

Guidelines for Prison Visiting within New Zealand by Members of Alcoholics Anonymous

(Approved by the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous - April 2004)

Introduction

The history of AA visiting prisons is both good and bad. Many a person has begun their life of sobriety by hearing the message for the first time when they are in prison. The intention of these guidelines is to preserve the sobriety of AAs who carry the message into the difficult arena of prisons, and to ensure that the traditions, which are at the heart of our organisation, are used to best advantage in presenting the AA way of recovery.

1. Specific Guidelines for Setting Up the Prison Meeting

a) Sponsoring a prison meeting

Regularity and continuity of meetings are vital. This work can be both rewarding and difficult. AA experience has taught us that continuity is best provided by prison meetings being sponsored by particular AA Groups. Someone should have the job of ensuring the meeting in the prison is covered, and this prison sponsor position should rotate within the sponsoring group. The job of prison sponsor has as its first task to ensure that the meeting takes place with suitable members. The prison sponsor may go him or herself or may arrange for someone else to go (provided they can comply with the guidelines for suitable persons, see below).

It is recognised that the above is the ideal arrangement. In many areas it does not occur and the prison meeting is carried out by one or two dedicated members. These members should avoid giving more lest they burn out. In particular, it is suggested individuals do not automatically provide what the prison authorities may request without going through the local intergroup or service structure.

b) Several AAs are needed.

Within the prison system you may be met with negativity and this is best countered by having several AAs always present. The minimum number should be two, but preferably three or more. This is also the best arrangement for presenting the right message. It is not recommended that one AA visit week after week on their own.

c) Polynesian Representation.

The Institutions Committee considers that, because of the large numbers of Maori and Pacific Islanders in New Zealand prisons, the presence of recovering AAs from these cultures in the prison visiting team will be advantageous.

d) Approval by Service Structure

All meetings and sponsors should be approved by the service structure within the local area (e.g. Intergroup, Service Centre). This supports the tradition of unity within AA and reduces the possibility of duplication.

2. Specific Issues for AAs Visiting Prisons.

a) Men for men and women for women.

AA experience has taught us that men should visit men's prisons and women should visit women's prisons. It is recommended that this guideline is followed; there may,

however, be certain extenuating circumstances.

b) Minimum length of sobriety required.

A minimum of two years sobriety is recommended. First impressions are very important, so look your best and be on time.

c) Smuggling.

AAs visiting prison should not carry anything in there or out, apart from AA approved literature. AA experience suggests that it is very easy to get into the situation of providing cigarettes, chocolate biscuits, etc. as the central point of a prison visit instead of carrying the message. Obviously sharing individually over a cup of tea/coffee is part of the AA way, but this guideline is meant to draw attention of visiting AAs to the situation which can develop all too easily where the provision of extra smokes and chocolate biscuits becomes more central than desirable.

d) Know the Justice Department Guidelines for Visitors.

AAs visiting prison must comply with Justice Department guidelines for those who have been in prison themselves. This varies from prison to prison. It is recommended that the local prison manager be approached for them as part of the process of liaison in the setting up of the meeting.

e) Introducing inmates to AA.

It is prudent to be aware that, like many AA members in the beginning, some inmates may not believe they have a problem with alcohol.

f) Outside meetings.

Members of AA, with the prison authority's approval, may take an inmate to an AA meeting and return them to prison after the meeting. More than this is not recommended.

g) Sharing

AAs attending the prison meeting should not just share their drinking story without sharing their recovery also, i.e. experience, strength and hope.

3. General

It is not advisable to give out personal telephone numbers. An inmate can contact the Service Centre and they can contact the person concerned. It is up to each individual member to decide for themselves whether or not they give out their personal details. If in doubt, seek the advice of a more experienced AA member