

About AA

‘We Are Not Professionals’

With increasing frequency the Cooperation With the Professional Community desk at A.A.’s General Service Office, fields inquiring calls from interested parties both outside and within the Fellowship who are either looking for or hoping to become “an A.A. professional.”

“With all the Twelfth Step work that goes on throughout the Fellowship — carrying the message into hospitals, prisons, and schools; working with counselors, judges and administrators — it’s easy to see how one might think there could be A.A. professionals,” the C.P.C. desk observes, “Yet, as much as A.A. members cooperate throughout the alcoholism and treatment fields, they are never paid to carry the message of hope and recovery to another alcoholic. As A.A. members, we cooperate with professionals to help alcoholics and serve as a resource to provide information about A.A.”

Even A.A. members who may work in the alcoholism field are not “A.A. professionals,” explains much of A.A.’s literature, and while they may refer clients to A.A., they do not wear an “A.A. hat” in their working environment. A.A. is founded on the principle of one alcoholic helping another, sharing freely what has been given to him or her. That person will then pass it on in turn to a newcomer, and so on, creating what A.A. cofounder Bill W. describes as “a chain reaction of sobriety.”

Overwhelmingly, A.A. members who hold a variety of jobs in the alcoholism world — from social workers, nurses, counselors and those who head national or local programs — agree that it is not A.A. membership but professional skill and experience which qualifies one for professional positions.

A.A. is concerned solely with the personal recovery and continued sobriety of individual alcoholics who turn to the Fellowship for help. Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religious organization, does not engage in the fields of alcoholism research, medical or psychiatric treatment, or education, although members may participate in such activities as individuals. No A.A. member should “play doctor,” all medical advice and treatment should come from a qualified physician.

A look back at A.A. history can provide some insight into how this approach got started and illuminate the beneficial aspects of A.A. members remaining “nonprofessional” in terms of sharing their A.A. experience with another alcoholic.

Early Lessons on Professionalism

When A.A. was young, many of its early members including Bill W., the fellowships’ cofounder, were tempted to use their A.A. experience and affiliation to hire out as lay therapists working with other alcoholics. With the ability many of these A.A.s had discovered to reach still-suffering alcoholics through the precepts of the

A.A. program and to help attain sobriety for many who had once been hopeless, it seemed like a logical progression to seek and receive payment for such services.

As related in the A.A. book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Bill W. found himself in just such a position upon receiving an offer from the proprietor of a well-known hospital — one in which Bill himself had been a patient a number of times as he tried to get sober — to return to the hospital as a staff member, continuing his A.A. work with other alcoholics for hire. “Why don’t you move your work in here?” the owner inquired. “I’ll give you an office, a decent drawing account, and a very healthy slice of the profits.... You can become a lay therapist, and more successful than anybody in the business.”

Thinking about the offer, Bill convinced himself of its efficacy and saw for himself and for others an avenue to legitimacy. Before accepting the position, however, Bill brought the offer before a number of other alcoholics who, alongside Bill, were struggling to get and to stay sober using the methods that had begun to take form in A.A.

They, however, were not as enthused about the idea as Bill seemed to be. “Don’t you realize,” said one “that you can never become a professional? As generous as Charlie [the proprietor of Towns Hospital] has been to us, don’t you see that we can’t tie this thing up with his hospital or any other?”

‘Freely Ye Have Received’

Bill never did take that job, recognizing that the voice of the group conscience on this matter was paramount to any benefit it might have brought him as an individual. With experiences such as this as the backdrop, A.A. developed a set of Traditions making clear that A.A. would never have a professional class.

“We have gained some understanding of the ancient words ‘Freely ye have received, freely give,’” says the text of A.A.’s Eighth Tradition. “We do not decry professionalism in other fields, but we accept the sober fact that it does not work for us. Every time we have tried to professionalize our Twelfth Step [carrying the message to other alcoholics], the result has been exactly the same: Our single purpose has been defeated....

“Alcoholics simply will not listen to a paid twelfth-stepper. Almost from the beginning, we have been positive that face-to-face work with the alcoholic who suffers could be based only on the desire to help and be helped. When an A.A. talks for money, whether at a meeting or to a single newcomer, it can have a very bad effect on him, too. The money motive compromises him and everything he says and does for his prospect.”

Meeting As Equals

Of course, money does have a place in A.A., as covered by another of A.A.'s Traditions (Tradition Seven: "Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions"), and that place is "in the hat," where contributions from members are used to pay group- and organization-wide expenses.

As described in the pamphlet, *Frequently Asked Questions About A.A.*, "Most local groups 'pass the hat' at meetings to defray the cost of renting a meeting place and other meeting expenses, including coffee, sandwiches, cakes, or whatever else may be served. In a large majority of the groups, part of the money thus collected is voluntarily contributed to A.A.'s national and international services. These group funds are used exclusively for services designed to help new and established groups and to spread the word of the A.A. recovery program to 'the many alcoholics who still don't know.'"

But money for A.A. work has never been part of A.A.'s program of recovery, as characterized and manifested in A.A.'s concept of sponsorship — where one alcoholic shares freely his or her experience, strength and hope with another.

While it wasn't known as such at the start, Alcoholics Anonymous began through sponsorship. When Bill W., only a few months sober, was stricken with a powerful urge to drink, this thought came to him: "You need another alcoholic to talk to. You need another alcoholic just as much as he needs you!" In A.A., sponsor and sponsored meet as equals.

Keeping It Simple

Another lesson learned early on by A.A.'s pioneering members revolved around questions of property, prestige, and determination of just what it was that A.A. was good at. Prompted by a number of enterprising members, the fledgling Fellowship entertained a few notable experiments that mixed A.A. groups with alcohol education, treatment and hospitalization, as some early A.A.s got together to start an alcoholism treatment center — "a kind of pilot plant A.A. groups could duplicate everywhere," notes the text of A.A.'s Tradition Four.

"When we had agreed that the Twelfth Step couldn't be sold for money, we had been wise," says Tradition Eight. "But when we had declared that our Fellowship couldn't hire service workers nor could any A.A. member carry our knowledge into other fields, we were taking the counsel of fear, fear which today has been largely dispelled in the light of experience."

A.A. Addresses Corrections Organization

When the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) met in Tampa, Florida, in early January 2015, Alcoholics Anonymous was there, invited to participate as an exhibitor and presenter at the organization's winter training institute. A group of local A.A. members staffed the exhibit booth and handled a broad range of questions. Two trustees from A.A.'s General Service Board and a staff member from the General Service Office, answered a wide range of information about A.A. with this highly-motivated group of corrections professionals. The American Probation and Parole Association is an international association composed of members from the United States, Canada and other countries actively in-

involved with pretrial, probation, parole and community-based corrections, in both criminal and juvenile justice arenas. All levels of government, including federal, state/provincial, local and tribal agencies, are counted among its constituents, and APPA has become the voice for thousands of pretrial, probation and parole practitioners and providers of services. Educators, volunteers, victim services providers, concerned citizens and others with an interest in criminal and juvenile justice are among APPA's members.

The A.A. workshop, moderated by Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee, the Honorable Ivan Lemelle, a U.S. District judge from Louisiana, was titled "Myths and Misconceptions About A.A.," and covered a number of areas pertinent to the collaborative relationship many A.A. communities have with local corrections professionals. The workshop opened with a reading and explanation of A.A.'s Preamble — a brief introduction to A.A. which is widely read at A.A. meetings around the world and encapsulates the principles around which A.A. has formed. This was followed by sharing from Chet P., Class B (alcoholic) trustee, and Clement C. (G.S.O. staff member on the Corrections assignment), providing some background and personal experience on how A.A. works. Questions and responses were interspersed throughout, while a video titled *A.A. In Correctional Facilities* and a PowerPoint presentation titled "Let's Be Friendly with Our Friends" were shown.

"It was heartwarming to see many heads nodding in approval to those pieces," said Ivan Lemelle, "and many of the comments centered on how A.A. cooperates with professionals, especially those within the judicial system."

Audience questions ranged from inquiries about Open vs. Closed meetings, "spirituality vs. religion" in A.A., the signing of court slips at A.A. meetings, A.A.'s singleness of purpose and the importance of anonymity.

One highlight, as noted by Chet P., was the response of one audience member who related that he had heard for the first time that A.A. is about more than just the negative orientation to the cessation of drinking, or abstinence; that the roadmap to a true life change — the exposure to a "design for living" that A.A. offers — is particularly exciting to him as he works with alcoholics in the corrections system. In addition, it was noted by Clement C., that often the best way for corrections professionals to determine whether or not a client is attending A.A. meetings may not always be through physical monitoring but rather through first-hand observations of a personality change as the client works the A.A. program. "People can and do get sober in a corrections setting," said Clement, "and often take their first meaningful steps toward emotional, physical and spiritual recovery while incarcerated, on probation or on parole."

How Can A.A. Help You?

Would you be interested in having an A.A. presentation at one of your professional gatherings? Or would you like information about recovery from alcoholism in A.A.? If so, please contact the C.P.C. desk at the General Service Office, P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163, or cpc@aa.org. We welcome your questions, comments and requests.

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