

About AA

A.A. Continues as a Resource for Professionals

Prison Chief Sees A.A. as A Lifeline to the Alcoholic

“Of the approximately 6.5 million offenders on probation or parole, 80 percent have a history of alcohol or substance abuse. A.A., with its extensive network of outside sponsorship programs to bridge the gap between A.A. meetings in prison and in the real world, is an outstanding resource. No research is available to measure its impact, because A.A. is an anonymous program, but anecdotally it is a strong presence.”



Allen L. Ault, Ed.D.

at Georgia State University.

So says Allen L. Ault, Ed.D., Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee of A.A.’s General Service Board. Allen has served, under five different governors, as director of corrections in three states—Colorado, Georgia and Mississippi. He presently is chief of the National Institute of Corrections, U.S. Department of Justice, a post he has held for more than five years. There, among other things, he is responsible for the development and administration of inmate substance-abuse programs. He also has chaired the Criminal Justice Department

“The challenge in corrections is greater than ever,” Allen says, “what with the explosion of the jail and prison population and, at the same time, a reduction of funding for rehabilitation.” He points out that “today there are more mentally ill people in prison than ever, many of them dually addicted—and compounding the problem, some states handle mental illness and substance abuse separately, even though they frequently go hand-in-hand.” He further reports that “research by the Federal Bureau of Prisons indicates that if alcoholics and drug abusers receive help for their addiction in prison, their recidivism rate is much lower, provided there is followup on the outside immediately after release. So the alcoholic inmate who has been exposed to A.A. inside, then is helped to become a part of mainstream A.A. on the outside, has an excellent chance of staying sober and out of trouble.”

Noting that there are roughly 1,200,000 men and women in our prisons (another 600,000 are in our jails), Allen says that “it took this country 200 years to get up to the 600,000 figure but only one decade, this last one, to double the number.” This year alone, he points out, “about 630,000 inmates will be released, and all too many of them have drug and alcohol problems.” Here Allen speaks optimistically of a new development: “a \$100 million federal reentry program administered by the Office of Justice Programs, the U.S. Department of Justice. It

calls for the distribution of 50 grants this year, one to each state, in the amount of approximately \$2 million each, to be used for the development of community reentry programs. Certainly, when the prototypes are being drawn up, I believe that A.A., with its proven success in outside sponsorship, and in cooperating but not affiliating with the court system or any other outside agency, could lend a helping voice of experience at the table.”

Significantly, Allen relates, “women today constitute 6.6 percent of all prisoners, representing a jump of 93 percent in the last decade.” As successful as A.A. meetings and other substance abuse programs are in men’s prisons, he adds, they do even better where women are involved. “There’s a different culture,” he explains. “Because women create family-like ties, theirs is a stronger internal support system.”

Allen observes that during times of recession, especially when funds are scarce, he has found A.A., with its program of “no dues or fees” and proven track record, “a welcome sight.” The A.A. volunteers entering the prisons to guide meetings or arrange for sponsorship inside and out, he adds, “are almost invariably cooperative and generous with their time. All we had to worry about was providing the coffee, milk and cookies.”

A.A. Has a Friend At Court in Florida

In Palm Beach, Florida, the vision of Judge Nelson E. Bailey, combined with the steady efforts of a bilingual team of A.A. volunteers, has created the Friday Morning Project—a successful new way to reach individuals summoned to court for D.U.I. offenses.

Says Judge Bailey: “This is a very simple idea and program, but it has power and impact and is changing lives. How many lives, I of course have no way of knowing. Nobody does. But unquestionably it is having impact for the good for folks whose lives have been changed by alcohol. I rate it as perhaps the most worthwhile and successful program I have initiated since becoming a judge.”

Two years ago, Judge Bailey received an invitation from a young man he had sentenced months before to a residential rehab facility for alcohol-related offenses. The fellow was completing his stay at the heavily A.A.-oriented center and invited Judge Bailey to his “graduation.” The judge did attend; later he described the event to Franklyn C., chairman of A.A.’s joint committee on Public Information and Cooperation With the Professional Community (P.I./C.P.C.) in the Palm Beach area, as a wakeup call. “When I heard that fellow and his friends speak,” Judge Bailey said, “I was deeply moved by the simplicity and power of what they had to say. Alcohol had almost ruined their lives, your program turned those lives

around, and they were able to convey all that in three or four minutes.”

The judge “immediately thought of how effective it might be if all D.U.I. defendants could hear that sort of brief talk before entering their plea of guilty or not guilty. Who knows how many would stop and take a look, perhaps for the first time, at what alcohol is doing to them—and to hear that help is available.” The judge approached Pat McG., an A.A. who also serves as director of the rehab facility and asked if he could bring a speaker to court some Fridays on a trial basis.

The project has been a success. José F., a Spanish-speaking A.A. member also on the team, speaks in court at least one Friday each month. “This is the most satisfying A.A. service work I’m into,” José reports.

Within a few months of its inception the Friday Morning Project became the responsibility of the area P.I./C.P.C. committee. Today the weekly team consists of three A.A.s: the English and Spanish speakers and a P.I./C.P.C. committee member who acts as a court liaison. Kevin S., one of the first speaker, said, “In the spirit of A.A.’s Sixth Tradition, we cooperate but do not affiliate with any outside agency, including the courts. Our role is to share our experience, strength and hope in recovery from alcoholism.”

A.A. at Ground Zero: A Sustaining Presence

Even as hot smoke billowed up from the collapsed towers of Manhattan’s World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, crews of firefighters, police, medical teams, construction workers and others began the exhaustive search, rescue and cleanup operation. As they worked virtually around the clock, the A.A.s among them began asking for meetings at the site of the terrorism, quickly dubbed Ground Zero. They called the General Service Office of A.A., New York Intergroup, the Red Cross and each other. The response was immediate, the inter-cooperation extraordinary, and by October there were two rooms where weary workers could come straight from the devastation known as “the pile” into the supportive atmosphere of an A.A. meeting.

The meeting rooms were set up in Respite Center 1, a Red Cross facility housed in a university classroom building several blocks into the off-limits Red Zone that provides meals, sleeping quarters and other services for the crews. The Ground Zero Group has not been a group in the usual sense, explained Richard S., chairman of the Southeast New York Committee on Cooperation With the Professional Community (C.P.C.), in the January 2002 A.A. Grapevine: “We have no regular meeting schedule, no group officers or meetings chairs, and everyone hails from a home group somewhere else—sometimes far removed from the city. But it is an A.A. room even so. Most times the meetings simply materialize when enough A.A.s have walked in and joined the two volunteers who are always here, 24 hours a day, in 6-hour shifts.”

The Red Cross workers have generously given of their time, help and understanding of A.A. principles. The two A.A. rooms, which Richard describes as “a cross between an alkathon and a hospitality suite,” are also places to rest, talk, meditate or call a sponsor on a cell phone. “The guys just need to be there,” Richard told G.S.O.’s newsletter *Box 4-5-9*. “Their whole demeanor changes after they’ve been there a few minutes.” Dorothy D., Institutions chair of the New York Intergroup and a nurse who worked nights at the disaster site, said she was tremendously

moved when, on the day the first scheduled meeting took place, one of the men wrote on the chalkboard, “Ground Zero A.A. Group, established September 28, 2001.”

One bright October day, Richard related, he was gazing at the site on which the Twin Towers once stood—“a vast square of unrelieved destruction, with men and equipment scattered over the heaps and hollows of the wreckage,” and “still recognizable fragments of the tower walls lying like enormous broken eggshells on the ground.” Then, he said, in his mind he could “see the A.A. rooms that have taken root here. . . . I think of how we’ve spread our message throughout the world and how the results can be seen right here in these A.A. rooms—seeds of life amid the desolation. And despite the horror of what lies in front of me, I know that no matter what takes place on this earth, as long as the hand of A.A. is there, together we can get through it, one day at a time.”

Being There for a Diverse Membership

Just about everyone coming to A.A. for the first time feels, even fleetingly, that “this may be okay for *them* but not me: I’m different.” Likely with this in mind, co-founder Bill W. pointed out in the July 1965 issue of the Grapevine, “Newcomers are approaching A.A. at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics . . . people of nearly every race, culture and religion.” (*The Language of the Heart*, p. 333) In the spirit of inclusiveness that has always characterized the Fellowship, efforts to reach out to a wide spectrum of newcomers are unceasing, not only in one-to-one Twelfth Step work but also in A.A. literature:

The new Fourth Edition of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*—a top nonfiction book of which more than 22 million copies have been sold since its publication in 1939—reflects sweeping changes in the membership, which has more than quadrupled in size and expanded in diversity since the last edition came out 25 years ago. As in previously revised editions, the basic text of the Fourth, comprising the first 164 pages, remains the same. The rest of the content, 42 personal stories, reflects changes that have occurred, representing the wide range of ages, ethnicity, backgrounds, beliefs and occupations of A.A. members today.

“*Can A.A. Help Me Too? Black/African Americans Share Their Stories.*” This new special-interest pamphlet offers a bridge to the Fellowship for black/African American alcoholics who may draw back because of a mistaken idea that A.A. is not for them. In candid recollections, nine A.A.s describe their preconceived notions of A.A. and what happened, or did not happen, when they stepped tentatively into their first meetings.

“*A.A. for the Older Alcoholic—Never Too Late.*” With 13 percent or more of its members over age 60, A.A. is heeding the need to reach out to older alcoholics who feel it’s too late to turn their lives around.

Other special-interest pamphlets, available from the General Service Office of A.A., include: “A.A. for the Woman”; “Young People and A.A.” and “Too Young?” (in comic-strip format); “A.A. in Correctional Facilities” and “It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell”; “A.A. and the Gay/Lesbian Alcoholic”; and “Do You Think You’re Different?”

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