

A.A. in Correctional Facilities



ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS[®] is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.

A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes.

Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

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Starting Groups in Correctional Facilities

One primary purpose

The formation of an *inside* A.A. group is based on cooperation and understanding between authorities and the A.A. people. The basis of the new group's operation is the rules and regulations under which the superintendent will permit an A.A. group to function *inside*.

It is equally important for everyone to have a clear understanding of what A.A. can and cannot do to help alcoholics — in correctional facilities and after they are released. In prison or out, *an A.A. group has but one primary purpose* — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

How groups start

An A.A. group in any correctional institution starts with the permission and cooperation of the officials in that institution. After that, several steps are in order. The following procedure is for prisons and other long-term institutions. Jail groups are a little different and will be discussed separately.

Policy meetings

A preliminary meeting is held between the administration and the A.A. people who will work with the new group, to work out the *ground rules* for the new group. The ground rules are laid down by the administration and should be put in *writing* for prison group members and nearby A.A. groups that participate in the prison group's activities.

Policy matters include deciding when and where the group is to meet; and setting the conditions under which visiting A.A. members may attend these meetings, including any required volunteer orientation and forms that must be completed.

Getting started

There are three ways the group might get started: (1) voluntary response to the announcement of the group's formation; (2) informal invitation by the chaplain or some other prison official; (3) assignment of selected individuals by an official.

Since the only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking, nonalcoholic narcotic addicts are not eligible to be members of A.A. groups; but like anyone else, they may attend any *open* A.A. meetings the groups decide to hold.

Group sponsors

The next step is to get the group going. This responsibility is usually given to two sponsors.

One sponsor comes from the staff of the facility, frequently a chaplain, social worker, or advisor; the other sponsor is from A.A. outside.

If membership is voluntary, there will have to be an advance announcement of the group's formation and an open invitation to attend. The first job of the two sponsors is to prepare this announcement and to see that it reaches all those in custody. There are several ways: the prison newspaper; the public address system (usually at meal time); bulletin board notices; and by word of mouth.

The first meeting is an organizational session that includes the prison sponsor and administrator, the A.A. sponsor and interested individuals.

Organizational meeting

The prison sponsor may act as chairperson and open the meeting. The administrator greets those attending, and explains why A.A. is being invited into the facility. The administrator often provides information, such as statistics on the incidence of alcohol and crime and the *effect of A.A. on reduction of parole violations*, etc. Then the chairperson states why the group is being formed and explains the preliminary steps which have already been taken.

Next, if the A.A. sponsor is to chair the meeting, he or she talks about A.A., perhaps explaining how A.A. started, how it has grown, how it works in other correctional facilities, and how it helps those in custody find a welcome and an easier transition into life wherever they may go, through A.A. groups on the outside.

The A.A. sponsor explains what an A.A. group is and how a group functions — through meetings and fellowship among members.

The A.A. sponsor also explains how A.A. groups nearby may be able to cooperate, and how the new group is related to the rest of the A.A. Fellowship through the Big Book (*Alcoholics Anonymous*), A.A. Conference-approved literature, the quarterly bulletin *Box 4-5-9* (often containing a special section on correctional facilities news and activities), correspondence with A.A.'s General Service Office, and the AA Grapevine.

The A.A. sponsor should prepare for this talk in advance by requesting from the General Service Office a complimentary prison package of A.A. literature and by obtaining copies of the Big Book, *Box 4-5-9*, Grapevine, and local A.A. publications.

One point that usually needs to be explained is why people have any need of A.A. while they are in prison. The answer is that the A.A. program is far more than staying away from alcohol. A.A. has been called a way of life, and its success in prison groups shows that this program can help the alcoholic live a sober and contented life, both in prison and after release.

It might be well also to make the point, at the beginning of a new correctional facilities group, that A.A. promises no favors from the outside and no special treatment on the inside. A.A. is for *sobriety*.

When the A.A. sponsor has finished speaking, it is good to throw the meeting open to questions. This usually provides a useful and lively interlude before the final item on the agenda, the election of officers.

Many local A.A. service committees will, upon request, provide informational presentations for your organization. Sessions can be tailored to meet your needs. A typical agenda might include one or several A.A. films and a presentation by one or more A.A. members on "What A.A. Is and What It Is Not."

Officers and committees

It may be helpful, at first, to elect only temporary officers — a secretary and a planning committee to serve until the group is really underway. This puts a number of members to work right away and helps to make everybody feel that the group belongs to the members.

Later, when the group is functioning and the members know more about A.A. and about each other, they may elect whatever officers are needed. Most groups rotate these officers on a regular basis as a matter of principle.

There is no hard and fast way for an A.A. group to function. In fact, it is an A.A. Tradition that each group is completely autonomous—that means

free to have as many officers, or as few, as it wishes—free to conduct its affairs in any way it chooses, except in matters which may affect other *A.A. groups or A.A. as a whole*.

In most prison groups, the *secretary* is usually the key officer, serving as the group's contact with the group's sponsors and with prison officials, and is the communications link with the rest of A.A.

Unless others are asked to do the job, the secretary is responsible for: arranging meetings, with the help of the sponsors; arranging for speakers; and assigning a different member of the group to be chairperson, or *leader*, of the meeting each week. The secretary also sees that the group has A.A. pamphlets and books.

Perhaps the most vital part of the secretary's role is *communications*. The most immediate of these contacts will be with nearby A.A. groups and members.

The group secretary is usually a busy *corresponding* secretary also, in regular mail contact with A.A.'s General Service Office in New York. In fact, sometimes, when a facility is in some remote location, the group's contact with GSO becomes its primary source of information, encouragement, and inspiration. The secretary will also be in touch with other prison groups—directly when permitted, and of course, through GSO.

At first, the group may have only one officer (the secretary) and one committee—the *planning committee*. It will be this committee's job to work with the sponsors and the secretary to get the group going. Its members simply do anything and everything that needs to be done to get going. Later, the group may want a *service committee* to see that the meeting room is set up in advance and that the clean-up work is done afterwards.

A *program committee* might be needed to see that speaker meetings are booked in advance and that prison authorities know who's coming, when, and from where.

A *refreshment committee* sees that there is coffee (and/or tea) for all, and whatever else their budget will allow in the way of cakes, cookies or donuts. Incidentally, *coffee time* after meetings is

not only an A.A. custom, it is also an important part of A.A. fellowship. The informal conversations and exchanges of the A.A. program that take place here are often as valuable as the meeting.

Jail groups

Because sentences in city and county jails are usually shorter, A.A. there is somewhat different from A.A. in prisons. So far, there are fewer permanent or even semi-permanent A.A. groups in jails. When there is rapid turnover in a jail population, *outside* A.A.s — always in cooperation with the jail officials — provide meetings and follow through with individuals after they are released.

The steps to be taken to bring the A.A. program into a jail are much the same as described for prisons: preliminary meetings with administration and city or county officials; mutual understanding of the jail's rules, regulations and restrictions; and clear-cut designation of responsibilities at both ends.

How groups function

Once a group has chosen its first officers, it is ready to begin developing bonds of understanding with the entire Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A.A. has been called a program of action. The power of A.A. seems to come from personal participation and letting it happen to you firsthand. Having A.A. members conduct their own group affairs and periodically rotating officers are doubly important for *inside* groups.

Identification with the Fellowship

It is important that the group itself, in addition to the individual, should feel a strong sense of *belonging* to A.A.

The sponsors should make every effort to put the group on its own as completely as possible, and also to bring in as much *outside* A.A. as can be arranged. Contacts with nearby groups and members will be the greatest single factor in relating the

inside group to A.A. as a whole. As there are limitations on the frequency of in-person visits, sponsors may find other ways to bring in A.A.

In some areas correctional facility groups participate in the A.A. General Service Structure. For example, an inside group's general service representative (GSR) might be given a proxy vote or a vote through an alternate on the outside at district and area meetings. In some instances, special arrangements are made for a representative from the group to attend area service meetings.

Literature helps. The basic piece of A.A. literature is the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* (called the Big Book). It should be read and reread by every A.A. member. "It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell" is a pamphlet giving the experience of people who found A.A. in prison and telling how they stayed sober after they were released. The video "A New Freedom" is also available, sharing the experience of incarcerated members. There are several other books and a sizable list of pamphlets (see page 15), each of which deals with some important aspect of A.A. It is always better if the group members can raise the money needed for A.A. literature and Grapevine subscriptions. But if this isn't possible, the sponsors may also find ways of helping through the institutions committees or corrections committees at the area, district and local level.

A Group Handbook (a loose-leaf binder containing key pamphlets and other information) and *Box 4-5-9* (a quarterly news bulletin) will be sent to the group secretary as soon as the secretary and group are listed at GSO Correspondence with the General Service Office regarding any questions the group may have always helps to produce a sense of *belonging*.

Meetings

The heart of A.A. activity is meetings. Closed meetings are for alcoholics only. Anyone interested may attend open meetings. In most institutions, the A.A. group holds meetings on a regular basis. There are different kinds of meetings. At a discussion meeting new members can get answers to their questions.

A *speaker* meeting follows the usual A.A. pattern of *what I used to be like, what happened, and what I am now like in A.A.* These talks help the new member to identify with other alcoholics *as* an alcoholic. Many groups also hold Step meetings, Tradition meetings or Big Book studies. Each type of meeting serves a different purpose; all are needed.

Discussion meetings

In the beginning, it is usually a good idea for both sponsors to sit in at meetings, maybe with an outside A.A. visitor or two, in order to provide some of the answers and to keep the meeting moving along in case of a lull.

However, after the members themselves know a little more about A.A., no outsiders are really needed, and sponsors can usually stay out of the discussions, unless their opinions are specifically asked for. This, of course, is good, for A.A. does not have any experts; the idea always is to encourage as much participation by as many members as possible.

Speaker meetings

Speaker meetings are usually scheduled during the weekend in order to make it easier for A.A. visitors to come in as speakers and to conduct the meetings. Outside A.A.s give the group a wider contact with A.A., a chance to meet a greater variety of A.A. people and to hear more personal stories and experiences within the A.A. program.

Later on, however, the sponsors will suggest that the group provide its own speakers — at least, some of them.

While nobody is forced to speak at A.A. meetings, speaking is an important part of A.A. participation. So, one way or another, regular opportunities to speak at meetings should be provided.

Step meetings, Tradition meetings and Big Book studies

Since the Twelve Steps are the basis of our recovery in A.A., many groups hold Step meetings.

Some groups read passages from the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* or the Big Book, followed by a discussion.

Groups may also read and discuss the Twelve Traditions, the best answers we have found to the questions “How can A.A. best function?” and “How can A.A. best stay whole and so survive?”

Since the Big Book contains not only directions for how many of our members practice the Twelve Steps, but also a brief history of our Fellowship’s beginnings and personal stories to help newcomers identify with other alcoholics, many A.A. groups devote meeting time to the study of this basic text.

Audio recordings of the Big Book and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* are available from the General Service Office. The pamphlets “The Twelve Steps Illustrated” and “The Twelve Traditions Illustrated” may also be helpful.

Special meetings

There are several types of *special occasion* meetings that the group may one day use. The most general of these is the *anniversary meeting*: at the end of each year, a group has a celebration, in which the sponsors, administrators and others may take part. Also, personal anniversaries, marking the *birthday* of an individual’s sobriety, often give a meeting an extra degree of interest.

For more information about how groups function, see “The A.A. Group” pamphlet.

Corrections Correspondence Service (CCS) — a special kind of A.A. service

Through the Corrections Correspondence Service the General Service Office will connect a member on the inside with one on the outside so they may share their experience, strength and hope with each other concerning sobriety and recovery in A.A. through the mail. As is suggested for sponsorship, men are put in touch with men, and women with women. The *outside* member will be connected with an *inside* one in another region

of the country. A free flyer is available from the GSO describing this service, including guidelines that suggest the focus of this correspondence be kept on recovery from alcoholism through A.A.'s Twelve Steps.

Sponsorship

Like all A.A. members, persons in custody can benefit from sponsorship. For more information, please refer to the Corrections Kit and Workbook or contact your local Corrections committee.

The follow-through — released A.A. members

When correctional facility group members are released, they almost always intend to continue with A.A. in whatever town or city they go to. Sometimes, however, in the anxiety, excitement or novelty of new freedom they put off looking up the local A.A. group — and just never get around to it.

Here, the group's sponsor can make membership in a correctional facility group pay off — by getting the member's permission, in advance of release, and arranging for A.A. people to welcome the newcomer home and into the local A.A. group.

By writing to GSO, the sponsor of the correctional facility group may find out how to get in touch with a local institutions committee or A.A. contact, and thereby smooth the *inside* member's transition to the *outside* A.A. world.

This final step may be the most important one of all, because experience shows that the first few hours of an individual's release can be the critical ones. When a released man or woman goes directly to his or her hometown A.A. group, there is far less chance of a relapse — and a return to prison or jail.

THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

A.A. PUBLICATIONS Below is a partial listing of A.A. publications. Complete order forms are available from the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Telephone: (212) 870-3400. Website: www.aa.org

BOOKS

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS
DAILY REFLECTIONS
AS BILL SEES IT
OUR GREAT RESPONSIBILITY
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS COMES OF AGE
DR. BOB AND THE GOOD OLDTIMERS
'PASS IT ON'

BOOKLETS

LIVING SOBER
CAME TO BELIEVE
A.A. IN PRISON: A MESSAGE OF HOPE
A.A. FOR THE OLDER ALCOHOLIC — NEVER TOO LATE

PAMPHLETS

Experience, Strength and Hope:

WOMEN IN A.A.
BLACK IN A.A.
A.A. FOR THE NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN
YOUNG PEOPLE IN A.A.
LGBTQ ALCOHOLICS IN A.A.
THE "GOD" WORD: AGNOSTIC AND ATHEIST MEMBERS IN A.A.
A.A. FOR ALCOHOLICS WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES —
AND THEIR SPONSORS
ACCESS TO A.A.: MEMBERS SHARE ON OVERCOMING BARRIERS
A.A. AND THE ARMED SERVICES
DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DIFFERENT?
MANY PATHS TO SPIRITUALITY
HISPANIC WOMEN IN A.A.
BEHIND THE WALLS: A MESSAGE OF HOPE
IT SURE BEATS SITTING IN A CELL
(An illustrated pamphlet for those in custody)

About A.A.:

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT A.A.
IS A.A. FOR ME?
IS A.A. FOR YOU?
A NEWCOMER ASKS
IS THERE AN ALCOHOLIC IN YOUR LIFE?
THIS IS A.A.
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON SPONSORSHIP
THE A.A. GROUP
PROBLEMS OTHER THAN ALCOHOL
THE A.A. MEMBER—MEDICATIONS AND OTHER DRUGS
SELF-SUPPORT: WHERE MONEY AND SPIRITUALITY MIX
EXPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT US:
AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR TWELVE TRADITIONS
THE TWELVE STEPS ILLUSTRATED
THE TWELVE CONCEPTS ILLUSTRATED
THE TWELVE TRADITIONS ILLUSTRATED
HOW A.A. MEMBERS COOPERATE WITH PROFESSIONALS
A.A. IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES
A.A. IN TREATMENT SETTINGS
BRIDGING THE GAP
A.A. TRADITION—HOW IT DEVELOPED
LET'S BE FRIENDLY WITH OUR FRIENDS
UNDERSTANDING ANONYMITY

For Professionals:

A.A. IN YOUR COMMUNITY
A BRIEF GUIDE TO A.A.
IF YOU ARE A PROFESSIONAL
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AS A RESOURCE
FOR THE HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL
A MESSAGE TO CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS
IS THERE A PROBLEM DRINKER IN THE WORKPLACE?
FAITH LEADERS ASK ABOUT A.A.
A.A. MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

VIDEOS (available on www.aa.org)

A.A. VIDEOS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
HOPE: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
A NEW FREEDOM

For Professionals:

A.A. VIDEO FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS
A.A. VIDEO FOR LEGAL AND CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS
A.A. VIDEO FOR EMPLOYMENT/HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS

PERIODICALS

AA GRAPEVINE (monthly, www.aagrapevine.org)
LA VIÑA (bimonthly, in Spanish, www.aalavina.org)
ABOUT A.A. (digital-only, www.aa.org/about-aa)

A DECLARATION OF UNITY

This we owe to A.A.'s future: To place our common welfare first; to keep our fellowship united. For on A.A. unity depend our lives and the lives of those to come.

I am responsible...

When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there.

And for that: **I am responsible.**

This is A.A. General Service
Conference-approved literature.

