

About AA

A.A. as a Resource for Drug and Alcohol Court Professionals

“Our jails are bursting at the seams,” says the Honorable Rogelio Flores, a Superior Court Judge in Santa Barbara County, California, and one of A.A.’s nonalcoholic Class A trustees. Millions of prisoners need help, he says, and there is no better way to help alcoholics in the court system than nudging them toward A.A. “If there’s alcoholism involved, who do we call? We always call A.A.; we always rely on the hand of A.A. to help the still-suffering alcoholic.”

Judge Flores has been on A.A.’s board of trustees since 2007, though he has been using A.A. in his work as a jurist far longer than that. “I’ve been involved in recovery efforts in all the 24 years that I’ve been on the bench,” he says. “Our criminal justice system can do a lot more than just incarcerate people. We can do a lot more in helping people get sober and maintain their sobriety.”

According to Judge Flores, drug and alcohol courts are in a unique position to guide and support the thousands of alcoholics and addicts who come before them, and to put an end to the “revolving door” cycle where repeat offenders simply pass through the system time and time again.

“Drug courts started some 21 years ago in Dade County, Florida, where a number of law enforcement officials—the district attorney, some judges, defense attorneys and other prosecutors—were seeing this revolving door justice system running amok. People were coming in and out of the courts and they were not getting any better. So, they helped create a model that has been emulated for some time now, and that is to utilize the courts as a treatment tool, to utilize the courts as a means of compelling people to change their behavior.”

For the last nine years, Judge Flores has been working as a drug court judge and has seen literally thousands of people suffering from addiction come before him, looking for help. “The courts can be a change agent out there for good, making things better,” says Flores.

Looking back on his work in the field of alcoholism and substance abuse, by his own estimate Judge Flores has sent over 20,000 alcoholics on to A.A. “At first my interest was partly personal—shake any family tree, including mine, and I think you’ll find an alcoholic or two. But the more involved I became with alcoholics and other substance abusers in my work, the more interested and concerned I became.”

A.A. as a Resource—‘It Works’

First and foremost, as a drug court judge, Judge Flores uses A.A. as a resource because “it works.” “For several years now, courts throughout the country have relied on a unique cooperation with A.A. to help individuals free themselves from the chains of the fatal disease of alcoholism. Some estimate that more than 80 percent of the two million prisoners in the United States are either alcoholics or were raised in alcoholic families. Like the question of what came first, the chicken or the egg, what made them the way they are is often uncertain. But what is clear is that A.A. shines a light on the path to sobriety—and helps them to find freedom from fear and hopelessness in a whole new way of living. “With the cooperation of local A.A. members, who devote their time and energy, we have seen tens of thousands of people throughout the country finish these court-mandated programs and as a result they are still sober, they’re gainfully employed, they have their families back.”

The idea of using the courts as agents of change isn’t really something new, says Judge Flores. “Even though the drug court model is relatively new in American history, small town judges throughout the United States would compel people who were chronic alcoholics to go to A.A. to get help. A.A. existed long before drug courts, for example, and when A.A. grew and became a national—and international—phenomenon, judges then had a resource which heretofore did not exist for us, and that was the ability to send somebody to a program that was not religious but spiritually-based, with strong spiritual principles, and that people could go to in their own communities. And so it was a natural marriage between judges who were trying to help people get better and the Fellowship of A.A.

“All drug court did was utilize those old, small-town principles of justice, where you knew the defendant, worked with the defendant. The only difference now is that the relationship has expanded. The treatment team is much bigger than just the judge. The district attorney is on board and the defense attorney is on board, probation and law enforcement, the treatment community, we are all working hand in hand while pulling in the same direction trying to get people to change.”

An Attorney’s Changing Attitudes

Understanding how A.A. works is key if court professionals are to use the program as a resource. For some in the field, learning about A.A. and problem drinking has been a process.

The director of the National Center for DWI Courts, David Wallace, says that 25 years ago when he started as an assistant prosecuting attorney, “I thought that sending someone to A.A. was letting them off easy.”

The vast majority of cases he handled in a town outside Lansing, Michigan, were for driving while impaired. It was routine, he says, to allow a first-time offender to plea down to the less serious charge of impaired driving—with a sentence of probation. For repeat offenders, the court was more stringent.

Those in court on their third drunk driving charge usually received jail sentences. “What I didn’t understand was that these individuals were alcohol dependent. What would happen, of course, is that the person who was sent to jail or to prison would soon be back before the court for another drunk driving charge. Jail hadn’t changed their behavior.”

In fact, says Wallace, “states across the country have thousands and thousands of repeat offenders, persons who did not learn their lesson in jail or prison, unable to do so because of their dependency on alcohol.”

There Is a Solution

When it comes to alcoholism, A.A. has a solution that has worked for over two million people worldwide. Fundamental to the solution is working with others at all levels of society to address the problem of alcoholism and local A.A.s across the United States and Canada, and indeed, around the world, have dedicated themselves to making the message of recovery available to anyone who wants it. Cooperation with professionals in all areas that touch upon alcoholism is key to this effort and local A.A.s are available to cooperate with court professionals in a variety of ways.

For years, local A.A. members have volunteered as resources for courts by contacting legal professionals to let them know about A.A. meetings in their areas and by supplying information about Alcoholics Anonymous, the A.A. program of recovery, the difference between open meetings (which are open to the general public) and closed meetings (which are limited to those who have a problem with alcohol), and to build cooperative relationships throughout A.A.'s service structure.

Alex N., an A.A. member volunteer, works with other A.A. members in the Indianapolis area to explain A.A. to probation officers. Three times a year, Alex, who has been sober in A.A. for 10 years, and other A.A. volunteers give presentations about A.A. and its history to area probation officers. The presentations last about 45 minutes and cover the main points of the program, such as the principles of anonymity, nonprofessionalism, singleness of purpose and nonaffiliation. The volunteers bring pamphlets on A.A. to the presentations that are given to the officers, who pass them on to probationers.

Singleness of Purpose

"There is a common misunderstanding, however," says Alex, "regarding A.A. and alcoholism in the court system." While other Twelve Step fellowships have had great success in dealing with problems other than alcoholism, such as drug addiction and gambling, A.A. is geared specifically toward alcoholics. Yet, as Alex notes, "A.A. just happens to be the one program that most people have heard of," which sometimes results in nonalcoholics being court-mandated to attend A.A. meetings.

"The biggest problem we have is when judges send drug addicts to A.A. meetings when they don't have a problem with alcohol," says Judge Flores. "In all my travels around the country and around the world, people in the Fellowship often say, 'Judge, don't do that. We do have a singleness of purpose.' So, I try to explain that to my drug court colleagues. I try to explain, don't send a heroin addict into an A.A. meeting if they're not alcoholic.

"The opposite side of that coin, of course, is the fact that many of the people I work with, the ones I see in my drug court who are mostly methamphetamine addicts, also have a serious problem with alcohol. So, what do we do with that person?

"That's where the team concept of drug courts comes in, where everybody pulls together to develop the best course of action for each person. It might be that the person is a meth addict *and* an alcoholic and we need to use every tool in the arsenal to help this person out. A.A. is a fundamental part of all that."

'The Rock of Gibraltar'

According to Judge Flores, one of the benefits of A.A. as a recovery resource is the continuity it provides and the stability it offers to alcoholics in or seeking recovery, as well as to the many professionals who look to A.A. for support and guidance in their own work with alcoholics.

"Seventy-five years later, A.A. hasn't changed," he says, referring to the program's founding in 1935 and continued longevity as a positive force for recovery. "It's like the Rock of Gibraltar. It's not necessarily an easy program, but it's a simple program. Not only the Twelve Steps, but the Concepts, the Traditions. Dating back 75 years ago, the A.A. recovery program really hasn't changed very much."

Even though he is not a member of the Fellowship, Judge Flores is a firm believer that the strongest counselors in his court, the people who are most on-fire for helping people out, are those who are in recovery themselves. "They're the ones I turn to for resources. They know what their lives would be like if they started drinking again."

"I too want to give back," says Judge Flores. "I want to keep helping. It's important. That's what drives me to keep going forward. As tired and frustrating and crazy as it gets, with state and federal budgets being what they are, that's the real beauty of A.A. The Fellowship goes on; it doesn't

matter if there's a recession or not. A.A. just keeps going forward, step by step, one alcoholic at a time. That's an amazing thing."

Informational Piece Spells Out A.A. for Courts

An informational piece titled "Alcoholics Anonymous as a Resource for Drug & Alcohol Court Professionals" has recently been produced by A.A.'s General Service Office in New York. The two-page service piece explains A.A. to those working in the court system, including ways in which the A.A. program can be a resource to courts and court-appointed counselors.

Among the information in the flyer is an explanation of what A.A. does and does not do, including the fact that A.A. members share their experience with anyone seeking help with a drinking problem; that A.A. groups are happy to welcome those sent to A.A. meetings by the courts, but that groups themselves do not keep attendance records or provide progress reports; and that A.A. does not offer any social services or provide letters of reference to parole boards, lawyers, court officials, etc. For a copy of the piece, go to www.aa.org or e-mail cpc@aa.org.

Two New Class A Trustees

The General Service Board of A.A. has appointed two new nonalcoholic members. Of the 21 trustees serving on the board, seven are termed Class A (nonalcoholic) trustees. These nonalcoholic members of the board provide professional experience useful to the Fellowship. Importantly, they can do things the 14 Class B (alcoholic) trustees can't do, such as facing the camera head-on or using their last names without violating the Traditions and principles of anonymity that are designed to keep A.A. members out of the public eye.

The two new trustees are Frances Brisbane, dean and professor of the School of Social Welfare at the State University of New York at Stony Brook; and Corliss Burke, former executive director of the Yukon Alcohol and Drug Secretariat.

Frances has a long association with A.A., from both a personal and a professional perspective. "In many ways it saved my life by saving the lives of people significant to me," she says. Frances has a long professional career in alcoholism, including teaching and clinical work with alcoholics and their families.

Like Frances, Corliss Burke has a long association with A.A. Her experience in addictions began with the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission in 1977, as a counselor and later as a trainer and supervisor. In her position as the head of the Yukon Alcohol and Drug Secretariat, she reported to the Minister of Health and Social Services.

"Early in my career I began to attend A.A. meetings so that I could, in an informed way, recommend the program to my clients. Some of my most rewarding experiences have been my work in Canada's North, with First Nation communities. There is, of course, still much to do to ensure that the hand of A.A. is there, in these isolated areas of Canada and the rest of the world."

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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