

Brothers, much like the rest of the programs comprising the Boy Scouts of America, the Order of the Arrow is facing challenges with the introduction of new members and retention of existing members. In a National OA webinar held on June 22, OA National Committee Chairman Mike Hoffman outlined the latest new membership metrics for the 2020 calendar year. Across the nation the Order has elected 65% fewer candidates from this time last year and has inducted 80% fewer than this time last year. Clearly the reduction has been a result of units not holding traditional meetings and elections as well as the cancellation of Ordeal weekends due to state COVID-19 mandates.

These numbers are extremely menacing and without pause one could take the face value of such metrics and think the worst of what is to become of Scouting's Honor Society. What I would prefer us to do is look at the positive things the national committee and your very own Blue Heron Lodge are doing to keep our membership strong.

I would first like to describe the policy changes initiated by the national office to aid in increasing and retaining membership. One of the major challenges facing potential candidates is the accumulation of valid camping days that count toward eligibility. The national website states the following:

In light of the extended period of camping restrictions attributable to COVID-19, the following temporary modification is being made to the camping requirements for OA eligibility:

Virtual camping (i.e., backyard or solo camping) may be counted toward the required nights of camping for OA election eligibility if all the following stipulations are met:

- To be counted, all virtual camping nights should be a direct result of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and be part of a BSA unit-organized unit camping event (i.e., multiple members of the unit are involved and camping simultaneously at remote locations).
- Some form of unit-organized communications should occur either during or immediately following the event.
- All existing youth protection policies and digital safety guidelines should be followed.
- No more than three (3) nights of virtual camping are to be credited in any month in which government- or council-imposed COVID-19 restrictions are in place.

This change is in effect until September 1, 2020.

Units which have already held an election between March 1, 2020 and April 30, 2020 are authorized to hold one additional election for any individuals who were ineligible at the time of the election due to the camping requirement, but would have been considered eligible at the time if this temporary policy had then been in effect. This second election must be completed no later than July 1, 2020. Those who were previously considered for election in the first election may not be reconsidered on this second ballot (i.e., no one can be considered for election more than once in a year).

Given that virtually all councils have either cancelled or reduced their summer camp programs this year, creating a situation where a high proportion of Scouts will not have the opportunity to attend an in-camp summer camp in 2020, a temporary provision to allow for "virtual" long term camping credit for OA eligibility is necessary.

Virtual Long-Term Camping Authorization

Two situations have developed associated with the current pandemic that may prevent Scouts from having an opportunity to qualify for OA eligibility due to not having attended a long-term camp this summer.

- The local council camp is closed and not offering a traditional summer camp experience.
- Scout parents are unwilling to allow their child to attend traditional summer camp programs due to health concerns.

In order to address these circumstances, virtual long-term camping of five (5) consecutive nights is authorized to be counted toward the long-term camping requirements for OA eligibility consistent with the above guidance and the following additional guidelines:

- A long-term camp plan must be developed and approved by the unit leader prior to the commencement of the long-term camp. This plan is to be individualized to each Scout's capabilities and situation and should strive to include:
 - Progress toward advancement for each Scout
 - Outdoor relevant experience consistent with local conditions and restrictions
- Unit-organized communications should occur on a daily basis during the camping experience and include discussion of progress made on summer camp goals.
- An end-of-camp assessment must be conducted with the unit leader to report on progress made during the experience itself and discuss how future virtual long-term camping experiences can be enhanced. During this assessment the unit leader will make the determination if the Scout's participation warrants granting credit for a completed virtual long-term camping experience in terms of OA eligibility.

This virtual long-term camping authority is not meant to substitute for attendance at traditional council summer camp programs, but rather to provide an alternative for Scouts who fit in one of the two categories mentioned above.

In addition to the above policy changes, Blue Heron is taking action to add opportunities for Induction into the Order. Our regularly scheduled August Service and Ordeal Weekend is still on for August 21-23. Our chairman has planned an outstanding event full of fun activities.

In September we will join forces with our OA brothers from the Peninsula, Wahunsenakah Lodge, to conduct a joint Service and Ordeal Weekend. The dates for this event are September 11-13. Look for updates to Tentaroo for registration information.

These are tough times for our lodge, the OA, and Scouting. The thing that makes our organization strong is our commitment to brotherhood. I challenge each brother to reach out to a member or candidate within your unit and chapter and ask them a simple question, "How are you doing?" Remind them about the events we have planned and encourage them to attend. Together we can overcome adversity and remain a strong lodge into the future.

I look forward to seeing you all around the campfire!

Yours in Cheerful Service,
Jeff Bobrow
Lodge Adviser
Blue Heron Lodge #349