

A.A.[®] Guidelines

Carrying the A.A. Message to the Deaf Alcoholic

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.

CARRYING THE MESSAGE TO DEAF ALCOHOLICS

One A.A. member reminded us that, in carrying the message to the deaf alcoholic, "Try not to treat them as different or special, but allow them freedom to participate in a typical A.A. meeting."

The main thing to remember is that deaf alcoholics have the same problem as anyone else. While we and they may come up with a thousand reasons why they are different, let's emphasize over and over "Don't drink; Keep coming back."

For the purpose of these guidelines we will use the term "deaf." There are other people who are hard of hearing, either permanently or temporarily. People who are deaf or hard of hearing are all unique, and there is a variety of ways to communicate with them: sign language, speechreading, writing, typing, and TTY, for example.

Often, sign language is the most effective way to communicate, and many groups use sign language interpreters to help carry the message to deaf members. In a pinch, you can try writing back and forth. But keep in mind that English is not the first language of many deaf people—sign language is! So, whenever possible, use sign language—either directly or through an interpreter. If you do have to write, keep it simple and brief. Encourage the newcomer to take A.A. literature and invite them to come to another meeting. A smile, a handshake and a cup of coffee speak "the language of the heart," which we can all hear.

SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

If there is a need for an interpreter try to arrange to have a sign language interpreter at the meetings that deaf alcoholics attend. The deaf member may be able to bring an interpreter. If not, try to make arrangements through a local agency or check with your local special needs committee, intergroup or central office, general service district or area committee to see if they have any experience with the situation.

Qualified interpreters are professional people who charge fees for their services. Experience suggests that most groups will agree to having a non-A.A. attend its closed meetings to act as interpreter for the deaf alcoholic. Professional ASL (American Sign Language) interpreters adhere to a strict code of ethics, which assures the confidentiality of the A.A. meeting.

Some A.A. groups cover this expense. Sometimes an agency will take care of the expense. On occasion, local area committees, districts, and central/intergroup offices have authorized payment for interpreters. Professional interpreters who are also A.A. members sometimes are willing to volunteer their services. Occasionally advanced students of interpreting will do the job at no fee for the experience gained. Be careful of placing too much reliance on volunteers, as deaf members rely on these services and there should be stability in whether the meeting is interpreted or not.

Experience shared with G.S.O. indicates that numerous areas have formed Special Needs Committees. Individual A.A. members or groups may wish to contact their area Special Needs committee for shared experience in reaching out to deaf alcoholics in their A.A. community. It appears that finding ASL interpreters is a continuing challenge at all levels of service.

Whatever arrangements are made should be based on a group conscience decision arrived at after full discussion at a business meeting. Is the group willing to cover the expense of this service, or does it wish to appoint someone to contact the central office or a professional agency about providing an interpreter? In order to welcome the deaf person and the interpreter and make the newcomer feel that he or she is an important addition to the group, it is important that a full consensus on these points be reached in advance. The interpreters should be introduced to the group before meetings.

Initially it may be difficult to convey feelings through another person, so try to communicate as directly as possible. It is important to have the deaf person's attention before speaking. He or she may need a wave of the hand, a tap on the shoulder or some sort of signal that you wish to communicate. Many deaf people have some training or experience in speechreading (also known as lipreading). However, this varies widely with individuals. Effective speechreading also requires very specific conditions: the speaker should not be chewing gum or eating, should not have an accent or a mustache, and there should be no back lighting. If a deaf person indicates that he or she can speechread, try to follow these guidelines. Also, speak slowly and clearly, but don't exaggerate. Look directly at the person while speaking.

If you are called on to read something while an interpreter is signing, read slowly and clearly. Try to furnish the interpreter with the text beforehand, as formal writing is more difficult to interpret quickly.

OTHER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

More and more dedicated A.A. members are committing themselves to learning sign language in order to be more effective in communicating with the deaf A.A. member. Some become proficient and are able to work with the deaf alcoholic as sponsors. Others learn enough to greet and encourage the member to keep coming back. Those A.A. members who do not know sign language can still communicate with our deaf friends by telephone. Some deaf people have TTY (Teletypewriter or Text Telephone) equipment which allows them to communicate not only with those with similar devices, but with the aid of a Telephone Relay Systems operator, they can communicate with anyone. Information on this service can be found in the front section of your phone book under "Services for People With Disabilities." Give the deaf newcomer the same care and concern that we would a hearing newcomer. If there is a Twelfth Step call to be made, it is not necessary

that both members be able to sign. We must remember that our A.A. experience is the most important thing we have to share.

Many area, district and intergroup/central office newsletters publish information about groups for the deaf. Meeting lists should note which meetings are interpreted.

SHARING BY MAIL AND ONLINE

If the deaf alcoholic is comfortable reading and writing in English, the Loners/Internationalists` (*LIM*) correspondence service is one way for deaf alcoholics to share their experience, strength and hope with other alcoholics. Some deaf members who communicate in English actively participate in online A.A. meetings. One source for online A.A. meeting information is the Online Intergroup of A.A. (www.aa-intergroup.org). For deaf alcoholics who have computers with cameras and high-speed Internet connections, there are face-to-face ASL A.A. meetings. Further information about the latter can be obtained by contacting the Special Needs desk at your G.S.O.

A.A. MATERIAL FOR SPECIAL NEEDS

The catalog of A.A. material lists a wide range of literature and audio-visual material for alcoholics with special needs.

Some A.A. literature cited as being most helpful for deaf alcoholics includes: "Twelve Traditions Illustrated," "Twelve Steps Illustrated," "Is A.A. for Me?," "It Happened to Alice," "What Happened to Joe?," and the A.A. Grapevine magazine. In addition, the following material has been rewritten for reading and signing: "Twelve Steps," "Twelve Traditions," "A Brief Guide to A.A.," "A Deaf Newcomer Asks," "Is A.A. for You?," "Is A.A. for Me?," "Do You Think You're Different," "How It Works," "This Is A.A.," "A Newcomer Asks," and The Serenity Prayer.

ASL DVDs and CLOSED-CAPTIONED VIDEOS

Alcoholics Anonymous (the Big Book) and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* are available in ASL (American Sign Language) on DVDs.

In addition, the "Young People's Videos," "Hope: Alcoholics Anonymous," and a selection of other A.A. videos, as well as the Conference-approved A.A. public service announcements, are closed-captioned for the deaf.

PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COOPERATION WITH THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY COMMITTEES

Based on the response G.S.O. received from the professional agencies we contacted, we encourage local P.I. and C.P.C. committees to contact agencies for deaf people (often part of local agencies for the handicapped) and offer to put on an open A.A. meeting or a Public Information meeting about Alcoholics Anonymous; also, to let them know about the A.A. resources available.

Another project that has been suggested for P.I. committees is to take an A.A. meeting to schools for deaf people and/or provide information and material about A.A. to such schools.

Often, local C.P.C. committees will exhibit A.A. literature at conferen-

ces which are focused on services for deaf people. Some C.P.C. service people also make presentations about A.A. and available services to these types of conferences and professional meetings.

A.A. EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

Deaf A.A. members may need a few special considerations when attending an A.A. event. For those who have a fair amount of hearing and/or who read lips, seating near the speaker may be all that is required. Others who are deaf may require the use of a sign language interpreter. Here are some points to consider when planning a conference or meeting that will be attended by deaf A.A.s.

- Reserve interpreters well ahead of time because they are in great demand.
- Budget the interpreting expenses. Find out early what the estimated cost will be, whether by the hour or by the day. If you are holding concurrent workshops, you may need more than one interpreter. If your event is small (and short) you may be fortunate to find a qualified volunteer, but do not expect to rely on volunteers.
- In designating preferred seating for deaf members, cordon off the reserved area and clearly indicate "Please reserve for deaf members," and ask that people refrain from walking in front of the section as it will cause the deaf members to be cut off from the speaker and the interpreter.
- Sensitize workshop leaders and meeting chairpersons to the use of the interpreter. In this way, those members who depend on the interpreter will not be deprived of opening remarks or keynote speakers.
- Stick with your plans once you have announced that an event is to be interpreted. Deaf people are very likely to travel far for the few events that are interpreted. If the event has concurrent meetings and workshops, plan for the availability of at least one interpreter per time block. Ask the deaf participants at the outset which workshops they plan to attend.
- If you are listing the event with the General Service Office, your local intergroup/central office or in any A.A. publication, specify that it is sign language interpreted. If possible, have a TTY. number that deaf people can call for more information.

CONCLUSION

A G.S.O. staff member who serves on the Special Needs assignment is available as a resource and facilitates communication among local Special Needs Committees. They ensure that inquiries from and about deaf alcoholics are given the proper information and are referred to the local A.A. committee for further action.

For information on TTY equipment please check the Central Offices/ Intergroup Directory, which indicates those central offices with these special machines.

We encourage you to keep us informed of your experience in trying to carry the message to deaf alcoholics, so that we can continue to improve our services in this area. We look forward to hearing from you, and wish you good luck in carrying the message to the deaf alcoholic who still suffers.