

■ Sign of the Times

Over the past year or so, the Special Needs Committee in the St. Louis metropolitan area has been struggling with the question of how best to carry the message to deaf and hearing impaired alcoholics — a challenge faced not only in St. Louis, but across the U.S. and Canada, as A.A. members and service committees continually seek to ensure that the hand of A.A. “will always be there” when an alcoholic reaches out for help.

In November of 2013, Bill J., the Special Needs chair for District 51, Area 38, developed a presentation on this topic intended for all the districts in the St. Louis metropolitan area, in the hopes of raising awareness of this issue and presenting some possible courses of action. The presentation covered a number of considerations, from the desire — and responsibility, even — to provide deaf or hearing impaired alcoholics the same information and content that hearing attendees receive at meetings, to finding, working with, and — perhaps most importantly — paying for professional American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters at A.A. meetings.

Covering the expense of a professional translator can be a factor for many groups, yet there are other possibilities that can be explored. As suggested in G.S.O.’s A.A. Guidelines on Carrying the A.A. Message to the Deaf Alcoholic, “Sometimes an agency will take care of the expense. On occasion, local area committees, districts, and central/intergroup offices have authorized payment for interpreters. Professional interpreters who are also A.A. members sometimes are willing to volunteer their services. Occasionally advanced students of interpreting will do the job at no fee for the experience gained.” The Guidelines note, however, “Be careful of placing too much reliance on volunteers, as deaf members rely on these services and there should be stability in whether the meeting is interpreted or not.”

Questions have also arisen about nonalcoholic translators attending closed A.A. meetings or nonalcoholic interpreters offering to donate their services to a group on an ongoing basis. As described in the Guidelines, “Qualified interpreters are professional people who charge fees for their services. Experience suggests that most groups will agree to having a non-A.A. attend its closed meetings to act as interpreter for the deaf alcoholic. Professional ASL interpreters adhere to a strict code of ethics, which assures the confidentiality of the A.A. meeting.” And, regarding the donation of services by nonalcoholic translators, most groups view it as their responsibility to pay for such services at their group, and typically a payment,

agreeable to both parties, is arranged.

There are a number of resources available from G.S.O. for deaf or hard-of-hearing members and for groups or service committees like the one in St. Louis. G.S.O. has long provided audiovisual A.A. material for the deaf, including two books that are available in ASL: a DVD of the first 11 chapters and other portions of the Big Book; *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, and the pamphlet “A.A. for the Alcoholic With Special Needs” are also on DVD. But recognizing the pressing need for A.A. service material that ASL signers can accurately communicate to the deaf, G.S.O. has made available the following four pamphlets specifically “for signing purposes”: “Do You Think You’re Different?,” “This Is A.A.,” and “Is A.A. for You?,” to the already existing list of: “A Brief Guide to Alcoholics Anonymous,” “A Newcomer Asks...” “How It Works,” “Is A.A. For Me,” “The Twelve Steps” and “The Twelve Traditions” (in both short and long forms) — all available from G.S.O. upon request. All were developed by hard-of-hearing members and ASL interpreters.

Nevertheless, as most A.A. members can attest, sitting in a meeting alongside other recovering alcoholics, sharing experience, strength and hope face-to-face is a critical aspect of recovery, and finding ways to provide ASL translation for deaf and hearing impaired members at meetings is the ongoing challenge of many Special Needs committees across the U.S. and Canada.

In St. Louis, as in other places, efforts are being made to establish a district or area fund to cover the costs of providing interpreters, and the Special Needs Committee has proposed a funding plan that would encompass the entire metro area. In southern Wisconsin, Area 75, a line item has been established in the area budget to pay for ASL interpretation upon request. In another area, both deaf and hearing members got together to select specific meetings in the area where ASL services would be offered in order to consolidate expenses and assure the best possible attendance for deaf members. Announcements reflecting this approach were made at meetings throughout the area, which helped to inform the group conscience of the broader membership when the Seventh Tradition basket was passed so that the costs could be spread out across the area’s entire membership.

Carrying the message to special needs populations, such as the deaf or hearing impaired, has always been a challenge — one A.A. members have always been willing to take on. And, in the end, as the Guidelines relate, “We must remember that our A.A. experience is the most important thing we have to share,” and “a smile, a handshake and a cup of coffee speak the ‘language of the heart,’ which we can all hear.”