendance, combining one or two regular in-person meetings with regular online attendance. If meetings with safer facilities return to in-person/hybrid while those at less safe facilities remain online-only this may provide a good balance of risk vs. benefit for all area members as well as encouraging a gradual transition back to in-person attendance.

Final thoughts

Finally, we would like to note that while the overall COVID19 situation has dramatically improved throughout Southern California and the country as a whole¹¹ there remain several issues of concern. First, it is not yet clear how long immunity from either natural infection or vaccination will last and we likely won't have that answer until we begin to see an uptick in cases for those previously exposed/vaccinated. Second, the pandemic continues to rage in other parts of the world and the emergence of new SARS-CoV2 variants may pose an increased risk to unvaccinated (and potentially to vaccinated) individuals.^{12, 13} Finally, environmental and behavioral factors tend to reduce transmission of respiratory illness during the summer and increase them during the winter.¹⁴ While we remain cautiously optimistic that the worst of COVID19 is behind us, we should bear in mind that the end of this pandemic is a process, not a single event, and it would be prudent to ease back to in-person meetings gradually rather than trying to rush back to 'normal' all at once.

Citations

(provided as web links for ease of access)

1. <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/coronavirus/vaccine/vaccine-dashboard.htm>
2. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412020317876>
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