

PETITION FOR REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNANCE AT AAMFT

AAMFT's historical governance structure represents a top-down, command and control, hierarchical model based on the Board holding all the powers of the association.¹ This includes a contractual relationship between the AAMFT Board and the Executive Director(ED)², which has spanned over 18 years and wherein the Board and the Executive Director "own" the day-to-day operations of the Corporation, and consequently the AAMFT culture.

This structure has evolved over time into the current closed system in which concerns raised by members or division leaders about the organization or the Executive Director's performance can be dismissed as "criticism" of the current and past boards, and those raising concerns blamed for trying to harm AAMFT.³

Although over 250 members⁴ have called for an outside, independent evaluation and assessment of the association, exploring all aspects of AAMFT internal affairs and governance structure, the current structure allows for the Board and ED to be buffered from listening and responding to member voices, claiming this might place the Corporation at risk of violating its own policies.

Symptoms of this top-down, hierarchical, closed system governance approach include the lack of responsiveness to members and the apparent distrust of the membership, through the elected members of the Election Council, resulting in the presence of executive staff in all Election Council proceedings. This speaks to a conflict of interest and a dysfunctional relationship between the board and the ED which the present governance structure allows. Under current policies, the AAMFT Board cannot evaluate specific behaviors or actions of the Executive Director, only progress on the strategic plan. Although the association continues to fall short of goals set in strategic plans (e.g., changing Medicare exclusion of MFTs), the Board continues to renew the contractual relationship with the Executive Director, with no transparency or 360 degree evaluation process, which seeks feedback from multiple stakeholders. By every indication, the Board's evaluations of the Executive Director continue to rate the Executive Director's performance as "outstanding" regardless of members' and division leaders' concerns or AAMFT's organizational performance on the Strategic Plan in a given year.

¹ Bylaw **5.02** The Board shall exercise all powers of the Association except as specifically prohibited by these Bylaws. The Board shall be authorized to adopt and publish such policies, procedures, and rules as may be necessary and appropriate, and to exercise authority over all Association business and funds. The Board may delegate such functions and powers as it deems appropriate to constituent components of the Association, including committees, commissions, councils, and divisions. Such delegations may be revoked at any time unless otherwise provided by these Bylaws.

² POLICY TYPE: BOARD-STAFF RELATIONSHIP, TITLE: *DELEGATION TO THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE*

2. As long as the executive director uses *a reasonable interpretation* of the Board's *Ends and Executive Limitations* policies, the executive director is authorized to establish all further enabling policies, make all decisions, take all actions, establish all practices and develop all activities. From GOVERNANCE POLICIES: ENDS, GOVERNANCE PROCESS, BOARD - STAFF RELATIONSHIP, EXECUTIVE LIMITATIONS. AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY (Revised December, 2006) p 41.

³ "Having all been on the Board of Directors, some of us as long ago as the 1980s, and having all recently served as President, we have firsthand knowledge of other conflicts which involved various groups of members attempting to control the Board's decision-making through protests, petitions and confrontations...none of us has escaped the experience of knowing that personal agendas and even old scores are often at the root of someone's discontent. Other members inevitably get recruited to join an otherwise seemingly reasonable protest without any real knowledge of exactly what prompted it in the beginning." Signed by seven past presidents of AAMFT including Mary Hotvedt, James Morris, Alan Hovestadt, Anna Beth Benningfield, Marcia Lasswell, Tony Jurich and Scott Johnson (Psychotherapy Networker, Nov./Dec 2009, p. 7)

⁴ Call for Change movement at AAMFT, see <http://mfts-call-for-change.com/>

The current governance structure also fosters distrust and reactive responses by the Board of Directors. Indeed, the current AAMFT Board and Central office have on many recent occasions fallen back on their governance structure to silence member voices and to disenfranchise member involvement within the organization. A number of recent, egregious examples of AAMFT leadership utilizing its existing governance structure to silence the voices and the good will of division leaders and the membership at large include these decisions by the AAMFT Board:

- ❖ Canceling the Council of Division Presidents meeting in March 2010.
- ❖ Canceling the Town Hall Meeting at the Annual Conference in October 2009.
- ❖ Using intimidation and threats, including a Gag Order and withholding quarterly dues disbursements of one division in November 2009.
- ❖ Telling Division leaders they violated “all” by-laws because they spoke out about issues the Board considers off-limits for Division leaders to discuss or address, such as the effectiveness of the Executive Director.
- ❖ Telling Division leaders that discussing the Call for Change within their divisions placed them at risk for violating their fiduciary responsibility to the Corporation, AAMFT.
- ❖ Closing the Program Directors’ list serve when concerns were raised about the COAMFTE investigation done by the Board of Directors.
- ❖ Developing increasingly restrictive sets of parameters regarding discussion items and process within the Program Directors and Division Leaders’ list serves.

AAMFT’s governance structure and policies need to better represent the voices of the membership, promote opportunities for members’ meaningful involvement within the organization, and support vibrant growth at the division level.

The Core Values⁵ guiding AAMFT have not been actualized in ways that are conducive to furthering the MFT profession. AAMFT needs a bottom-up, representative governance structure to ensure collaboration and accountability within the association, including new governance bylaws, policies, procedures and practices that protect members’ rights to participate fully as stakeholders, empower divisions and the Council of Division Presidents, and promote a transparent, decentralized, staff-served, membership-driven AAMFT.

We, the authors of the attached petition, believe that representative governance will open up the dialogue and strengthen relationship and accountability within AAMFT, tap into the underutilized resources in the membership, and align AAMFT more closely with the core values of the profession. Therefore, we are asking for a re-write of the governance policies to change our organization from a top-down, command and control, Executive Director and Board-driven organization to a governance that is member driven, accountable, transparent and inclusive.

⁵ **Core Values** The core values of AAMFT embody:

1. Acceptance and appreciation of a diverse membership.
2. Excellence in service to members.
3. Excellence in the provision of Marriage and Family Therapy services.
4. Excellence and distinctiveness in training of Marriage and Family Therapists.
5. Diversity, equity and excellence in clinical practice, research, education and administration.
6. Integrity evidenced by ethical and honest behavior.
7. Innovation and the advancement of knowledge of the profession.