

About AA

Alcoholics Anonymous "Behind the Walls"

Although A.A. members have been carrying the message of hope and recovery to correctional facilities since 1942, some people have continued to misunderstand the goals of A.A. in prisons. Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religious or temperance movement, social service organization, employment agency, or cure-all. Nor is it interested in soliciting money or favors. A.A. in fact accepts no contributions from anyone outside its membership. It is simply a way to help men and women stay sober, both in and out of prison, and to help them redirect their lives in positive ways.

A.A. correctional programs extend beyond the prison walls. In most metropolitan centers, local A.A. service committees work closely with prison (and hospital) A.A. groups. Members schedule "outside" A.A. speakers for "inside" A.A. meetings, share their experiences with inmates on a one-to-one basis, and follow through with practical and emotional support whenever a prisoner is released and trying to adjust to life on the outside.

W. J. (Jim) Estelle Jr., former director of the Texas Department of Corrections, and nonalcoholic chairperson of the General Service Board's trustees' Correctional Facilities Committee, highlights some of the history of A.A. in correctional facilities:

"The Fellowship of A.A., founded in 1935, was into its seventh year, with a growing membership of more than 8,000, when a progressive warden at San Quentin asked for nearby members of A.A. to carry the message to alcoholics behind the walls. The year was 1942, and the warden who defied many skeptics, was the now-legendary Clinton Duffy. He said, 'If the program will help just one man, I want to start it.'

"The first meeting had 20 inmates and several free-world guests in attendance. Warden Duffy recognized the importance of the free-world visitation to the growth of that new A.A. group of imprisoned alcoholics. Others, both inmates and Duffy's peers alike, remained skeptical until the return rate for alcoholic parolees dropped from 80% to 20% and stayed there.

"By 1960 . . . A.A. in prison had gone international, with seven groups in Finland and two in Holland. . . . Men like Lee Henslee of Arkansas, Gus Harrison of Michigan, and Alfred Dowd of Indiana lauded Alcoholics Anonymous as a '20th century miracle' that often made the difference in the transition to freedom."

In the mid-1980s, A.A. estimates that groups in prisons and jails number in excess of 1,350, with a membership of approximately 45,000. These prison groups are served by more than 274 correctional facilities and institutions committees, as well as many dedicated individual A.A.'s across the U.S. and

Canada. Wherever a well-organized committee is functioning, correctional facilities A.A. groups grow and flourish, and their members' transition from the facility to the outside is usually far less difficult.

The General Service Office recently heard of an ex-inmate A.A. member who had started a group while he was in prison in Australia. That group just celebrated its Silver Anniversary and its founder (still an active A.A. on the outside) went back as the guest speaker.

Cooperating With the Court — For 35-odd years, A.A. members have been helping magistrates, judges, and other court officials (both in various criminal courts and in family courts) by carrying the A.A. message into courtrooms. There, A.A. prospects are often required (by the court — *not* by A.A.) to hear the A.A. message. As a result, many alcoholics unwillingly introduced to A.A. this way are now happily sober.

In more recent years, a great number of safe-driving programs have been set up for automobile drivers in trouble with the law because of some alcohol-related episode. These programs have many different names: Alcohol Safety Action Project (A.S.A.P.), Countermeasures, Driving While Intoxicated (D.W.I.), Reduce Alcohol-Impaired Driving (R.A.I.D.), and the like. Hundreds of A.A. members have helped and are helping such drivers to learn about A.A., and to see whether they are ready for it — yet. Many are now happy members of Alcoholics Anonymous as a result.

Here is what two non-A.A. officials say:

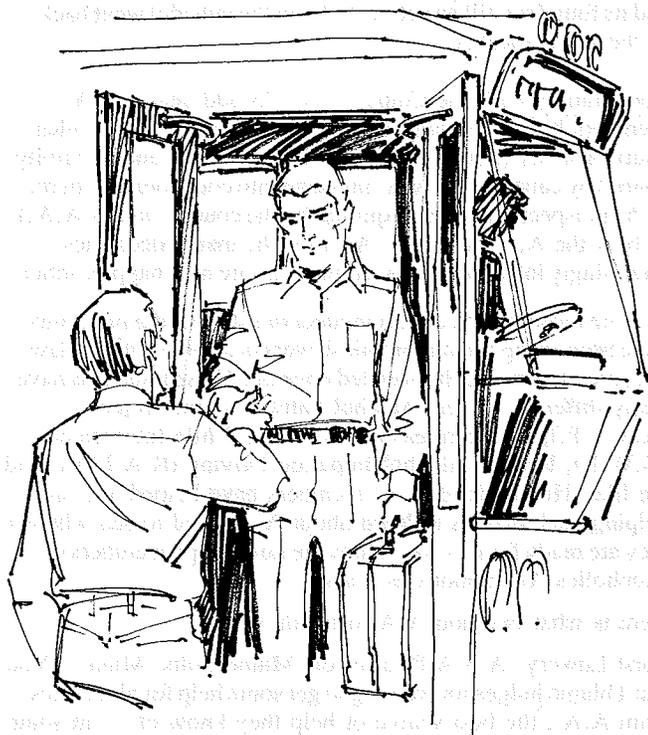
Forst Lowery, A.S.A.P. director, Minneapolis, Minn.: "You can't blame judges for wanting to get some help for alcoholics from A.A., the best source of help they know of — in some places, the only source. So please forgive us if, in our desire to get your help for somebody, we blunder by asking you to do something your principles won't allow. If you can accommodate some of our needs which go beyond your usual ways of helping, we would deeply appreciate it. If you can't, please let us know and we'll probably bend our needs, because above all, we need you."

Eugene K. Mangum, chief presiding judge, Phoenix, Arizona: "There is no pleasure greater than meeting someone and being reminded that sobriety came to him with an introduction to A.A. through our court class on alcoholism. It is a distinct privilege to associate with the men and women of A.A. I have never found such devotedness to a cause and such willingness to be of service to their fellowmen as I have found among these people."

Correspondence — It is difficult for an A.A. member behind the walls to participate in ongoing individual sharing about the A.A. program of recovery, particularly in large prisons. The Institutions Correspondence Service allows inmates to correspond with outside A.A.'s on an individual basis.

Over 600 A.A. members active in local groups are currently writing to inmates. One A.A. member corresponded with an inmate in Florida for more than a year. While on vacation, the A.A. member drove 250 miles to visit the inmate and bring him a Big Book.

Prerelease Sponsorship — Past experience has shown that attending an A.A. meeting on the outside on the day of release from prison is one of the most effective tools for an inmate in making a sober transition and maintaining continued sobriety in the free world. It is strongly recommended that an inmate who is an A.A. member have a prerelease sponsor — an A.A. member on the outside who contacts the inmate and arranges to meet him or her on the day of release.



As in all types of sponsorship in A.A., prerelease sponsors share their experience, strength, and hope with soon-to-be released inmates. Experience shows that it is better if no emotional or romantic relationship develops in a sponsorship relationship.

Don P., of Colorado, shares his experience as a former inmate: "When I was paroled, I made A.A. my first stop, and it worked. I was welcomed, of course, but of most importance to someone as scared as I was, I was welcomed by someone I already knew and trusted from his long attendance at our prison meeting.

"I believe it is vital for a person being released to have in mind a place and a person for that first night out — not just the

admonition to 'go to A.A.' A newly released prisoner is at best nervous and scared and feeling alienated.

"Because someone cared enough to show regularly, to share honestly, and to be there my first night out, I have not had to go back. The parole man gave me six days at the outside, based on my past record. It has been 12 and a half years free and 14 years sober now."

As they regain their confidence, jobs, families, and friends, many newly rehabilitated ex-convicts turn around and offer a helping hand to those coming after them. Thus, with the continuing support of prison officials and the many dedicated outside A.A. groups and individuals who understand that alcoholism is an insidious but arrestable illness, alcoholics behind bars are getting well in A.A. and learning how to make "today the first day" of the rest of their lives.

Alcoholics Anonymous Celebrates Its 50th Birthday

Celebrating the Golden Anniversary of the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, more than 45,000 A.A.'s, Al-Anons, Alateens, and friends from over 50 countries registered for A.A.'s Eighth International Convention, in Montreal, Canada, July 4-7, 1985. Thirty-three nonalcoholics, professionals in the field of alcoholism and alcohol-related problems, were guest speakers.

International Conventions have been held every five years since the first, in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1950. No "business" is done at these gatherings; they are just mammoth A.A. meetings for fellowship, inspiration, and fun.

One of the highlights of the weekend-long convention was the presentation of the five-millionth copy of "Alcoholics Anonymous," affectionately known as the Big Book, to Ruth Hock, Bill W.'s nonalcoholic secretary who typed the original manuscript. The Big Book is A.A.'s basic "how-to" or "text" book. It is different from others of its kind in that it was written three years *after* the founding of A.A. One part, Chapter Five *How It Works*, delineating A.A.'s Twelve-Step recovery program, is read at many A.A. meetings.

The theme "Fifty Years With Gratitude" summed up the underlying attitude of the convention-goers, an attitude that is basic to A.A.'s worldwide membership of more than one million. Five decades ago, with the meeting of Dr. Bob (a surgeon from Akron, Ohio) and Bill W. (a New York stockbroker), the Fellowship of A.A. was born in Akron. What started with two alcoholics has grown without the aid of membership drives or promotional campaigns; it continues to rely on the simple concept of one alcoholic speaking to another on a one-to-one basis. It was the way that worked then and, as some A.A.'s put it, "If it works, don't fix it!"

This newsletter may be duplicated for distribution without obtaining permission from A.A. World Services, Inc.