

Engaging A.A. Members in Corrections Work

(This material reflects shared experience from A.A. members serving on Corrections Committees. This sharing was in response to a questionnaire from the trustees' Corrections Committee. The purpose of this sharing is to assist A.A. members in carrying the message to the alcoholics behind the walls.)

Carrying the A.A. message into correctional facilities is a form of service work that A.A. members have been providing throughout the Fellowship since its earliest years. In 1942, just seven years after the founding of A.A., the San Quentin Group became the first "inside" A.A. group to be recorded at the General Service Office. The group was formed when Clinton Duffy, a pioneering warden at San Quentin, asked nearby A.A.'s to carry the message to alcoholics in that fabled prison. Recognizing that alcoholism presented a serious problem within the prison population, Warden Duffy was heard to say, "If the A.A. program will help just one man, I want to start it."

Following those first A.A. meetings in San Quentin, prison groups began to spring up across the U.S. and Canada, and by the mid-1950s were taking root around the world.

Today in the U.S. and Canada general service structure, there are approximately 1,490 A.A. groups in correctional facilities that are serviced by local correctional facilities committees.

GETTING OTHERS INVOLVED

Traditionally, one of the principal functions of Corrections committees is taking A.A. meetings into facilities within their areas. Through local "outside" participation in this kind of Twelfth Step work, alcoholics "inside" are introduced to A.A. and its program of recovery.

Here are some of the things committee members have found to be helpful in getting others involved in carrying the message into correctional facilities.

Enthusiasm and Persistence: Be enthusiastic and positive when talking about corrections service; share positive experiences; talk to individuals one-on-one emphasizing Twelfth Step work, one alcoholic talking to another. Make announcements in meetings; hold workshops to inform, encourage and recruit.

Eliminating Barriers: Many folks are misinformed about A.A. meetings in prison. Some are afraid to go into locked facilities, so sharing personal experience about the safety and security that the facilities provide and how powerful the meetings are, help to break the prejudices that are out there concerning "prisoners," "inmates," and "prison meetings."

Recruiting Members: The best way to recruit is to personally invite members one-on-one and/or to take sponsees along to see what correctional facility service is like. Many committee members make it a point to mention corrections service during workshops at Area assemblies and often stress A.A.'s long history of going into jails and institutions to do Twelfth Step work. Some committees have sought to recruit more members by reducing the hours of

commitment that a volunteer does in a month, creating what may be a more manageable commitment in terms of time.

Encouraging Young People: While encouraging young people is not necessarily any different than encouraging any other A.A. member, inviting young people to carry the message in places that serve young people, like youth detention centers, can be a powerful way of engaging new members in corrections work.

CORRECTIONS SERVICE EVENTS

Committee members often run workshops and seminars to inform members and others about doing prison work. Here are some of the things committee members have found to be helpful.

Setting up informational events: staffing a booth or holding an Open House where members can ask questions and meet other A.A.s who carry the message into correctional facilities; setting up round table discussions about how to better support the alcoholics behind the walls. .

Having regular committee meetings at state conventions, area assemblies, district service days, inter-groups, or local and Regional Forums etc.

Getting group involvement: Some groups participate in Pink Penny can programs that help raise funds to bring A.A. literature into correctional meetings; some districts furnish funds for corrections service workshops.

Meet with Wardens and other prison personnel to provide information about A.A. and what A.A. can and cannot do; work with district and area C.P.C./P.I. committees to maximize efforts and provide the best information possible to prison administrators.

HELPFUL RESOURCES/TOOLS

There are many tools that committees and individuals find helpful in their work in correctional facilities. Here are some:

Corrections Workbook and Pamphlets: Along with the Corrections Workbook, the A.A. Guidelines for those doing service inside and the pamphlets “Corrections Correspondence Service” and “Corrections Prerelease” are useful tools. Also the DVDs “A.A. in Correctional Facilities” and “It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell” are helpful.

Correspondence with and from inmates: The Corrections Correspondence Service, a service that puts inmates in touch with A.A. members on the outside, gives A.A.s a chance to do Twelfth Step work writing to alcoholics in confinement. This provides fellowship and sponsorship for inmates who may be unable to get to meetings or have access only to limited contact with other A.A.s. *Sharing from Behind the Walls* is a newsletter filled with excerpts from the letters received on the corrections desk at GSO. Like a mini-meeting, it gives inmates a chance to share their experience with each other. Currently more correspondents are needed, especially men.

A.A. Grapevine/La Viña: Many areas, districts and inter-groups send subscriptions or packs of back issues into local correctional facilities and/or collect and redistribute used Grapevines for

volunteers to bring to inmates. Magazines can also be made available by getting them placed in prison libraries.

WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE?

Communication: Committee members should provide ongoing emphasis on corrections work at every opportunity, i.e., through the Grapevine and other A.A. publications; pass the word about the need for volunteers to GSRs through DCMs; encourage all trusted servants to carry information back to their districts and home groups. Sometimes there is a tendency to think, "Someone else will do it."

Continuity: Keep inviting people and stating the need for carrying the message to correctional facilities, as alcohol is the reason so many inmates are there in the first place. People will never be convinced to do this work by appealing to their head, you have to touch their heart.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF MEMBERS DOING CORRECTIONS WORK

Here are some personal reflections on corrections service work from Corrections committee members across the U.S. and Canada:

- "Corrections work helps keep us sober – it keeps it real about what 'yet' can happen to us or reminds us where we have been."
- "Being able to watch people at their bottom in jail and see them reach out to A.A. and grow and get help is just amazing."
- "I hadn't been to jail, so I thought I had nothing to offer at a meeting in a correctional facility. Then one day a young sponsee of mine was set on doing service in the local county jail. She filled out the paperwork, got approved and went. She begged me to go with her to help. So I filled out the application, got approved and went with her. Then there were two of us that didn't know much of what we were doing. So we asked an old-timer in our home group who had done a lot of corrections meetings and he agreed to help us run the women's meeting. He came a few times, let us watch and mimic him and we learned how to run the meeting just like it is on the outside. And that is what I found out. It's just a meeting -- with a few more bars and locks. But it is just a meeting. And what we could share is our experience, strength and hope. This experience has shown me that I need a meeting just as much as people on the inside. Often I hear just what I need to at a prison meeting. I am also filled up by the gratitude of the members on the inside who usually only get a meeting once a week and appreciate the fellowship being brought to them. I thought I had nothing to offer, and yet when I showed a little willingness, I gained more than I could imagine on this Corrections journey."
- "I am a former incarcerated woman so I understand what it is like and worked hard to be able to go back inside to share my message and give back. I wrote our superintendent for two years and he finally allowed me to go in while still on probation which had never happened before. These meetings are so powerful and spiritual for me and I have had women come to me inside and when they get out, telling me they heard my message and were impacted by the hope I shared. By the grace that allowed me to be of service to these

women, I know where I don't ever want to go again and that the sharing of my experience, strength and hope not only spreads a message that there is a better way, but also helps me every day to walk in sobriety!"

- "My experience putting on meetings and taking individuals through the Twelve Steps has certainly impacted my sobriety. When I leave the prison on a Saturday night after putting on a meeting it is certainly a spiritual awakening. It does so much for my sobriety. But for the grace of God, I could be there, too."
- "I spent 4 years at a meeting at one of our facilities. When the warden told us we could no longer bring refreshments, attendance dropped from 20-25 down to 2 or 3, but one of those guys came every week. He is now out of prison, 5 years sober and attends the weekly meeting at the pre-release center with me and several others. It means a lot to him (and to me)."
- "Working with the officials of correctional facilities to open new A.A. meetings in such facilities is most enlightening and spiritually rewarding, seeing the magic of the program work in the hearts and minds of non-alcoholics who tend to the suffering alcoholics living within their correctional facilities."
- "I speak at our local unit regularly. The guys at that facility are all going home within 6 months, so you're really getting a chance to catch them before they put their feet back on the pavement. From the questions I receive, you can tell many of them are scared about trying to stay sober in the 'real world.' Often during my talk, I tell them to find an A.A. group. I often say, 'If you're ever in town, stop in at our group, too.' Well, one of them did. A guy walks up to me and says, 'You probably don't remember me, but I remember you. You used to speak at the unit. You told me 3 years ago if I was ever in your area I should stop in and catch a meeting at your group, so here I am.' And he was still sober. Truth is, you never know just who you are going to help."

Harkening back to its earliest roots, corrections service work reflects the comments of its first non-alcoholic supporter, Warden Clinton Duffy, "If the A.A. program will help just one man, I want to start it."

For more information please visit the A.A. website: www.aa.org, or contact the Corrections desk: corrections@aa.org.