

**Carrying
the Message
Behind
These Walls**

CARRYING THE MESSAGE BEHIND THESE WALLS

“**Y**our job now is to be at the place where you may be of maximum helpfulness to others, so never hesitate to go anywhere if you can be helpful.” – *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 102

Over 70 years ago, Warden Clinton Duffy asked A.A. members to bring an A.A. meeting into San Quentin. Today there are over 35,710 A.A.s in confinement and 1,450 prison groups throughout the United States and Canada. These meetings answer only a fraction of the need for more groups in correctional facilities all across the country. Many there reach for, but don't find, the hand of A.A.

Carrying the A.A. message into jails, juvenile detention centers and prisons is an important and rewarding service, and one where there is a constant need for volunteers. Following is some sharing from inmates who have received the message through the dedicated work of A.A. members.

I am an inmate at a juvenile detention hall. I am 14 years old and know I'm an alcoholic. I write to you to show my thanks for publishing this Alcoholics Anonymous book. It's made me want to turn my life around.

This letter is meant to encourage all those who bring A.A. meetings into correctional institutions. Thank you, thank you, thank you. A.A. is a breath of fresh air in penal facilities. It brings a spirit of peace into an otherwise hostile environment and turns our focus to what is positive, healthy and good.

I am 25 years old. I have been drinking for about 14 years. By the time I was 19, I was arrested for attempted burglary, and sent to a prison that had A.A. meetings. This is the best thing that has happened to me. I have been without a drink for over a year and two months.

You can help. Here are some ideas:

- *Support your district, area, intergroup/central office corrections or hospital and institutions committees* – Many committees supply literature and guidelines for setting up A.A. groups on the inside, as well as providing encouragement and shared experience.
- *Take a meeting into or share at a correctional facility* – When carrying the message into a correctional facility,

we are sharing our experience, strength and hope with another alcoholic. Some A.A.s may be apprehensive about going into institutions, but they may rely on the experience of those who are doing this type of service. It is not necessary to have been incarcerated to become involved in this very rewarding form of service. The inmates may ask about drugs and other things; however, we talk about our program of recovery through the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

- *Communicate with corrections professionals* – Cooperation with the professional community has been an objective of A.A. since our beginnings. Many local A.A. service committees will, upon request, provide informational presentations for correctional facilities. A typical agenda might include the video, “Carrying the Message Behind These Walls” and a presentation by one or more A.A. members on “What A.A. Is and What It is Not.”

Remember to practice patience and tolerance, especially when dealing with correctional facilities. Often rules or procedures may seem unreasonable to the outsider, but prison officials report that these precautions were developed for safety and security – yours and theirs too.

Communication is the key to working with professionals in achieving our common purpose to help the alcoholic who still suffers. As one corrections professional stated: “The work done by A.A. volunteers has a profound impact on offenders fortunate enough to hear the volunteers speak, as well as those, such as myself, charged with helping them prepare to re-enter society.”

- *Conduct workshops* – Many corrections committees have found that workshops are fine tools for doing corrections work.

The videos, “Carrying the Message Behind These Walls” or “A New Freedom” may be shown; tapes of corrections workshops may be played; or brief presentations as described in the A.A. Guidelines or the Corrections Workbook may be utilized. A discussion period may follow.

- *Provide the correctional facilities with A.A. literature* – There are A.A. Conference-approved pamphlets for inmates, professional staff, Corrections Committee workers, and young people as well as audio and video tapes. Our literature catalog lists material in other lan-

guages and formats. Your group or committee may wish to donate soft-cover copies of A.A. Conference-approved literature, as well as back issues of the Grapevine.

The bulletin *Sharing from Behind the Walls*, available in English, Spanish, and French, contains excerpts from inmate letters received at G.S.O., and is distributed by local corrections committees to A.A. groups and members behind the walls.

- *Participate in the Corrections Correspondence Service* – 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 Corrections Correspondence Service allows inmates to correspond with outside A.A.s on an individual basis.

- *Volunteer to be a prerelease A.A. contact* – Experience has shown that attending an A.A. meeting on the outside on the day of release is one of the most effective ways for an inmate to make a sober transition and maintain sobriety.

In a 1949 letter to an A.A. prison group, Bill W. wrote: “Every A.A. has been, in a sense, a prisoner. Each of us has walled himself out of society; each has known social stigma. The lot of you folks has been even more difficult: In your case, society has also built a wall around you. But there isn’t any real essential difference, a fact that practically all A.A.’s now know. Therefore, when you members come into the world of A.A. on the outside, you can be sure that no one will care a fig that you have done time. What you are trying to be – not what you were – is all that counts with us.”

* * *

Remember – When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that I am responsible.

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