

A.A.® Guidelines

**Serving Alcoholics
With Special Needs**

from G.S.O., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

A.A. Guidelines are compiled from the shared experience of A.A. members in various service areas. They also reflect guidance given through the Twelve Traditions and the General Service Conference (U.S. and Canada). In keeping with our Tradition of autonomy, except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole, most decisions are made by the group conscience of the members involved. The purpose of these Guidelines is to assist in reaching an *informed* group conscience.

While there are no special A.A. members, many members have special needs. For the purpose of those Guidelines, we define A.A.s with special needs as persons who are blind or visually impaired; deaf or hard of hearing; chronically ill or homebound, and those who are developmentally disabled.

SPECIAL NEEDS COMMITTEES

Some A.A. entities are attempting to meet such needs by forming Special Needs Committees. Since the goal is to make A.A. accessible, some committees refer to themselves as Accessibilities Committees. In some localities committees name themselves according to the specific need addressed, such as "Hearing Impaired Committee." When one or more members of a group have special needs (such as the need for an American Sign Language interpreter or wheelchair accessibility, or have an illness which prevents them from getting to the meeting room), A.A. members from that group will attempt to see that those needs are met. The members of a Special Needs Committee explore, develop and offer resources to make the A.A. message and participation in our program available to everyone who reaches out for it. A G.S.O. staff member who serves on the Special Needs assignment, is available as a resource and communicates with local Special Needs Committees.

In the interests of good communication and working together, Special Needs Committees are encouraged to keep their area committees and local central/intergroup offices informed of their activities. It is also helpful to work closely with committees handling Public Information and Cooperation With the Professional Community in terms of keeping the public and appropriate agencies informed about A.A. being accessible to alcoholics with special needs.

CATALOG OF A.A. MATERIAL FOR SPECIAL NEEDS

A catalog of A.A. material lists a wide range of literature and audio-visual material for alcoholics with special needs. For the blind and visually impaired there is recovery literature in Braille and large print, as well as audio tapes. *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* are available in American Sign Language (ASL) on VHS videos for the deaf and hard of hearing.

CARRYING THE MESSAGE TO A.A.s WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES AND/OR CHRONIC ILLNESSES

Many A.A. members are hard of hearing or deaf, visually impaired or blind, brain injured, confined to their beds with a chronic illness, or use wheelchairs, walkers or crutches. Members of a group may

feel stymied when first faced with these out-of-the-ordinary requirements but, in fact, there are many accommodations which can be made so that alcoholics with special needs can be active, participating members of a "regular" group. Some adjustments are simple and some are more complicated—but all are possible for the member willing to "go to any lengths" for his or her own sobriety and to help another alcoholic.

Often A.A.s will take a meeting to an A.A. member who is home- or house-bound. "I can't tell you," one hospitalized A.A. reported, "what a difference it made in my mental and emotional state when those six people showed up in my room carrying the message of A.A. and all the love and support of our Fellowship. And they did it twice a week for three months, until I was able to make meetings again! I was so down in the dumps before; I really had sort of given up—and, to be honest, I had started thinking I might as well have a drink, since I was dying anyway. But hearing the experience, strength and hope of others in the program inspired me to fight both my illnesses—the cancer *and* my alcoholism. I don't know what I would have done without A.A. at that low point in my life."

For members who aren't confined to bed, A.A.s in their group often drive them to and from meetings, install wheelchair ramps over steps to the meeting room, and arrange the room so that there is ample space for wheelchairs or walkers. It is important to identify meetings accessible for wheelchair users in local meeting schedules.

Services and material available for members who are chronically ill and/or have limited ambulatory ability include the *Loners/Internationalist Meeting (LIM)*, a newsletter for A.A. members who are in isolated areas, at sea, or home- or hospital-bound (known as Homers) and stay in touch with other members by mail and newsletters. A similar publication (not through G.S.O.) is *World Hello*, an international correspondence group. Many A.A.s share via computer bulletin boards and on-line meetings. You may contact the On-line Intergroup of A.A. (intergroup-approval@worldstd.com) for further information. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* are also available on 3.5" diskettes that run in Microsoft Windows.

DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING

For members who are deaf or hard of hearing, the use of a skilled interpreter in American Sign Language (ASL) is encouraged. The Special Needs Committee can compile and maintain a list of meetings where ASL interpreters are available, as well as a list of ASL interpreters who are willing and able to sign at A.A. func-

tions. The cost of ASL interpreters is a factor for many groups. In some areas, the intergroup or district committees provide financial assistance and/or help coordinate efforts to make signed meetings available.

Some intergroup/central offices have TTY (Teletypewriter or Text Telephone) machines to enable the deaf member to readily contact the A.A. community. Those who do not have them use the Telecommunications Relay Service, which is offered in most communities. Either way, there should be some training in the use of this equipment so that the communication will be as smooth as possible for all concerned. They might also keep a list of deaf or hard of hearing A.A. members who have TTY machines and would like to network with members.

If a deaf member comes to your group, put them in touch with someone who is willing to keep in touch through the TTY or Relay Service. It is also helpful, when speaking, to look directly at the deaf or hard of hearing member, since many are able to read lips. A.A. groups with the help of local central office/intergroup or district or area committees can initiate efforts to start new A.A. groups or meetings that are more accessible to deaf or hard of hearing members.

Services and material available for the deaf and hearing impaired include the Intergroup/Central Offices Directory (those with TTY equipment are noted); and a 5-volume 1/2" VHS video of *Alcoholics Anonymous* in ASL. Pamphlets rewritten for reading and signing purposes are: "A Newcomer Asks," "A Brief Guide to Alcoholics Anonymous" "Translation of the Twelve Steps," "Translation of the Twelve Traditions," "Is A.A. For You?," "Do You Think You're Different?," How It Works, "This is A.A.," and "Is A.A. for Me?" Deaf members are welcome to participate in the *LIM*. For more detailed information see the A.A. Guidelines on Carrying the A.A. Message to the Deaf Alcoholic.

BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED

For A.A. members who are blind or visually impaired, simply getting to the meeting room can be the biggest problem. The Special Needs Committee can compile and maintain a list of sighted members who are willing to provide transportation to and from meetings and other A.A. functions. Several groups have asked their local central office or intergroup to code Twelfth Step lists to identify members who are willing to provide transportation. Volunteers may be recruited to guide the blind or visually impaired newcomer to chairs, the hospitality table and rest rooms, until that member is acquainted with the surroundings. Meeting rooms should always be set up exactly the same way, or else the blind or visually impaired members should be alerted to what's different. Banging into a chair or a table in what was empty space at the prior meeting can be both dangerous and embarrassing.

Services and material available to help the blind or visually impaired alcoholic include books and pamphlets available in Braille, in large print, and/or on audiocassette tape, and a list of suppliers of A.A. talks for sale or exchange.

EASY-TO-READ LITERATURE

Some alcoholics are unable to take advantage of the wealth of supportive and informative literature in A.A. If you become aware that a member might have a limited ability to read, there are several ways to be helpful without embarrassing him or her.

For instance, when your group's literature chairperson announces which books and pamphlets are available at that meeting, he or she can also mention the numerous books, pamphlets and Grapevine articles which are available on audiotape. Or, if you think a member of your group might have limited reading skills, you can structure your Step and Traditions meetings so that the Step or Tradition is read aloud at the beginning of the meeting—which is great for everyone!

Services and material available to help developmentally disabled A.A.s include audio and video cassettes; illustrated, easy-to-read literature, such as "Is A.A. For Me?," "Twelve Steps Illustrated," "Too Young?," "What Happened to Joe," "It Happened to Alice," "It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell."

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ALL SPECIAL NEEDS ACCOMMODATIONS

Respect for the dignity of others has to be the foundation for all our efforts to carry the message to alcoholics with special needs, with emphasis on identification rather than on how we are different. As one deaf A.A. put it, "I'm just an alcoholic, like everyone else here. I have the same need to be a 'worker among workers' and not be singled out for special treatment. If you can just make the program available to me, I'll do what I have to do to work it." The goal is to include all alcoholics in the wonderful experience of belonging to a group and partaking of a full range of benefits of membership.

Beyond helping those in your own group or committee, others may be informed about carrying the message to alcoholics with special needs through workshops and presentations at A.A. gatherings, such as area assemblies, conventions, conferences, round-ups and Regional Forums.

SUMMARY

Our Big Book says, "We are people who normally would not mix," and this is especially true when someone is a little "different" from the others. But the rewards of giving this kind of service to a fellow alcoholic are immense! Group fellowship grows stronger, the person with special needs is included and respected as a fully-participating member of the group, and everyone's sobriety is strengthened. When faced with the challenges of accommodating a special need, we would do well to 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."

Please share with the General Service Office your experiences and successes in carrying our A.A. message of recovery to alcoholics with disabilities. G.S.O. will in turn share your experience with any A.A. member trying to reach out to alcoholics with special needs.