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# The Intelligencer

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## Group offers secular recovery

By **JACOB FENTON**  
The Intelligencer

On a day millions of Americans wish they had less to drink the night before, John Ralston will be doing his best to help recovering addicts continue to stay sober.

Ralston's group usually meets on Mondays, which means they will get together on New Year's Day, usually one of the best-attended meetings of the year.

But it isn't an area chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. It's a local group of a California-based organization called LifeRing Secular Recovery, which became a national organization in 2001. Alcoholics Anonymous requires people in recovery to acknowledge a higher power, but LifeRing is built on a solidly secular platform.

LifeRing CEO Marty Nicolaus said the group traces its roots back to "Women for Sobriety," which was one of the first recovery groups in the 1970s to recognize that traditional 12-step programs aren't for everyone.

"We're not opposed to any other group ... we're just saying it's important to give people a choice," Nicolaus said.

After years of drinking, Ralston managed to kick the habit on his own, but after 14 months of sobriety, he said he felt like if he didn't talk to someone about it he'd get "back on the same barstool."

Alcoholics Anonymous was a big turnoff to Ralston, who says he's spiritual but not very religious.

"You've got to find some higher power plus you're scared to death of quitting drinking in the first place. It's just too much for some people to overcome," he said.

In the last five years LifeRing has grown to about 100 face-to-face meeting sites as well as online forums devoted to sharing experiences with alcohol and drugs. Its Web site is [www.unhooked.com](http://www.unhooked.com); Ralston also keeps up a directory of local secular alternatives at [www.nosteps.org](http://www.nosteps.org).

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"For some people, the support is just as good online as it is face to face," Nicolaus said. "You can be very anonymous as opposed to a face-to-face meeting. I personally know people who have stayed clean and sober for five years with just online meetings."

Alcoholics Anonymous is careful to make the definition of a higher power as broad as possible.

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In the group's "Big Book," it states: "When, therefore, we speak to you about God, we mean your own conception of God."

One step in the group's recovery plan, however, is making "a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him."

The idea of powerlessness ran contrary to the pure determination Ralston relied on to clean up his own act.

At meetings, Ralston encourages members to take charge and plan as concretely as possible how they can stay sober.

"If you always drive by the liquor store on the way home, drive a different way home," Ralston said.

Timothy Philpot, associate director of the Bucks County Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependency, said his agency puts people who need assistance in touch with a wide range of help.

"We believe very strongly that there are many pathways to recovery," he said.

Counselors often advise those in recovery to attend a few different meetings to decide which one makes them feel most at home.

"Every traditional AA meeting or NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meeting has its own personality based on the people who frequent the group," Philpot said.

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