

CONFIDENTIAL: 71st General Service Conference Background

2021 Conference Committee on Corrections

ITEM B: Discuss innovative ways of carrying the message to alcoholics in correctional facilities/programs.

Background notes:

At their January 31, 2021 meeting the trustees Corrections Committee:

Agreed to forward to the 2021 Conference Committee on Corrections a proposed agenda item to “request sharing from the Fellowship to assist A.A. groups in finding innovative ways of carrying the message to alcoholics in correctional facilities/programs” for consideration and discussion.

Background:

1. Proposed Agenda Item from a Tuesday Night Concept Study
2. Excerpts from Request for Sharing (Activity Report) 11/23/2020
3. Shared experience from H & I committee members

CONFIDENTIAL: This is background for the 71st General Service Conference, and as such may be a confidential A.A. document. Distribution is limited to A.A. members. Placement of this material in a location accessible to the public, including aspects of the Internet, such as websites available to the public, may breach the confidentiality of the material and the anonymity of members, since it may contain members' full names and addresses.

December 15, 2020
General Service Office of Alcoholics of Anonymous
Attention: Conference Coordinator, Patrick C.
Grand Central Station, P.O. Box 459
New York, New York 10163

Dear Patrick,

We are members of Alcoholics Anonymous who belong to various Home Groups across the United States. We have been meeting on a weekly conference call for over ten years to share our experience, strength and hope in the study of applying our A.A. Traditions and Concepts in our daily lives and service work. We serve and have served our A.A. Fellowship in various service positions from the Group to the corporate board levels of our A.A. service structure. Through our in-depth discussions about our principles, the following has come to our attention as a result of the rapid and widespread changes brought on by the global pandemic.

We unanimously agree and humbly request the inclusion of the following item on the 71st General Service Conference agenda in order to allow for full Fellowship discussion and an informed Conference to offer spiritual guidance and direction to the Trustees and staff to lead us through these worldly times:

Request sharing from the Fellowship to assist A.A. Groups in finding innovative ways of carrying the message to alcoholics in correctional facilities/programs.

Because each correctional facility and program is unique, there are challenges for Groups who want to carry the message into them. Although this year may have created global issues for communication, it has also revealed new opportunities to access the message. As Groups have been finding new ways to hold meetings, work with alcoholics, and participate in the service structure, we have also been finding new ways in which we might reach alcoholics in corrections facilities and programs.

For example, one Group that we know of has meetings in person (when mandates allow) as well as through a teleconference call. An inmate from a state penitentiary called a member of the Group during a meeting and the member hit the speaker button. This allowed one alcoholic from “behind the walls” to start attending that meeting. As there were other members already attending the meeting via teleconference, the addition was most welcomed! When he was released, he became a member of that Home Group.

Gathering sharing from the Fellowship could give Groups ideas on how they might carry their A.A. message in correctional facilities. There needs to be updated information about possible solutions and resources with which the Groups are finding success. While it is still important to have coordination performed at the district or area level, using the tools that have emerged during this difficult time can help more Groups participate in this vital Twelve Step work.

CONFIDENTIAL: 71st General Service Conference Background

Additionally, if sharing could be collected and compiled for sharing with the Fellowship, reliance on outside workshops could be minimized.

Our experience indicates that this item would most probably be considered by the Conference Committee on Corrections, and we will attempt to share this with the chair of that committee.

Godspeed,

A Tuesday Night Traditions and Concepts Study

Cc: Mike L., West Central Regional Trustee
Jimmy D., Southwest Regional Trustee
Mark E., East Central Region Trustee

Excerpts from Request for Sharing (Corrections Activity Report) 11/23/2020

VIDEO

- A local correction committee created a video combining their public service announcement, "Sobriety in AA: Opening Doors to a Life Without Drinking" with the 3:57 minute version of "A New Freedom". The video was broadcast throughout the facility.

LITERATURE

- Female inmates were given access to the Grapevine issues that were available for free during the pandemic.
- Administrative staff allowed literature to be dropped off.
- A Large quantity of books was purchased for when the facilities re-open.
- The Correction Chairs have supplied all chaplains with literature.
- Packets of GSO pamphlets with meeting resources (local directories, website information, and Meeting Guide information) were prepared for inmates once the facility re-opens.

TABLETS FOR INMATES

- The Corrections department provided female inmates tablets in order to access approved A.A. stories.

ZOOM MEETINGS

- In Area 36 Southern Minnesota the Administrative Staff assisted in establishing video conference A.A. meetings (jails and detention centers.)
- The jail in Franklin County has begun video conference meetings for inmates.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION - INSIDE VISITING SPONSORSHIP SERVICE

PURPOSE: For Corrections Committees to provide a system to connect prisoners (with at least a year remaining inside) who wish to avail themselves of **outside in-person sponsorship** with outside volunteers willing to perform that service on a continuing and, at minimum, monthly basis. Volunteers for the Inside Sponsorship Service are classified for entry into the institution as visitors, not as Program Volunteers, and CANNOT also go into that institution as meeting volunteers.

Since sponsorship, like providing A.A. literature and meetings, is an essential component of carrying the message, the Inside Visiting Sponsorship Service operates in addition to, but entirely separate from, inside meeting activities. **The key difference is that these volunteers enter the institution through Visiting Services rather than through Program Services.**

We do not “manage or organize sponsorship” – volunteers are free to use whatever methods work best for them and both sponsor and sponsee are free to end the relationship at any time. It is merely an attempt to provide a safe and viable structure within which outside in-person sponsorship can be provided within the unique prison environment.

CURRENT APPROACHES TO SPONSORSHIP FOR CONFINED ALCOHOLICS: currently existing approaches to sponsorship of prisoners, while sometimes highly effective, may be inadequate to optimally provide this vital component of recovery and SOME COULD ENDANGER THE EFFORTS OF CORRECTIONS COMMITTEES AS A WHOLE.

1. Cleared Program Volunteers: In some areas of the country sponsorship is provided by cleared Corrections Committee volunteers who bring A.A. meetings into the facilities they serve. While well-intended, this approach conflicts with how most State Departments of Corrections view overfamiliarity, and it can also lead to issues of favoritism or bias in the meetings. Additionally, cleared Program Volunteers are required to sign PREA agreements, which require reporting of certain sensitive information. Importantly, in most States, cleared Program Volunteers aren't allowed to be on the visitors list of any inmate currently in the facility, so time spent providing sponsorship is limited to a few minutes before or after the meeting. These factors prevent the performance of adequate sponsorship by regular Corrections meeting volunteers. Furthermore, it puts the entire efforts of the committee at risk when members fail to follow the regulations of the institution.
2. Corrections Correspondence Service: While this is an outstanding program which has benefitted many alcoholics, *monitoring of all written communication* (including J-Pay email system) by prison administration may discourage full disclosure. Also, experience has shown that in-person sponsorship, providing the intimacy of face-to-face visits, is invaluable whenever possible.
3. Prisoner to prisoner sponsorship: While prisoner-to-prisoner sponsorship offers an excellent solution for inside members, many may feel a reluctance to reveal ALL their story to another prisoner, as the rigorous honesty required could put them in jeopardy. Alliances can change on the inside and the consequences of revealing information could be far greater than on the outside.
4. Sponsorship by individual local groups: The logistics of protecting anonymity and maintaining ongoing reliable service are usually too complicated to achieve long-term, sustainable consistency over time. If key members leave the group, there may be no system to keep the service in place. However, when operated by an established Corrections Committee, this system provides prison administrators with the accountability of an established service committee with a proven track record, whose sole purpose and experience is to carry the message of A.A. to the alcoholic *who is confined*.

CONFIDENTIAL: 71st General Service Conference Background

IVSS PROGRAM LOGISTICS:

- Create a Sponsorship Service Coordinator for each institution, working in cooperation with the current Institution Coordinator.
- Recruit volunteers from local Corrections Committees, Area Intergroups, General Service districts and A.A. meetings who wish to sponsor “inside” A.A. members.
- Distribute pamphlets to prisoners who attend A.A. meetings on the inside, informing them of the service and providing a PO Box address where they can send a request for visitation. Prisoners must attend inside A.A. meetings to be eligible.
- Upon receipt of a request, the Sponsorship Service Coordinator contacts a volunteer who then completes a request for visitation clearance. This simple review process involves no PREA forms, no TB tests or lengthy clearance procedures and, unlike the clearance for regular Program Volunteers, does NOT classify the volunteer as “unpaid staff”, thus removing them from prohibitions against overfamiliarity.
- Once the volunteer is approved for visitation, the first visit is scheduled. After the initial visit, the inside member and the volunteer will decide if they want to continue working together. Neither the sponsee nor the sponsor is under any obligation to continue the relationship – like all sponsorship, it is entirely voluntary on both sides.

BENEFITS OF VISITING SPONSORSHIP SERVICE:

- CONFORMS TO PRISON COMPLIANCE REGULATIONS. Since “visiting sponsors” don’t need “staff clearance” as Program Volunteers do, they don’t sign PREA agreements and are not subject to CDCR staff regulations, so no legal concerns about disclosure issues or overfamiliarity.
- Enables one alcoholic working directly with another – a cornerstone of our program of recovery. We suggest to every newcomer on the outside: “get a Big Book, get a sponsor, go to meetings, work the steps” – can we make this a reality for those on the inside as well?
- Prisoner’s private business is confidential from the prison population.
- Volunteer’s anonymity is protected.
- No hierarchy either at meeting level or on the yard – we remain a society of equals.
- Offers an opportunity for the prisoner to talk about outside sponsorship at parole hearings.
- When operated by an established Corrections Committee, the program can be sustainable over the long-term due to wide ranging access to volunteers over different geographic areas. Procedures will be consistent throughout the system.
- Many prisoners have expressed a desire for outside sponsorship and A.A. members have indicated they wish to sponsor members on the inside – this service could benefit both while enhancing Corrections Committee’s ability to carry the message to the alcoholic who is confined.
- Minimal Committee costs involved: po box, stamps, brochure & other printing.

[Back to Agenda](#)

CONFIDENTIAL: This is background for the 71st General Service Conference, and as such may be a confidential A.A. document. Distribution is limited to A.A. members. Placement of this material in a location accessible to the public, including aspects of the Internet, such as websites available to the public, may breach the confidentiality of the material and the anonymity of members, since it may contain members’ full names and addresses.