

About AA

A.A. for the Alcoholic With Special Needs

“While there are no special A.A. members, some members have special needs.” This statement animates the efforts of recovering alcoholics across the United States and Canada in carrying the A.A. message to persons who are blind or visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, chronically ill or homebound, those who are developmentally disabled, and many others who may have less visible challenges.

As noted in the A.A. Guidelines on Serving Alcoholics with Special Needs (available from the A.A. General Service Office), “When faced with the challenges of accommodating a special need, we would do well to remember A.A.’s Responsibility Declaration: ‘When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am responsible.’”

Meeting the Challenge

Carrying the message to special needs populations can be a challenge — one A.A. members have always been willing to accept — with the goal of including all alcoholics in the wonderful experience of belonging to a group and partaking in the full range of benefits of membership in A.A. Some A.A. entities are attempting to meet this goal by forming Special Needs-Accessibilities Committees and there are currently some 200 such committees throughout the U.S. and Canada A.A. service structure.

In general, the members of a Special Needs-Accessibilities Committee explore, develop and offer resources to make the A.A. message and participation available to everyone who reaches out for it. In the interests of good communication and working together, Special Needs-Accessibilities Committees are encouraged to keep their area committees and local central/intergroup offices informed of their activities. It is also helpful for these committees and members 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. In addition, a G.S.O. staff member who serves on the Special Needs assignment, is available as a resource and communicates regularly with local Special Needs-Accessibilities Committees.

Sharing Experience, Strength and Hope

The A.A. Fellowship includes members who are hard of hearing or deaf, visually impaired or blind, brain injured, confined to their beds with a chronic illness, or who use wheelchairs, walkers or crutches. Members of a group or Special Needs-Accessibilities Committee may feel stymied when first faced with these out-of-the-ordinary challenges 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.

Often A.A.s will take a meeting to an A.A. member who is hospitalized, home- or house-bound, allowing that person an opportunity to focus on their alcoholism along with whatever other difficulties may be going on. “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. 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.”

Sobriety with a Personal Touch

For members who aren’t confined to bed, A.A.s 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, often identifying 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.

For A.A. members who are blind or visually impaired, simply getting to the meeting room can be the biggest problem. The Special Needs-Accessibilities 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.

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-Accessibilities 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. functions. 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.

New and Productive Lives

Respect for the dignity of others is the foundation for all of A.A.’s efforts to carry the message to alcoholics with special needs, with emphasis on identification rather than on how people are different. As one special needs A.A. put it in the pamphlet “A.A. for the Alcoholic with Special Needs,” which shares the personal stories of eleven

A.A. members with a wide variety of disabilities who are now living new and productive lives free from alcohol, “It is so good to be made to feel welcome and ‘a part of,’ especially when you have a disability.... I have come to realize that deafness, like alcoholism, is surmountable when I make use of the help that is available.”

For professionals who are interested in the services A.A. provides for members with special needs, or to contact one of A.A.’s many local Special Needs-Accessibilities Committees, contact the A.A. General Service Office, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163, (212) 870-3400, or check the A.A. Website: www.aa.org.

A.A.’s International Convention — Atlanta in 2015

Next year over the Fourth of July weekend (July 2–5, 2015), A.A. members from around the world will be converging in Atlanta, Georgia to celebrate A.A.’s 80th birthday and to share experience, strength and hope on a myriad of sobriety-related topics in meetings, panels and workshops at the Georgia World Congress Center, the Georgia Dome and other locations throughout this friendly city at the heart of the New South.

Held every five years since 1950, A.A.’s International Conventions have been hosted in numerous U.S. and Canadian cities with cultures and personalities as varied as the alcoholics who travel to them for the celebration, and in Atlanta many will celebrate not only their own sobriety and newfound lives, but also their ability to pass on this miracle — the message of recovery — to another suffering drunk.



The Georgia Dome

Finding a Renewed Commitment

The theme of the 2015 International Convention, “80 Years — Happy, Joyous and Free,” will help draw attention to the many benefits of sobriety and Convention-goers will greet one another in gratitude as carriers of hope, good news, and a simple solution for their alcohol problem. Varied meeting topics will excite many A.A.s who look forward to hearing the experience of members from other locales and the perspective provided by the many nonalcoholic guest speakers, including A.A.’s nonalcoholic Class A trustees and other professionals in the field of alcoholism. And, as attendees partake in the many meetings and workshops scheduled for the weekend, more than a few will find their imaginations fired and their enthusiasm for carrying A.A.’s message renewed.

Fittingly, for more than a century, Atlanta’s official symbol has been the mythical phoenix rising from the ashes, a symbol many A.A.s can readily identify with, having risen themselves out of the ashes of active alcoholism.

Professionals who would like to find out more about the Convention may contact the International Convention Desk at the General Service Office of A.A.: (212) 870-3130, or access G.S.O.’s A.A. Website at www.aa.org. Members of the media may contact the Public Information Desk at (212) 870-3119.

Anonymity — Then and Now

Our previous issue took a look at A.A.’s tradition of Anonymity as it has developed through the years, delineating some of the aspects of anonymity that led A.A. co-founder Bill W. to call this important principle “the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.” Serving as a guidepost for both personal and organizational humility, “the principle of anonymity is an all-pervading spiritual quality which today keynotes A.A. life everywhere,” added Bill W. in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, the A.A. book which spells out the fundamental building blocks of the A.A. program of recovery. “Moved by the spirit of anonymity,” wrote Bill “we try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as A.A. members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public. As we lay aside these very human aspirations, we believe that each of us takes part in the weaving of a protective mantle which covers our whole Society and under which we may grow and work in unity.”

For A.A. members and those seeking to help alcoholics get and stay sober, the question of personal anonymity at the public level of press, radio, film, television and the Internet has always generated healthy discussion. “As a rule, the average newcomer wanted his family to know immediately what he was trying to do,” wrote Bill. “He also wanted to tell others who had tried to help him — his doctor, his minister, and close friends. As he gained confidence, he felt it right to explain his new way of life to his employer and business associates. When opportunities to be helpful came along, he found he could talk easily about A.A. to almost anyone. These quiet disclosures helped him to lose his fear of the alcoholic stigma, and spread the news of A.A.’s existence in his community. Many a new man and woman came to A.A. because of such conversations. Though not in the strict letter of anonymity, such communications were well within its spirit.”

Adds the pamphlet titled “The A.A. Group,” “In our personal relationships with nonalcoholics — and with those we think might have a problem with alcohol, we may feel free to say that we are recovering alcoholics (without divulging the names of other A.A. members), although discretion is recommended. Here our openness may help to carry the message.”

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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