

Delegate Panel Presentation at PRAASA 2015: Discuss ways to engage members in corrections service

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PRAASA 2015

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Panel 4: Our Legacy of Service: Critical in the Past – Vital Today

Aloha kakou. I'm Cheryl, I'm an alcoholic and it is with great honor that I serve as the Panel 65 Delegate for Hawaii, Area 17. My sobriety date is June 13, 1996 and my home group is Kailua Kona AA on the Big Island of Hawaii. My topic is "Discuss ways to engage members in corrections service."

Since the early years of AA, members have been carrying our message into correctional facilities. In 1942, just seven years after AA was founded, the San Quentin Group became the first 'inside' AA group to be recorded at the General Service Office, then the Foundation Office. Clinton Duffy, a pioneering warden at San Quentin, invited local AA members to carry the message to the alcoholics in that legendary prison. He recognized that alcoholism presented a serious problem within the prison population and was heard to say, "If the AA program will help just one man, I want to start it."

Today, in the US and Canada, there are approximately 1,490 AA groups in correctional facilities that are serviced by local correctional facilities committees.

There are two principal types of Corrections service today – taking AA meetings into local facilities and the Corrections Correspondence service where a member inside an institution is paired with an outside correspondent.

So, now, how do we engage members in corrections service?

Enthusiasm and Persistence:

- Be enthusiastic and positive when talking about corrections service; share positive experiences. One of my favorite ways of sharing my experiences in
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service is to incorporate a little bit of it into my personal share so I can reach those who may not be as familiar with service. Too often, if we are sharing about service only in business meetings, we're preaching to the choir.

- You can also talk to individuals one on one emphasizing Twelfth Step work, one alcoholic talking to another.
- Make announcements in meetings.
- Hold workshops to inform, encourage and recruit.

Eliminate Barriers

- Eliminate barriers such as misinformation. Many members are misinformed about AA meetings in prison. We can emphasize that when carrying the message in a correctional facility, we share experience, strength and hope with other alcoholics as we do at any AA meeting on the ‘outside.’ Having prison experience is not a prerequisite – sobriety in AA is. Inmates are more interested in learning about how we got and stayed sober through AA’s Twelve Steps, rather than hearing about time we may have spent in prison.
- Help eliminate barriers of fear. Some are fearful of going into locked facilities. We can help reassure them by sharing our positive experiences about the safety and security that the facilities provide and just how powerful the meetings are for all involved.

Recruiting Members:

- One of the best ways to recruit is to personally invite members one-on-one and/or to take sponsees along to see what correctional facility service is like.
- Consider reducing the hours of commitment that a volunteer does in a month, creating what may be a more manageable commitment in terms of time.

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- Host a corrections event that is solely targeted for members who are not involved in corrections service and may be curious to discover “What It’s All About.”
- Encourage ex-inmate AA members to get involved in all aspects of corrections service, as well as emphasizing the effect AA had on his/her sobriety when they were incarcerated.
- Utilize resources from GSO such as the DVD Carrying the Message Behind These Walls or AA in Correctional Facilities.

Encouraging Young People: While encouraging young people isn’t any different than encouraging any other AA members, inviting young people to carry the message in places that serve young people, like youth detention centers, can be a powerful way of engaging new members in corrections work.

Involve Home Groups, Districts and Area

- Discuss ideas in areas and districts regarding ways to collect contributions from

groups and members to purchase literature for local correctional facilities.

- Suggest groups collect past Grapevine and La Vina magazines for distribution into facilities.
- Mention that packs of back issues of Grapevine and La Vina can be ordered for a discounted price.
- Include local corrections events on district and area websites.

Corrections Correspondence Service (CCS) – The Corrections Correspondence Service is another type of Twelfth Step work. AA members on the ‘outside’ who are interested in corresponding with AA members on the ‘inside’ are paired. Men are paired with men and women with women. In 2014, GSO linked almost 2400 inmates to ‘outside’

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members who signed up to participate in CCS. Making members aware of the service and inviting them to participate will help engage them in the Corrections work.

- An outside correspondent said – “I know how important our Twelfth Step work is and I enjoy writing to men who are locked up. It is one of the tools that I use to keep me sober. I myself found AA in prison almost 20 years ago. And it hasn’t been necessary for me to return to prison since I was released in 1979.”

I’ll end with a couple of quotes, first from a member doing corrections work.

- “Being able to watch people at their bottom in jail and see them reach out to AA and grow and get help is just amazing.”

And, from a member who has been on both sides –

- “I am a former incarcerated woman so I understand what it is like and worked hard to be able to go back inside to share my message and give back. These meetings are so powerful and spiritual for me and I have had women come to me inside and when they get out, telling me they heard my message and were impacted by the hope I shared. By the grace that allowed me to be of service to these women, I know where I don’t ever want to go again and that the sharing of my experience, strength and hope not only spreads a message that there is a better way, but also helps me every day to walk in sobriety!”

Mahalo nui loa for your attention and for allowing me to be of service