



## 2004 LifeRing Congress Annual Report

We are a young and small organization with a vision for the future and a potential for growth. This past year we have concentrated on laying proper foundations. Our foundation-building work has consisted mainly of improving our infrastructure, improving our work of convenor development, and giving convenors more tools to build their meetings. In more detail, this is what we have been doing:

### I.

We passed a milestone in May 2003 when we acquired our own leased office space. As many of you know, prior to that time the LifeRing Service Center and Press had been guests in the law office of the LifeRing CEO. We now have a free-standing office space exclusively our own, with our name on the door, as any free-standing organization ought to have.

What happens at the LifeRing office?

- Here is where the telephone rings. The number 510-763-0779 is given on the website and on every piece of LifeRing literature. You'll get referred to this number from anywhere in the country. We keep a log of calls. Since the last Congress we have received and responded to hundreds of telephone contacts. We have received phone inquiries from every area of the country and made pinpoint referrals to practically every local meeting. Most of the calls are from people who want help with their own or with a loved one's drug/alcohol problem and are seeking information and referrals to support groups and/or treatment providers. If you phone the office, chances are you will talk to Katie F., who has donated large pieces of her time to become our de facto Office Manager.

- Here is where the email to the LifeRing Service Center and LifeRing Press arrives. The email addresses [service@lifering.org](mailto:service@lifering.org) and [publisher@lifering.com](mailto:publisher@lifering.com) are on the websites and on most pieces of LifeRing literature. Since the last Congress we have received and responded to more than 800 email messages, not counting book orders. We have received email from practically every region in the world and made referrals to practically every local meeting as well as to all the LifeRing online resources.
- Here is where the LifeRing snail mail arrives. We receive a steady flow of snail mail from prisoners and many others who prefer this traditional communications channel. We send out new meeting charters and Meeting Starter kits to people who want to start new LifeRing meetings. "Serve the Meetings" is the motto of the Service Center.
- Here is where we receive the brown envelopes and other containers with contributions from the meeting baskets and from book sales at meetings. As you will see from the Financial Report, collections from meeting baskets are a strong and important source of revenue for the Service Center. Tallying and banking the cash and check deposits is a major piece of work for Chet G., the Chief Financial Officer each month, or more often. The LifeRing office is the financial nerve center of the national organization; here is where the deposits come in, the checks go out, the accounts are kept, and the financial reports are generated.
- The office is where our organizational archives are kept. The correspondence files, the files of accounts, the Press invoices, and much else that is vital to our past and present is preserved here. Keeping the files organized and up to

date is a weekly occupation for Gillian E., the LifeRing Secretary.

- Here is where we produce meeting schedules, flyers, brochures, posters, announcements, and other kinds of paper publicity. We design and compose most of this output on the spot. We print a great deal of it on the HP LaserJet printer we purchased last year – and we've already half worn it out. We have a folding machine that gets a lot of work. We have good relations with copy shops and print shops right around the corner who produce our larger volume jobs.
- Here is where we do mailings that help get the word out about LifeRing. We regularly mail out local schedules to treatment providers and other referral sources. We do special targeted mailings to specific areas. For example, we have mailed LifeRing materials together with local flyers to treatment providers in the zip codes around Telford PA to help the local meeting there get started. We have mailed LifeRing materials to members of the Psychological Association in Marin county CA to bring more referrals to the LifeRing meeting there. We have the capacity to do mailings of this kind in any area of the U.S. We have also done nationwide mailings to our own list of LifeRing Press customers, to addiction treatment providers, and others. When we do a larger mailing, the long table in the LifeRing office becomes the center of a lively social event, as the volunteers chat and laugh and groan and get to know one another while their hands move the paper out.
- Here is where orders for LifeRing Press books and other literature are received and fulfilled. The office serves as a warehouse for our stock of books and brochures, and as a shipping center. We have a state-of-the-art online postage system that replaced the clunky old

postage meter. We generally ship out book and literature orders the same day or the next business day after receipt. To comply with postal regulations, we walk the book orders to the Post Office branch around the corner and hand them to the clerks, who greet us by sight. We know that quick gratification is important to our customers and we work hard to meet that expectation.

- The LifeRing office is where most updates are done to the unhooked.com, lifering.com and lifering.org web sites. We try to keep the worldwide meeting schedule up to date, and changes are generally posted within 24 hours of receipt of notice. We post LifeRing news from meetings around the world on the unhooked.com Bulletin Board. We send announcements out to the appropriate LifeRing email lists.
- Finally, the LifeRing office is a meeting place. The long table can fit 12 to 15 people. Thanks to donations from Deanna H. and Laura H. and others we actually have chairs for them to sit in. Here we hold the monthly convenor workshops on the first Saturday of each month. These workshops have done a great deal to give the participating convenors a sense of organizational community and to share best practices and raise the all-around level. Here also is where a Workbook study group meets on Tuesday evenings. Our new Media Committee has met here. Informal working groups convene here. We hope that in time there will be a constant round of meetings around the Service Center table.

We want to extend an invitation to all the Congress delegates and attendees to visit the new office space so that you can see where the central service and publishing arms of your organization are housed.

The new office also presents us with some challenges. The obvious ones – paying the rent, the

telephone bills, and the other office expenses – are in some ways the easiest. As you will see from the Financial Report, the flow of contributions to the office from meeting baskets and the income from literature sales has been adequate to meet these modest expenses.

A more difficult challenge is to keep the office staffed. The possession of an office address and telephone number creates the expectation in the public mind that someone will answer the door bell during business hours and that a live voice will pick up the telephone. To date, less than a year after move-in, we are still some distance from meeting these legitimate expectations.

As you know, all of your LifeRing directors, officers, convenors and staff people are volunteers. No one gets paid and no one gets *per diems* or anything of the sort. Our volunteer basis means that economic reality is constantly rearranging our plans for us. When one of our LifeRing volunteers gets a job, it means that important LifeRing projects get postponed or dropped altogether. We are constantly on the lookout for volunteers who can donate patches of their time, and we count on the patience and understanding of our members and clients in dealing with the less-than-optimum responses that occasionally result. We are very proud of the timely book shipments and the quick telephone and email responses that we are able to achieve most of the time.

We can probably continue to muddle through with this crazy-quilt staffing pattern for a while longer yet. But it is clear that if the LifeRing network is to grow much beyond our present flea-like dimensions, we will have to find money to pay office staff. We are now actively researching various charitable funding possibilities with a view to getting a grant to support our office manager on at least a part-time basis. If you have ideas or resources to help along these lines, please get in touch.

## II.

The new office, however, is only one part and probably the easiest part of the foundation-building work that we have been doing and

need to develop further. The most demanding foundational challenge before us is developing and growing the ranks of LifeRing convenors.

There was a time in the not so distant past when the little band of LifeRing activists were frustrated for lack of opportunity to do our thing. We couldn't find rooms or referrals and didn't have a way to get the word out. Today the playing field has changed. We can get rooms. We can get referrals. We can get the word out. There are more and more people who have heard of LifeRing and would like to attend our meetings. There are more and more referral sources requesting that we start a meeting for their clients in their facility or in their community. The key bottleneck today is convenors.

Even a single energetic and tenacious LifeRing convenor can transform the recovery landscape from an arid wasteland to a flourishing oasis of recovery choices. Look at the rapid growth of LifeRing in Western Australia, or in Toronto, in semi-rural Vancouver Island in British Columbia, or in upstate New York, or in the Hayward/Union City/Fremont area, to mention only a few. Experience teaches that the conditions for the development of LifeRing exist almost everywhere; but it takes convenors with vision, energy, and tenacity to make it happen. There is probably no place in the world where LifeRing cannot succeed if there is an energetic and determined convenor at hand.

We took two significant steps this past year to help develop more convenors. One is the start of regular monthly convenor workshops at the Service Center. The other is the publication of *How Was Your Week*, the updated convenor's handbook.

- The monthly convenor workshops, on the first Saturday, currently use a two-part format. We hold a regular LifeRing recovery support meeting during the first hour. This helps us as convenors to bond with other convenors and to see that our efforts are part of a larger community. In the second part of our convenor workshops we address convenor practice issues. We ask questions

and learn from each other. These workshops are informal schools of convenor training, and we particularly welcome members who are interested in becoming convenors in the future. Although these workshops have been held in Oakland, they could be held anywhere that people feel a need for them. As you can see, we have incorporated a version of the convenor workshops into the Saturday morning program of this weekend's Congress.

- The publication of *How Was Your Week* was the major event in the LifeRing Press publishing calendar this past year. As the old-timers among you will remember, LifeRing was originally formed in 1997 to publish an organizational manual called *Sobriety Handbook*. When LifeRing became an independent organization during the 1999–2001 transitional period, this was reissued with small modifications as *Handbook of Secular Recovery*, a drab-looking pamphlet of some 50 pages. The pool of experience on which this work was based is vintage 1995–1996. We have not only become a free-standing organization since that time, we have accumulated an enormous amount of organizational and philosophical experience. We urgently needed to be able to hand our new LifeRing convenors a tool that reflected our new organizational reality, that conveyed the lessons learned in the past seven years, and that appeared in an attractive format. *How Was Your Week* is that tool. Now, when people come to us – as they do more and more frequently – and say they want to start a LifeRing meeting but have no clue what is involved in doing so, we can put a copy of *How Was Your Week* into their hands.

All this is by way of saying that your organization's current leadership has been pro-active and productive in addressing the need for more LifeRing convenors. But the handful of people

who work at the center could achieve very little were it not for the support and active cooperation of large sections of the LifeRing membership. Becoming a LifeRing convenor is something that practically every LifeRing member can aspire to. LifeRing convenors themselves need to become more mindful of the urgency of recruiting and promoting their own replacements. The most rewarding experience for a convenor is to be able to step away from a meeting and see it flourish with another hand at its helm. We all need to do more to make it clear that every member can and should take a turn as convenor, and that every convenor can and should pass on the convenor role to another member as soon as practicable. The distinction between member and convenor should always be fluid and busy with cross-traffic.

### III.

Convenors need tools to build and sustain meetings. Over the past year we've paid special attention to two issues that many convenors face. One of those big issues is getting referrals.

Making a meeting grow is largely a matter of getting referrals. Word-of-mouth from one recovering person to another is one such channel for referrals, which brings in new members one by one. Recommendations from treatment professionals are another channel. Over time, such referrals can bring in new members by the dozens and hundreds. We know from experience that where treatment professionals regularly refer their clients/patients to LifeRing, there the LifeRing meeting will have a good attendance. If the meeting does not get referrals from treatment professionals, the meeting may struggle and is liable to dry up.

We now have a good basic toolkit for getting professional referrals. For instance:

- LifeRing Press has come out with a second, updated edition of the booklet *Presenting LifeRing Secular Recovery*, which is targeted specifically at treatment professionals. We make this booklet available at cost or free of charge. Wherever LifeRing speakers

address professional audiences, we make sure that every participant gets one.

- On the unhooked.com web site we have a section for treatment professionals. We have there a sample slide show outlining the LifeRing approach – “Life-Ring 101” – that can be borrowed or adapted for convenor presentations to treatment audiences.
- We also have a small but growing referral list of treatment facilities that offer options broader than the 12-step approach, including a few that use the *Recovery by Choice* workbook with their clients. In this way we not only receive referrals, we make referrals in turn, to complete the cycle.
- The new brochure titled “We Come Recommended,” published by LifeRing Press a few months ago, is more easily accessible than a booklet or a slide show. It can quickly help you, the convenor, open doors to treatment professionals and establish the *bona fides* of the LifeRing approach.
- We mail more and more LifeRing literature to treatment professionals and to treatment facilities. These mailings over time build name recognition, probably the main ingredient in gaining acceptance and getting referrals.
- The *Recovery by Choice* workbook is a good tool for impressing on treatment professionals that we have a positive, viable, and comprehensive resource available for their patients/clients.
- We have tailored part of our Congress program to attract treatment professionals, and thanks to Marylou B., we have qualified as a provider of Continuing Education Units for professionals who have LCSW, MFT and CAADAC certification.

- This month we entered new territory by placing a display ad in the journal *Addiction Professional*, which reaches about 25,000 substance abuse treatment providers and administrators. This is a test to evaluate the response. The hope is that the ad will not only sell workbooks but increase name recognition for LifeRing around the country, and make the work of our pioneer convenors in new territories that much easier.

The upshot of all of these efforts is that the gatekeepers who each year guide a flow of nearly one million persons from chemical dependency treatment programs into support groups are becoming more aware of the LifeRing name and more acquainted with the positive aspects of the LifeRing approach. LifeRing meetings everywhere will reap the benefit.

#### IV.

At a growing number of LifeRing meetings, getting referrals is no longer a problem. The problem is developing greater “stickiness.”

At treatment facilities where the counseling staff routinely include LifeRing as a support group option on a par with 12-step groups, all the chairs at the LifeRing meetings may be filled up from day one, and people may be sitting on the floor. The trouble is that some of these LifeRing meetings have almost 100 per cent turnover in a period of two or three weeks. The people come for as long as they are in the treatment program, and when it is over, they disappear again. In meetings of this kind it may be difficult to develop a core group of regulars, and consequently it may be difficult for the convenor to recruit a successor who can take over. This is a potentially dangerous situation that could lead to convenor burnout.

To be sure, a full room with high turnover is a better problem to have than an empty room. But it’s a serious enough issue to require attention. In the past year, we’ve listened closely to the convenors who are experiencing the high-turnover problem and we’ve been working on a couple of tools to address it. One is the new all-

in-one brochure. The other is the emerging workbook study group format.

The new all-in-one brochure entitled *Welcome to LifeRing* is based on the premise that if we only see people once or twice, we owe it to them and to ourselves to put a comprehensive introduction to the LifeRing approach into their hands. Our original set of brochures – the trilogy formed by *Sobriety Is Our Priority*, *Secular is Our Middle Name*, and *Self-Help is What We Do* – isn't compact enough and also not comprehensive enough to serve the purpose. Convenor Joe B. of Walnut Creek developed the first draft of a new approach, and quite a few people on several email lists had input into its development. Using the new brochure we can now rest satisfied that even if we aren't going to see certain people more than once or twice, we have put something into their hands that can give them a complete picture, in a nutshell, of what we are about. Often people don't get serious about their recoveries until the second, third, or later attempts. Thanks to the new brochure, the LifeRing approach will already be on their recovery radar when they try again, and maybe this time they'll stick around.

A different approach to the turnover problem is shaping up in the form of workbook study groups. The first tentative attempts at this kind of group date from two or three years ago and didn't take, but the concept is gathering new steam and taking new shape in a variety of circumstances. We have one workbook study group going on Tuesday evenings at the Service Center, another one just formed in San Francisco, and another one coming soon in Hayward/Union City CA, among other venues. The details of format and procedure are still in flux and under experimentation. The main point is that the workbook provides a structured agenda of recovery work that can engage the person over a considerable span of time. In other words, the workbook provides "stickiness" -- a reason to come back and stay around and become involved in LifeRing for the longer term. It's too early to blow trumpets on this score, but it's clear that workbook study groups will appeal to that considerable segment of recovering people who are looking for a structured longer-

term pathway within our philosophical framework.

Another thing that makes people stick around is social ties. Many of our members participate in informal friendship networks with other LifeRing folks, and we organize occasional social events such as barbecues, picnics, and dinners. We could do much more in this area. Every meeting could give some thought to ways and means for the participants to get together after the meeting or between meetings and to connect with LifeRing members from other meetings and other areas.

One example of this kind of effort is built into our annual Congresses. The psychological boost of this face-to-face encounter, the social events, together with the formal structure of democratic self-government embodied in our delegate process and our assembly, send the message that LifeRing is not just a concept but a worldwide community. If you want, you can make LifeRing your life thing. It's a great bunch of people to spend time with. Ultimately, it's neither brochures nor study groups that will give LifeRing its long-term cohesion and growth but rather the intangible satisfaction of being part of a lively, caring, and interesting community engaged in a worthwhile journey.

V.

All of the above is by way of saying that we now have, or are close to having, a fairly solid foundation for growth. We have the beginnings of an infrastructure; we have a growing body of literature; we have tools and resources for developing the core group of our membership (convenors); we have some workable answers to the problems of referral and turnover that we are experiencing in different settings, and we have an organizational framework that brings and keeps people together. All of this is beginning to make an impression on the people who get to know us.

The emerging task for us now is to increase the number of those people. It isn't that we have been altogether silent about our merits, hiding our light under a bushel. Our Internet presence,

our mailings, and the constant round of speaking engagements that our convenors in the SF Bay Area perform, among other projects, testify to our continuing effort to get the word out. But we could be doing more and we need to move these efforts to a higher level.

Earlier this year, we had the first meeting of a LifeRing Media Committee at the Service Center, and this committee has developed a list of regional media contacts. These efforts have been primarily directed at the Congress, but the intent is to make them ongoing and to seek ways and means to reach the national media. We are well aware of the numerous obstacles that we face in this arena. The media are more and more concentrated in fewer hands, there appears to be a deeply rooted 12-step filter system in place, and the public is sometimes weary of hearing about the problems of alcoholics and addicts. It is easy to become discouraged.

It is helpful to remember that just a few years ago, many of us felt equally daunted by the prospect of getting a hearing from members of the treatment profession. Aren't they all locked into the 12-step mindset? Aren't we beating our heads against a wall here? Today we have learned, sometimes to our surprise, that there are gaps in that wall and that there is a significant sub-set of treatment professionals, even those who grew up with 12-step, who are willing to offer their clients whatever may work for them, even if it's something other than 12-step. We need to take the same positive and tenacious attitude toward the media. The goal of our media work is to reach out directly to the people who want release from drug and alcohol addiction. If we learn how to find and how to enter the openings in the media wall, we can certainly achieve a much wider audience for the LifeRing message of choice and hope.

## VI.

In all of these efforts, we depend and rely on the active support of our entire membership and friends. We are very fortunate to have a membership that is like the children of Lake Woebe-gone: all above average. The words of Abraham Lincoln to the Washingtonian Total Abstinence

Society in 1842 might have been written about this group:

*I believe if we take habitual drunkards as a class, their heads and their hearts will bear an advantageous comparison with those of any other class. There seems ever to have been proneness in the brilliant and the warm-blooded, to fall into this vice. The demon of intemperance ever seems to have delighted in sucking the blood of genius and of generosity.*

The historic project that we have set ourselves sometimes seems daunting. We are building a much-needed new road toward the City of Recovery. This is hard work, and sometimes our band seems small, the road narrow, and the goal far away. It's well to remind ourselves how far we've come. There are now hundreds of people who have achieved personal milestones of sobriety in the free and supportive atmosphere of LifeRing meetings. Our sober lives are testimonials that this pathway to recovery works – it works for us. As we accumulate more and more sober days, we gain in clarity of vision and in the strength to do what must be done. As our eyes see farther into the past and into the future, and as our sober legs grow stronger, there arises within many of us the urge to give something back. We begin to acknowledge that each of us is the beneficiary of the efforts of many people who came before us. Each of us can be a contributor to the recovery of many who will come after us. In this connection lies one of the strands that gives meaning to our life and makes it worth living. If each of us holds fast to our sobriety, and if each of us dedicates ourselves to giving back something of what has been given to us, then our forward progress as a recovery network will be unstoppable.

The LifeRing Board of Directors:

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