

COURT AND SIMILAR PROGRAMS

WHAT KINDS OF PROGRAMS DOES THIS GUIDELINE COVER?

For many years, AA members have been co-operating with various law-enforcement officials in order to carry the AA message into places where it is needed. At first, this involved only correctional facilities, where thousands of alcoholics found and now enjoy the AA way of life. Today, the principles of co-operation learned in that experience are being used in other ways. AA members began helping magistrates, judges and other court officials (in both criminal and in family courts) by carrying the AA message into courtrooms. There, AA prospects are often required by the court (not by AA) to listen to the AA message. As a result, many alcoholics introduced to AA this way, albeit unwillingly, are now happily sober. AA members' activities in such programmes are described in this Guideline. In more recent years, in some countries, 'safe driving' programmes have been set up for drivers in trouble with the law because of incidents related to drinking. In those countries, AA members have helped and are helping such drivers get at least a chance to learn about AA and discover whether or not they are ready for it. Many are now happy members of AA as a result.

ARE THESE PROGRAMS EFFECTIVE?

To quote members who have participated: "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much ensure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics" . . . "It works when other activities fail" . . . "You can help when no one else can" . . . "Because of your own drinking experience, you can be uniquely useful to other alcoholics" . . . "Co-operate; never criticise." These are the comments of AA's first members to the rest of us. ("Alcoholics Anonymous" Chapter 7: "Working with Others").

Therefore, as long as carrying the message helps those of us already in AA to maintain our own sobriety, any kind of message-carrying is a success for us. Our responsibility is to make the seed of AA freely available: what the sufferer does with it is not our responsibility. To quote one of our many clichés, we carry the message, not the alcoholic. We cannot claim credit for success, nor take blame for failure if failure it is - the alcoholic may not reach for help until we have departed. But in AA we do not measure success in terms of how many people we sober up, nor brag about our success in helping people. Instead, we try to be grateful for being invited to carry our message to anyone, anywhere, because that helps us. AA members who have been co-operating with court and similar programmes have given us many statistics about the numbers of alcoholics brought into AA as a result, but only one statistic interests us in AA - the next person who may need our help.

The final phrase of the Preamble, "*Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety*" is clearly directed to the individual - the objective of helping other alcoholics is second only to maintaining personal sobriety.

Similarly, *Tradition Five* is just as clearly directed to the Group - any Group of AA; that includes the single Group where we all meet and share, the Districts where GSRs meet, the Areas where Districts meet, and top of the list, the Annual General Conference, the Group Conscience of Australia. At all levels, our primary purpose is “. . . to carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers”.

Tradition Three states plainly and simply that “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.” It is unequivocal and not capable of being ‘interpreted’ - anyone, **anyone**, who asks us for help is entitled, by our own traditions, to get it, whatever his/her station in life. That unqualified statement most obviously includes those who have been sentenced by the legal system for their illegal behaviour.

WHAT BASIC ELEMENTS ARE COMMON TO NON-AA PROGRAMMES?

In most cases, this general outline is followed by all court and similar programmes for alcoholic offenders:

- 1 Pre-trial interview
- 2 Release, conviction, or case continued (if conviction, sentence or probation is next)
- 3 Classes on alcoholism, regular (outside the court) AA meetings, or incarceration.

WHERE CAN AA MEMBERS BE OF SERVICE AND HOW?

- 1 **Pre-trial interview:** acting as private individuals, not as representatives of AA as a whole, AA members can talk to the person in trouble if the magistrate permits. Sometimes, the interview is conducted by a probation officer, who may use assistance from AA volunteers.
- 2 **Release, conviction or continuance:** if the arrested person is released, he or she may be required by the judge to go to AA. If the offender is convicted, the sentence may be suspended and the person put on probation, depending on the magistrate and local customs.
- 3 **Classes on alcoholism, AA meetings or gaol:** the offender under suspended sentence or on probation may be required by the magistrate to attend meetings of one type or another. The court class usually meets in the court building and may be one of three types:
 - a. it may be run exactly like any AA meeting, by AA members, but in reality it is a meeting about AA, not a regular AA meeting. Sometimes an officer of the court presides;
 - b. the court class may be handled by several agencies. For example, a doctor may explain that alcoholism is a disease, or various other professionals and/or volunteers may describe some of the characteristics of alcoholism, eg symptoms, behaviour patterns, mood swings and the like. Usually, at least one session is turned over to AA members, who put on a ‘sample’ AA meeting. They tell their own stories briefly, but more importantly, they relate how AA works. AA members experienced at this say it is very important never to be argumentative, nor critical of anything. These classes seem to work best when the speakers are not AA fanatics but are tolerant and good-natured - that is, when they make the AA way of life seem attractive. AA members say it is also very important to be sure lots of AA literature is on hand at each session.

- c. in some Domestic Relations or Family Courts, there are also sample Al-Anon and Alateen meetings held for the spouse and children of the offender. These are separate from the AA meetings, of course. It is important to explain each time the difference between these court classes and regular (outside) Al-Anon or Alateen meetings.

MEETINGS OUTSIDE THE COURT

Sometimes meetings of types a) and c) become so big that they lead to the formation of new "outside" Groups, that is, regular AA or Al-Anon Groups which meet outside the court building and choose a new name showing no relation to the court. In some regions magistrates may require offenders to attend regular AA meetings outside the courtroom as a condition of the suspended sentence or probation. In such cases the offenders may be required to provide proof that they have attended the required number of meetings. How this can be done within AA traditions is explained below.

SOME OF THE PROBLEMS THAT MAY ARISE:

- 1 **Lack of support:** Many AA members simply are not aware that this kind of *Twelfth Step* work is available, nor that they can participate in it. In some regions there is a central advisory committee established by the court, or there may be an AA Court Committee set up by interested members. The AA committees usually meet monthly to iron out problems and to make sure enough AA volunteers are available. It is up to the individual AA members who co-operate with such programmes to carry the message of this experience to other members, so that all members in the community understand this kind of *Twelfth Step* work and how to take part in it.
- 2 **Misunderstanding** by AA members and by the offenders: Sometimes members are upset when they hear of these projects; some of the things they complain of are:
 - a. **Too many newcomers to AA;** occasionally, when such a programme first starts, one small regular AA Group may find more newcomers at its meetings than regular members, and members may resent their Group being 'invaded'. This has been solved in several ways:
 - i. in some Areas, if many newcomers turn up under court sentence, the Group divides into small 'buzz' sessions, and a few regulars sit with each set of newcomers for discussion;
 - ii. or this may be the signal to hold a meeting with the magistrates and/or court officials to see about setting up courtroom classes or meetings in the court building about AA. After learning of AA in this way, the offenders are then free to attend meetings of regular AA Groups if they want to.

- 3 **The mistaken impression** that such programmes affiliate AA in some way with outside enterprises, or constitute endorsement by AA of a court or similar programme. When properly handled by the members involved, co-operation with these programmes no more constitutes affiliation or endorsement than do AA meetings held in hospitals and prisons. This misapprehension need not arise if it is always made clear, repeatedly, that AA is not affiliated with any other enterprise.

It should also be explained that court classes, or meetings *about* AA, are different from regular AA meetings. It should be explained, clearly, that because AA is self-supporting, AA Groups do not accept rent-free meeting rooms, refreshments, or literature furnished by any non-AA source. It should also be made clear that regular AA groups do not force attendance, nor keep attendance records, but that courts can and sometimes do require these things to be done.

For many older AAs, it is like seeing a dream come true when an increasing number of courts use AA as a place to send sick alcoholics, instead of using the old revolving-door punishment. AA, naturally, cannot ". . . endorse any cause . . ." but courts are not bound by the AA Traditions and thus are free to endorse AA if they so wish, and we are grateful that so many do.

- 4 **Mandatory attendance** at AA meetings: all of us sober in AA know that to get well we really had to want it for ourselves, eventually, if not at first. We could not stay sober just because we were required to by or for anybody else. Yet, in a very real sense, it could be said that every member of AA was first 'sentenced' to AA, not by a court, certainly, but by his or her own inner suffering - we would not come to AA until we had to. Only after our first contact did many of us decide we really wanted AA for ourselves.

So, we are not concerned about who or what first sends the alcoholic to us, nor how. Our responsibility is to show AA as such an attractive way of life that all newcomers who need it soon want it.

- 5 **The hostile attitude** of some who are required by a law-enforcement agency to attend AA meetings: just as many of us now happily sober in AA did at first, some of these newcomers approach AA very resentful at having to be there. If we remember our own attitudes at the outset, this is very easy to understand, and it calls for our compassion, not resentment. It is up to the more mature members of the Group to provide examples of patience, tolerance and goodwill toward the sick and angry newcomer. It is simple to explain to such newcomers that we understand their feelings because so many of us felt the same way at our introduction to AA.

In any case, we in AA cannot afford resentment of any newcomer's fear, ignorance or antagonism.

- 6 **Proof of attendance** at AA meetings: it is important for the courts to understand that attendance at AA meetings does not guarantee anybody's future sobriety. Nevertheless, courts sometimes require legal, written proof that offenders have attended a certain number of meetings. In most cases, the Group Secretary (or other Group officer) is happy to sign or initial a slip furnished by the court saying so-and-so was at the such-and-such meeting on a particular date. Since this is not at the level of newspapers, magazines, TV, radio or movies, no break of Tradition Eleven, on anonymity, is effected by signing such a document.

In some areas, the court furnishes co-operating AA Groups with sealed, stamped envelopes addressed to the court. (There may or may not be anything inside the envelope - it doesn't matter.) The secretary of the Group announces at each meeting that he or she has the envelopes and anybody needing one can get it after the meeting. All the offender has to do is take the envelope, privately write his/her own name and/or return address on it, and mail it. This gives the court proof the offender was at some AA meeting, and the only name involved is that of the offender.

In other Areas, each co-operating Group has a sheet, furnished by the court, showing the AA Group name and meeting date. The Secretary announces at each meeting that such a sheet is available and offenders sign it after the meeting. Then the secretary mails the sheet (in an envelope furnished by the referring court, clinic, employer, union or other agency) to the agency sending prospects to AA. Thus it is not the AA Group but the prospect's own signature - readily checked for verification - which affirms he/she was at the meeting. Most courts and agencies are glad to work out such systems for AA co-operation.

Such procedures help make the following facts clear to the offender:

- a. AA is not part of the court;
- b. it is the law enforcement agency which requires attendance, not AA;
- c. it is not AA which reports anyone's attendance at the meeting; rather, it is the offender who reports him/herself.

However, it is important to note that an Advisory Action of the 1985 Conference Committee on Public Information and Co-operation with the Professional Community (US/Canada) states: "AA does not provide letters of reference to lawyers, court officials, social agencies, employers, etc".

- 7 **Offers by law-enforcement agencies** to pay AA members for taking prospects to and from AA meeting: sometimes it is necessary for AA members to meet with court officials and explain that AA is strictly self-supporting and that AA members do not accept money for *Twelfth Step* work. Non-AA agencies do not necessarily understand, until we show them, that we work with other alcoholics for our own sobriety, not for money. It is our responsibility to make this clear to offenders, too. (Note: AA members who are employed to work as professionals in the field of alcoholism are, of course, a different matter, since they are paid for their professional services. Even so, they are not paid to do *Twelfth Step* work).
- 8 **The differences between AA and court and other such programmes:** naturally, these programmes aim to reduce the number of arrests for drunkenness, and for road accidents, divorces, child abuse or homicides caused by drinking. Just as prison alcoholism rehab programmes are set up for the purpose of reducing relapse rates, hospitals take care of the physiological illnesses associated with alcoholism, and industrial alcoholism programs have as goals reduction of absenteeism, improved work output, rehabilitation of troubled workers, and not least, savings of company money. The primary purpose of AA, of course, is quite different, but this does not mean that programmes set up for other purposes are no good. It means that we stick to our business, and are grateful that other agencies make their particular contributions to the welfare of society and problem drinkers. When their programmes enable AA members to carry the AA message, that is an additional cause for gratitude. It is occasionally a good idea to make clear to non-AA agencies that we can only share our experience, strength and hope in order to solve our common problem and to help others. "Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety."

As AA members, we are not qualified to judge, endorse or oppose any other programme in the field of alcoholism nor is it a good idea to give the impression that we are professional, scientific experts. We can help only with our own experience.

WHICH AA MEMBERS ARE BEST QUALIFIED FOR CO-OPERATION WITH SUCH PROGRAMMES?

Any AA member who wishes can become a valuable asset to these programmes if he/she is willing and able to learn and work in non-AA ways. It seems that those who have enjoyed this activity most, and who have been most successful at it, are AA members who:

- have several years' continuous sobriety
- have had wide AA experience, not only in more than one Group, but also in Local/Central Service Office and General Service Office affairs
- have extensive knowledge and understanding of all the AA experience recorded in the Big Book "Alcoholics Anonymous", "Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age", "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" and other AA publications
- have time, patience and willingness to understand the purpose and methods of non-AA approaches to drinking problems and
- have sufficient serenity, steadfastness and courage, mixed with a clear grasp of the meaning of *Twelfth Step* work.

HOW CAN YOU HELP START SUCH A PROGRAMME IF NONE EXISTS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

You've already made a good start by familiarising yourself with this material. Follow that up by studying all the other AA publications suggested at the end of this Guideline. Find out whether any other AAs in your community are interested in and/or knowledgeable about such programmes. Discover whether your local Local/Central Service Office or Area Committee knows where such help is needed. Talk it over with other AAs (be patient - not all members are interested in this, of course, and their feelings are to be respected, as yours are, but don't be put off when you talk to such people). Then two or three of you might call formally on a local judge or other official you believe might be interested in your help. Offer to help in any way that the non-AA agency desires, but be sure to make it clear why and how we in AA try to help other alcoholics, and what AA's Traditions are. Explain carefully that you are acting only as individuals, as private citizens, not as representatives of any AA Group nor of AA as a whole. Leave some AA material, such as the pamphlet "*If You Are a Professional*". Try to make sure every official you talk with is taken to some open AA meetings and meets some AAs sober a long time, but always bear in mind that quality of sobriety is more important than mere length of sobriety. Try to educate yourself about such programmes by contacting any other community agency interested in drinking problems and learning how they do it. Write to the appropriate governmental agencies for information about their programmes. Relax. If this is the right time, the programme will happen. If it doesn't, wait for a more appropriate opportunity.

RECOMMENDED READING

PAMPHLETS:

- *“How AA Members Co-operate”*
- *“AA Tradition - How It Developed”*
- *“The Twelve Traditions Illustrated”*
- *“AA In Prisons”*
- *“If You Are A Professional”*
- *“A Brief Guide to Alcoholics Anonymous”*
- *“It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell”*
- *“How Did I End Up Here?”*
- *“AA and Occupational Alcoholism Programs”*
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GUIDELINES:

- GL-04: *“Information on Alcoholics Anonymous”*
- GL-17: *“For AA Members Employed in the Alcoholism Field”*
- GL-07: *“Public Information and Co-operation with the Professional Community”*
- GL-08: *“Court and Similar Programs”*

also related:

- GL-16: *“Correctional & Treatment Facilities Committees”*
- GL-19: *“Forming Local Committees on Co-operation with the Professional Community”*
- GL-22: *“Suggestions for Members Wishing to Visit Correction Centres.”*