

## SUGGESTIONS FOR MEMBERS WISHING TO VISIT CORRECTION CENTRES

### Why Do AA Members go into Correctional Centres ?

**One of the purposes of imprisonment is to afford inmates an opportunity to 'correct' their illegal behaviour. By addressing any underlying problem of alcoholism, Alcoholics Anonymous has sustained a record for over seventy-five years as an effective option for many inmates to turn their lives around.**

For members of AA, visiting sick alcoholics where they are has long been one of the important and happiest ways of keeping ourselves sober. The book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, includes a chapter on 'Working with Others' which states: *"Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics. It works when other activities fail."* Later in the chapter it concludes that *"Helping others is the foundation stone of your recovery."*

Our AA Fellowship encapsulates this policy in its banner displayed at many AA meetings: *When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there - and for that I am responsible.*

All members have to do in correctional centres is to be channels for the AA message. Everyone has a story to share in correctional centres because inmates are as varied as AA members; you don't have to have been in gaol yourself. As our book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, says: *"Your job now is to be at the place where you may be of maximum helpfulness to others, so never hesitate to go anywhere if you can be helpful."*

Not only are we doing our Twelfth Step and making ourselves useful in recovery (as the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* talks about), it also gives us that 'sense of belonging' we often lack as practising alcoholics. It also lets sober alcoholics see what could happen to them if they drink again. However, most important of all, it's the change we witness in inmates that motivates us to carry the AA message.

### HOW TO VOLUNTEER:

Members have sometimes found service in correctional centres to be a challenging experience. However, if you believe it would be personally rewarding, firstly, find out when the meetings are held at the correctional centre convenient to your location. If you are available on those days and times, contact the National Correctional Facilities Coordinator through National Office at [www.aa.org.au](http://www.aa.org.au) or [national.office@aa.org.au](mailto:national.office@aa.org.au) or 02 9599 8866.

If AA meetings are not held in a correctional centre in your area, the brochure *AA in Correctional Facilities* can guide you towards starting one. The AA members who arrange security clearances for correctional facilities in your State or Territory can also assist.

## SECURITY

While many corrective services officers understand the usefulness of AA meetings for inmates, especially in facilities with a through-care focus, their job is to place primary importance on security and safety. Consequently, the superintendent of a correctional centre sets the terms under which AA visits can be made. In addition, AA visitors are subject to facility rules that apply to every visitor.

To be allowed into a correctional facility, you have to complete official forms and submit them through the AA member or office that coordinates clearance approvals by the correctional services agency in your State or Territory. In some locations, you may have to re-submit your forms and photographs at regular intervals, perhaps every few years. You may also be required to complete a security awareness course on a date set by the prison. You also usually have to sign an agreement about your obligations as a visitor in a correctional centre.

Inmates will not hesitate to complain to authorities if an AA visitor who is supposed to be there to help them fails to meet standards of behaviour or seems to be wasting their time. To protect your sobriety and AA's reputation, AA may withhold your application unless you obviously satisfy most of the following general conditions:

- Some good sobriety (say, a minimum of two continuous years to date)
- Personal experience of alcoholism and Twelve Step recovery
- Broad knowledge of AA and ability to stick to AA's business of recovery
- Dependability, including being known as an active member of a home Group of AA
- A common sense approach learned from being a sponsor
- Experience of doing Twelfth Step calls
- Ability to follow directions
- A long-term commitment to at least one gaol meeting every month.

In addition, the correctional services agency in each jurisdiction sets its own criteria—which can change from time to time so always make sure you have the latest version. These criteria always require proof of your identity and a criminal record check.

Note that some States do not permit former inmates to visit; in other cases you may apply if you have been out of gaol for an extended period.

If the corrective service agency does grant you a clearance, you will be given an authority which you must present for each visit, usually along with some photo identification such as a driver's licence. Note that a pass gives no guarantee that you will be permitted entry on any particular occasion.

Finally, the long-standing practice in AA is for at least two members to do Twelfth Step calls together. This equally applies in correctional centres; there is safety in numbers and you will have a witness in case anything should ever happen.

## BANNED ITEMS

As a general rule, it is better to take as little as possible on a visit. However, always take your official pass and photo identification. You may usually also take your car keys and a handkerchief. Best to limit yourself to those items and leave everything else at home or in the car.

However, in some centres you may not be allowed to take in any personal items, including cigarettes, car keys, wallets, purses, or money. (Coins may be permitted in some centres where there are vending machines.) Sometimes there are lockers at the entrance to hold your possessions.

Corrective Services officers will probably not permit you to take in AA cloth banners of the Steps and Traditions for the meeting. Ask if they would permit you to take in A4 paper printouts of the Steps and Traditions to be displayed on a table.

There are penalties for bringing some items into a correctional centre. This varies from location to location, so it is your responsibility to find out what you are permitted to take into the correctional centre, including any local rules that apply at the centre. For example, some items are not even permitted in the facility car park. In general, banned items typically include: guns; knives; mobile phones; cameras; syringes and, often, CDs. (The Caring and Sharing Tape Library can assist with cassette tapes if they are permitted.)

If staff have a reasonable suspicion that you may be carrying contraband you may be asked to remove your outer clothing such as jacket, hat, and shoes and turn out your pockets. You will also have to open bags or other personal belongings and have them tested with a wand for traces of banned substances. You may be scanned head to toe with a scanning device and have to walk through a metal detector. (Surgical implants and body piercing, especially if concealed under clothes, are a security problem you need to consider in advance.) You may also be required to stand still while a dog, specially trained to detect drugs, walks around you.

If you need to take medication into the correctional centre you'll have to declare it to corrective services officers at the front desk. If your medication is prescribed it needs to be in the original package which has your name on it. Diabetic syringes are not permitted.

You should use the toilet prior to a visit. Advise correctional centre staff in advance if a medical condition will require you to use the toilet while you are in a correction centre.

Finally, what was permitted on the last visit is no guarantee that you will be allowed to take something in the next time.

## CODE OF CONDUCT

AA members are guests in correctional facilities and you have to do what you are told—without question. Cooperation with correctional services staff is a pre-requisite for carrying the message to inmates. Your fellow members want to ensure the Fellowship is always welcome so please be polite and respectful to everyone.

AA is a program of attraction: if you are given a clearance, remember that you represent AA to people in that facility; you are being judged as an example of sobriety. Your language, appearance, manners and mood all affect other people's opinions of our Fellowship. We already know that AA works—let our new friends see, hear and talk to a winner and make sure your behaviour brings credit to AA.

You may encounter corrective services officers who think AA is a waste of time. You should not try to impress them, but we need to keep on side by keeping our minds on the alcoholics who still suffer, now and in the future: thoughtless words or actions can instantly undo prolonged efforts to establish AA in a facility.

Here is a checklist of dos and don'ts derived from the experience of those who have visited correctional centres before you:

### DO

- Abide carefully by all the rules of the facility. The reasons for their rules may not seem clear to us, but it is not up to us to question them
- Observe local dress codes to the letter: make sure you are well groomed and dress as though you are proud to be sober: wear clean, neat clothes with joggers or shoes (no sandals or thongs). In some centres, shorts or T-shirts are not permitted
- Be reliable and arrive at the main gate at least 30 minutes before the AA meeting time so staff have time to fetch you and sign you in
- Smoke only in any area provided if you are able to bring in cigarettes and matches (lighters may not be permitted)
- Make sure any undertaking you make is kept
- Let the authorities know on your way out if you have been asked to bring something in

### DON'T

- Do not take anything in for the inmates apart from printed AA materials. AA cassette tapes may be allowed but CDs are usually not permitted
- Do not take anything out for anyone, no matter what it may be
- Do not wear clothes that resemble inmate uniforms in style or colour

- Do not swear
- Do not give corrective services officers or inmates any reason to be uncomfortable about AA.
- Do not argue about anything with either inmates or staff: disagreement never wins friends
- Do not try to claim special exemptions or privileges or attempt to manipulate the agency into making concessions
- Do not expect correctional services staff to govern themselves by AA's Traditions
- Do not make a commitment unless you personally are going to keep it; excuses do not speak well for AA, but faithfulness and results do
- Do not make claims about our Twelve Steps, but we can speak of their effectiveness for us.

## THE AA MEETING

If possible, put up the Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions and clichés before the meeting starts and display some AA literature.

## OPENING REMARKS

- Read the AA Preamble. Tell the inmates that AA started in 1934 and there are over 1,900 meetings every week across Australia—which all function just like the ones in gaol.
- Explain that AA's single purpose is to help alcoholics. However, remember that people in custody often have complex histories of addiction and inmates who more fully identify with other Twelve Step programs may be at the AA meeting because it is their only option.
- Read the Anonymity Desk Card (*What you hear here...*). Explain that we remain anonymous in the media so that alcoholics will not be deterred from seeking help because they fear public disclosure.
- Point out that sharing is encouraged but not required.

## SHARING

If you are asked to share, identify as an alcoholic and make it clear that you choose not to drink alcohol or use any mood altering substances that are not prescribed.

The gaol audience is more interested in learning how to stay sober than in hearing how you got drunk. Get to the point that will help them. Without using AA jargon, talk to them in a straightforward way: tell it like it was for you: not what you guess they might like to hear.

Leave them in no doubt that you:

- a) are a fellow alcoholic. Focus on your drinking pattern (rather than specific graphic descriptions); maybe mention the loneliness, hopelessness and fears; or talk about the mental obsession and physical allergy;
- b) came to a turning point; tell how you came to ask for help, referring to Step One; and,
- c) stay sober using AA's program of recovery with the Twelve Steps. Let them know how different

life is thanks to AA and perhaps explain why you are there.

**It is always useful to reinforce these AA suggestions:**

- Stay away from the first drink
- Live one day at a time
- Read the literature such as the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*; *Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions*; and, *Living Sober*
- Go to meetings regularly and try to put into practice what we learn there
- Get a sponsor who has made some progress in the recovery program
- Join a home Group where you feel a sense of belonging.

At some stage during the meeting, read 'How It Works' from Chapter 5 of *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

## QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

If there are newcomers or observers, it may be helpful to open the floor at the end of sharing for questions about AA. You can also expect to interrupt the meeting if an inmate asks a question when they hear something they do not understand.

Be ready for basic questions such as:

- How do I do the Steps in gaol?
- **How do I get a sponsor?**
- **Isn't this a waste of time if you're an alcoholic with a history like mine?**
- **Why do I have to give up alcohol completely?**
- Can I contact AA members outside gaol?
- Can we run our own meeting without visitors?
- Will I be welcome in AA meetings when I get out?

Give simple, straightforward answers...but make sure you answer the question. You can say: *'I don't know, but I will try to find out.'* For questions that are not about AA, such as the merits of other recovery options, it is best to say that AA has no opinion.

In preparing ourselves for possible questions, it helps to be clear in our minds what AA represents to inmates (or corrective services officers). Some possible answers are attached to this Guideline about what AA is trying to achieve in a correctional facility...and what it does not do. You may wish to read out these answers about AA to the inmates, or hand out a printed copy.

## AFTER THE MEETING

Thank everyone, including corrective services officers, for their time and attention.

When talking one-on-one to newcomers or observers:

- Listen as much as you talk
- Always maintain a cheerful humility about how AA works
- Limit yourself to carrying your own honest message of recovery from alcoholism
- Do not brag about AA; rather, let results speak for us
- Remember that medication, psychiatry, or scientific theories of alcoholism are the business of professionals; we are not authorities on alcoholism. Similarly, our spiritual life does not make us experts on religion
- Let the inmates know about the benefits of sponsorship, as well as the temporary contact program which may be available in your area
- Show you can laugh at yourself
- Give out the AA Helpline number, not private numbers.

## PRE-RELEASE

Corrective services officers sometimes like to view AA as a source of peer-based mentoring for people in transition from an institution to living in the community. At the very least, we can provide a card to inmates with the local AA Helpline number and [www.aa.org.au](http://www.aa.org.au) so they can promptly get to meetings and make contact with local members. If you definitely know a reliable member will be available, offer for AA to escort them to their first meeting outside and exchange contact details for the inmate.

If the inmate will be moving to another part of Australia after release, provide contact details for the prisoner release contact in other Areas. The National Correctional Facility Coordinator can usually assist with this—contact National Office at [www.aa.org.au](http://www.aa.org.au) or [national.office@aa.org.au](mailto:national.office@aa.org.au) or 02 9599 8866.

## ATTACHMENT A

### USEFUL RESOURCES

#### FOR THE INMATE

Carry a range of simple, cheap AA literature that requires minimal reading. Don't load inmates up with too much confusing information; they will ask for more if they want it. Likewise, the Little Big Book is often more welcome than the full-sized *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Some inmates have reading difficulties so cassette tapes are often welcome. If there are Aboriginal inmates, source the tapes from the National Aboriginal Conventions. Remember that CDs are usually not permitted in correctional centres.

Relevant reading material includes:

- Regional AA journals, especially editions that have stories involving time in prison: Mainstay; Messages of Hope; Pathfinder; Serenity; The News; and, The Reviver.
- Just for Today card
- Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions card
- 44 Questions
- A Brief Guide to AA
- A Newcomer Asks
- AA at a Glance
- AA for the Aboriginal Woman
- AA for the Indigenous Australian
- Are You Sick of Being Charged (for Aborigines)
- Do You Think You're Different
- **How did I end up here? (for women in prison)**
- 'How It Works' from Chapter 5 of *Alcoholics Anonymous*
- Is AA for Me
- Is AA for You
- **It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell (for men in prison)**
- Making a Start in AA
- **Memo to an Inmate who may be Alcoholic**
- Questions & Answers on Sponsorship
- The Twelve Steps (Illustrated)
- This is AA
- Understanding Anonymity
- Where do I go from here?

#### FOR THE AA SPEAKER

- **AA in Correctional Facilities**
- **Carrying the Message into Correctional Facilities**
- Speaking at non-AA Meetings



- How AA Members Co-operate with Professionals
- **Carrying the Message behind these Walls (DVD)**
- **Inside View for professionals (DVD)**
- Australian AA Service Manual (from [www.aaservice.org.au](http://www.aaservice.org.au))
- AA Guidelines (from [www.aaservice.org.au](http://www.aaservice.org.au))

## ATTACHMENT B

### WHAT IS AA?

AA is a community-based option formed by alcoholics to help each other get and stay sober. We are a social movement based on a set of principles learnt from experience. There is no conflict between our approach and other options. However, we can vouch for good results amongst those who thoroughly follow AA's path even though our program is not amenable to research, especially in the short term.

The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no fees for AA membership or services.

Members remain anonymous but AA should be visible. However, AA's public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion.

AA is a worldwide non-profit fellowship of local groups that has been established in Australia since 1945.

AA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organisation or institution. It is not a religious organisation, but the word God is used to reflect the belief amongst members that a higher power rather than willpower has helped us find a solution to our drinking problem. AA does not wish to engage in any controversy so it does not endorse or oppose any cause.

### WHAT AA DOES

AA's basic philosophy is that one alcoholic can help another. AA members share their experience with anyone seeking help with a drinking problem; they give person-to-person 'sponsorship' to the alcoholic coming to AA from any source.

Our Twelve Step program offers the alcoholic a way to a satisfying life without alcohol. This program is discussed at AA meetings. In order to keep our sobriety, we try to give the program to other still-suffering alcoholics: that's why we're visiting the correctional facility.

### WHAT AA DOES NOT DO

- tell anyone that they're an alcoholic – that's for them to decide

- seek or accept contributions from non-members or any outside organisation
- keep any records of its membership
- define 'alcoholism' or profess any profound knowledge of its cause or 'cure'
- have any opinion on public policy or practices regarding what some professionals term 'alcohol dependence and abuse'
- compete with other treatments or get into debates about evidence for or against various treatment options—we are not professionals
- solicit members, make diagnoses or offer advice
- give initial motivation for alcoholics to recover
- provide drying out, professional treatment or other welfare services
- provide references for any purpose
- educate about alcohol or engage in its own research
- join councils or social agencies
- follow-up or try to control its members
- promise anything beyond the promises of sobriety set out in the Big Book.

### **REMEMBER:**

- 1. Non-AA professionals cannot be expected to be aware of AA Traditions;**
  - 2. AA members are invited guests in the facilities;**
  - 3. Co-operation is the key to successful *Twelfth Stepping* in Correctional Facilities.**
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1. Co-operate with the facility. Although we have our own Traditions to guide us, when we are inside any institution we must follow their rules to the letter. The reasons for their rules may not seem clear to us, but it is not up to us to question them.
  2. Personal appearance is vital. If you look as if you just rolled out of bed, you have already made a negative first impression and no matter how well you present your own message it may never be heard. Look as neat and as well-groomed as possible.
  3. Personal conduct is also important while inside the facility. Be polite and respectful to the staff and inmates - we are there as their guests. Refrain from using any foul language in any Group situation.
  4. When we are carrying the AA message into a Correctional Centre, we are not just one drunk talking to another. In their eyes, we represent the entire Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.
  5. In order for the AA meeting to run smoothly in a Correctional Facility, it is necessary for all to be there early. How we look, act and talk are all the Correctional Officers are going to know about AA. In many cases, months of hard work have gone into establishing the relationship which enables AA to be invited into a Correctional Facility. Careless action at any level by AA members could destroy that relationship and AA would no longer be admitted to carry its message. Remember, we already know that AA works - let our new friends see, hear and talk to a winner.

## **SOME DOs AND DON'Ts**

1. You may only be able to bring in cigarettes and matches and all other personal property may have to be left in a locker at the front gate. Cigarette lighters may not be permitted.
2. Smoke **ONLY** in the area provided.
3. **DON'T** take out anything for anyone, no matter what it may be.
4. **DON'T** bring in anything for anyone, no matter how innocent it may appear to you.
5. **DO** let the authorities know on your way out if you have been asked to bring something in; alternatively, ring the contact on the next working day but **DON'T BRING ANYTHING IN.**

**REMEMBER, IN THEIR EYES YOU REPRESENT THE ENTIRE FELLOWSHIP OF ALCOHOLICS  
ANONYMOUS**