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Recovery and Public Service

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Critics of recovery mutual aid societies have argued that such societies foster cult-like isolation and thwart broader community participation. The historical record and recent scientific studies challenge such criticisms.

Recovering individuals and their families have played important roles in local and national alcohol policy debates. Recovery activists such as John Gough, John Hawkins, Dr. Henry Reynolds and Francis Murphy played leadership roles in the larger temperance movement of the nineteenth century. In the 1890s, members of the Keeley Leagues demonstrated in support of legislation to provide state funding for treatment of indigent alcoholics. That tradition of advocacy continued through the work of Marty Mann and the National Council on Alcoholism. One could build a convincing historical case that there would be no modern system of addiction treatment without the legions of recovering people and their families who spent decades advocating for the development of such a system of care. AA co-founder Bill Wilson testifying before a 1969 congressional committee in support of the landmark legislation that birthed the treatment system as we know it today constitutes a landmark of such public service.

But what of broader levels of community involvement? In 2003, Linda Farris Kurtz and Michael Fisher published a study in *Contemporary Drug Problems* on the level of participation in community life by AA and NA members. They found a high level of community service by AA and NA members in long-term recovery. AA and NA members reported that their volunteer involvement in helping agencies, schools, civic groups, professional associations, political parties, advocacy groups, cultural groups and religious organizations was a way of giving back to their communities the gifts that had come to them through their recoveries.

Personal recovery is a catalyst for community participation and public service. Those on the front lines of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement in the United States are writing new chapters within that tradition.