

CARRYING THE AA MESSAGE TO THE HEARING-IMPAIRED ALCOHOLIC

In response to many inquiries regarding help for hearing-impaired alcoholics and because of the limited information on hand at GSO New York, two separate surveys of the North American AA membership were undertaken. The first, in 1978, was directed to AA service entities and those deaf Groups already listed at GSO New York; the second was conducted by way of Box 459 in 1982. GSO also wrote to more than 3,500 individual professionals and agencies that serve hearing-impaired people seeking information on what AA could do to improve its ability to carry its message of help and hope to alcoholics in the deaf community. The response was excellent, indicating real need in this area. Several agencies requested local AAs to provide public information meetings about the Fellowship for their people.

If this is your first experience with deafness and sign language interpreters, you may want to educate yourself a bit beforehand. Australian Hearing Services and similar organisations can offer you information on deafness, deaf culture and information about sign language, but there is no need for you to take a crash course in sign language! Of course, if you do learn some signs or finger spelling (manual alphabet), it will surely be useful. In Australia there is no national Society for the Deaf; however, each State has a Deaf Society association - please check your local telephone directory.

CARRYING THE MESSAGE TO DEAF ALCOHOLICS

The main thing to remember is that the deaf have the same problem with alcohol as anyone else. While the deaf come up with a thousand reasons why they are different, let's emphasise over and over "Don't drink; keep coming back". When all else fails, they do come back. Often, everything must be written out for those with impaired hearing and not all are great readers and writers. Let's hope that a smile, a handshake and a cup of coffee can carry 'the language of the heart', even to those minus their hearing. Try to encourage the newcomer to take some AA literature and summarise what the speaker said on a note pad. Encourage the newcomer to come to another meeting and try to work out a way for the deaf person to bring a professional interpreter who uses sign language with him, or contact one yourself at a nearby agency.

INTERPRETERS

An interpreter is essential for the hearing-impaired alcoholic: without one there is no communication. As the situation is now, interpreters are a *must*. Care must be taken, however, that the deaf person does not become so dependent on the interpreter that there is little or no interaction with other members. It is sometimes (often?) difficult to convey feelings through another person.

It must be appreciated that hearing-impaired people have varying degrees of language skill which differ depending upon their age when they became deaf. Most deaf people use sign language, but there are various levels of competence; there are also different types of sign language, not to mention regional dialects. Interpreters are professional people who charge fees for their services; sometimes an agency will take care of the expense and we have heard of a Group that covers this expense. On occasion, Local/Central Service Office have authorised payment for interpreters and sometimes students of sign language will do the job for free to gain the experience.

Whatever arrangements are made, they should be based on the Group's conscience, expressed after discussion at a business meeting. For instance, is the Group agreeable to having a non-AA attend its closed meetings to act as interpreter for the deaf alcoholic? Is the Group willing to cover the expense of this service, or does it wish to appoint someone to contact the Local/Central Service Office or the professional agency about providing an interpreter? In order to welcome the deaf person (and the interpreter) and make the newcomer feel that he or she is an important addition to the Group, it is important that a full understanding be reached in advance. Non-alcoholic interpreters should be introduced to the Group before meetings. In America there is an organisation of interpreters known as Registry of Interpreters (RID); it should not be difficult to discover if there is an equivalent in your Australian Region, and if there is, to contact them.

SHARED EXPERIENCE

"The wife of an AA member who is a member of Al-Anon is excellent with sign language. Several deaf members attend both open and closed meetings with her and she interprets for them. The Groups took a 'sense of the meeting' and agreed to her attending closed meetings for the purpose of helping deaf alcoholic."

"The TDD phone at GSO rang with our first *Twelfth Step* call. Marilyn S, just out of treatment, was eager to attend AA meetings, as recommended, but was unable to find any with an interpreter present. Our letter of enquiry brought forth encouraging news:

1. That the office had just arranged for interpreters at two weekly meetings;
2. Its newsletter had asked for members who would be willing to 'sign' their own home Group meetings when needed;
3. A list of deaf members willing to *Twelfth-Step* deaf newcomers was being compiled and
4. Marilyn herself was hard at work setting up an AA meeting for deaf alcoholics at a local hospital."

"Encourage Group members to write to deaf alcoholics as often as possible and refer the deaf newcomer to our deaf correspondents."

"Dealing with deaf alcoholics has been very similar to dealing with hearing alcoholics, and the support of the AA community is most important."

"Try not to treat the deaf alcoholic as different or special. Allow him or her the best possible freedom to fit into a typical AA meeting."

SIGN LANGUAGE

Unfortunately, sign language differs between countries, so video materials produced for one country are useless for another. GENERAL SERVICE OFFICE holds and can provide copies of one video explaining the *Fifth Step* in the New Zealand deaf signage. At this time a video is being prepared in *Auslan*, the Australian system and has been approved for distribution when completed.

A few dedicated North American AA members have learned sign language in order to be more effective in this *Twelfth Step* work. Here are some comments:

"As a result of trying to communicate with deaf alcoholics, I am taking a course in sign language."

"Learning this skill for a hearing person necessitates being with the deaf often. Expecting a hearing person to give himself often to the deaf community is expecting the heroic. When I say often, I mean like constantly."

"As two of us go on *Twelfth Step* calls, it isn't necessary that both use sign language; one talks, the other interprets." Local/Central Service Office newsletters could be encouraged to publish information about Groups or contacts for the deaf and availability of instruction in sign language for anyone interested in learning.

SHARING BY MAIL

Deaf alcoholics can be included in the *Loners Internationalists Meeting Australia* (LIM Australia), an AA meeting by mail, published four times per year. Also, General Service Office will on their behalf, call all known local resources, including Local/Central Service Office, to find assistance for deaf Members or Groups if they call for help.

AA LITERATURE & OTHER MATERIALS

See the notes above under "*Sign Language*" and the NZ video: "*The Fifth Step Explained*". Call GENERAL SERVICE OFFICE {(02) 9599 8866} if this could be of help to you.

In response to our survey question on AA literature, those items cited as most helpful with the hearing-impaired were:

- "Living Sober"
- "*Is AA for You?*"
- "*AA at a Glance*"
- "*Twelve Traditions Illustrated*"
- "Alcoholics Anonymous"
- "The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions".

In response to many requests for simplified material, the following service pieces are available from New York in easier English and large type, which may be ordered from General Service Office:

- "*Twelve Steps*"
- "*A Brief Guide to AA*"
- "*A Newcomer Asks*".

PI & CPC COMMITTEES:

Based on the fine response GSO New York received from the professional agencies contacted, local PI & CPC committees are encouraged to seek out agencies for the hard-of-hearing (often included in local agencies for the handicapped), and offer to put on an open AA meeting or a *Public Information* meeting about Alcoholics Anonymous. Should you have the opportunity to do this, General Service Office will be glad to advise on material to display and distribute. Another project that has been suggested for PI committees is to take an AA meeting to schools for the deaf and/or provide information and material about AA to such schools. Apparently, there are a number of social clubs for the deaf, and there are likely to be some alcoholics among the members. At the very least, some club members may know of deaf alcoholics. If we can make information available about what AA can offer the hearing-impaired, the attitude toward attending AA meetings could become much more positive. Contacts for local deaf institutions and clubs may be found in the telephone directory under 'Hearing Impaired ...' or 'Deaf ...'.

EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

AAs with impaired hearing may need a few special considerations when attending an AA event. For those who have a fair amount of hearing and/or who can lip-read, seating near the speaker may be all that is required. Others who are deaf may require the use of a sign-language interpreter. Here are some points to consider when planning a conference or meeting that will be attended by hearing-impaired AAs:

- Reserve interpreters well ahead of time because they are in great demand;
- Budget the interpreting expenses. Find out early what the estimated cost will be, whether by the hour or by the day. If you are holding concurrent workshops, you may need more than one interpreter at the same time. If your event is small (and short) you may strike lucky and find a qualified volunteer, but don't count on it;
- In arranging preferred seating for hearing-impaired members, designate the reserved area clearly: "Reserved for hearing-impaired members";
- Advise workshop leaders and meeting chairpersons regarding the use of the interpreter. If there is trouble locating an interpreter for a minute or two it is preferable to wait. In this way, those members who depend on the interpreter will not be deprived of opening remarks or keynote speakers.
- Stick with your plans once you have announced that an event is provided with sign-language interpreters. Hearing-impaired people are very likely to travel far for the few events that are interpreted. If the event is a large one with concurrent meetings and workshops, plan for continuous availability of several interpreters;
- If you are listing the event with General Service Office, your local Local/Central Service Office or Area or in any AA publication, specify that it is, or which parts of it are, sign-language interpreted.

CONCLUSION

We encourage you to keep us informed of your experience in trying to carry the message to deaf alcoholics so that we can continue to improve our services in this field. If General Service Office is aware of stable special interest Groups for the hearing-impaired, we will contact you when we receive requests for help from deaf alcoholics in your community. We look forward to hearing from you and wish you good luck in carrying the message to the alcoholic who still suffers.