

While there are no special A.A. members, many members have special needs. A.A.s who are blind or visually impaired may need help with transportation to a meeting. A deaf or hard-of-hearing member may be able to get to the meeting, but needs a sign language interpreter in order to understand what's being shared. A person with a physical disability must find a meeting with wheelchair access, while chronically ill alcoholics are often homebound and cannot attend regular meetings at all. A.A.s throughout the Fellowship are discovering that the common bond of recovery can transcend the barriers of physical disabilities.

Both groups and members can become more aware of A.A.s who need specific kinds of help. But the most important fact to keep in mind is that all alcoholics—whether deaf, blind, or with other disabilities—want to be part of the whole. The goal is to enable every alcoholic to be an active participant in the group, without emphasizing differences.

A local intergroup/central office can often provide information about the accessibility of meetings, and whether organized Special Needs efforts exist in your area. This information is often made available through local meeting lists and events flyers. When preparing these listings, it can be helpful to use appropriate symbols, and to include a name and number to contact for additional accessibility information.

Available for Special Needs/Accessibilities Committees:

- Special Needs/Accessibilities Kit — a 3-ring binder with material to help A.A. members and committees carry A.A.'s message of recovery to those with special needs. See complete kit contents on www.aa.org.
- Special Needs/Accessibilities Workbook — A booklet with information on forming Special Needs Committees, presentations to professionals and working with American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters.

The Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing Alcoholic

"I wonder in meetings if people are saying out loud what appears on their faces," wrote one deaf A.A. member. "Are they expressing the sadness or anger I sense in their bodies or behind their eyes? Is this real or in my mind? I wish I could hear this meeting with all its noise, all the feelings! What's the laughter about? Who's speaking now? How are the newcomers doing?"

An A.A. who signs for his home group worries

about the communication gap: "When hearing alcoholics join A.A., we listen to the message of sobriety over and over, and ultimately it can penetrate our fog. But most deaf alcoholics in the Fellowship are denied the benefits of repetition."

The challenge of serving the deaf or hard-of-hearing alcoholic goes beyond that of simple "hearing." For deaf people who use American Sign Language (ASL), for example, English is a second language. Idioms and colloquialisms are difficult to sign, and some phrases used in A.A. — such as "Rarely have we seen a person fail" — do not have comparable signs. In a real sense, working with the deaf community can be similar to working with any group that has a separate language and culture.

A growing number of groups are providing signers to interpret for their deaf members. 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 interpreters adhere to a strict code of ethics which assures the confidentiality of the A.A. meeting.

Special needs committees and local service offices often maintain lists of qualified interpreters who are willing and able to sign for A.A. meetings and events. Providing a signer takes money, and if the group cannot afford the cost, there are other sources of help. Some local intergroup/central offices have provided resources in their annual budgets for helping groups hire interpreters, and some area committees have set up special funds. Also, the alcoholic may bring his or her own interpreter to a meeting. Some agencies provide interpreters for people who are deaf.

One area's special needs committee offers the following suggestions for groups interested in starting an interpreted meeting: (1) *Determine the need.* Do some research to find out if there are any interpreted meetings available in your neighborhood, and whether there is a need for such a meeting at the time your group meets. (2) If there is, *make a commitment.* Is the group willing to pay for an interpreter week in and week out, even if sometimes no deaf or hard-of-hearing people show up? Remember that the meeting will be listed in the meeting book as interpreted. (3) *Designate a group member* to coordinate all the work related to an interpreted meeting. (4) *Reach out to the deaf community in your area.* Make up flyers; give them out at other interpreted meetings, and send them to local professionals who work with deaf alcoholics. Notify your local intergroup/central office and special needs committees, in writing. (5) *Be patient.* It takes time to get a signed group going. And be aware that not all hard-of-hearing people want to

identify themselves as such, and they may be sitting somewhere other than in the designated area.

An increasing number of A.A. members are learning sign language in order to communicate with deaf members. Some become proficient enough to serve as interpreters at meetings; others learn enough to greet deaf or hard-of-hearing newcomers and encourage them to keep coming back.

When a deaf or hard-of-hearing member is present at a meeting, visual communication is important—many deaf people can read lips, so make sure to look at the person when you are speaking, and speak clearly and directly. A wave of the hand or a tap on the shoulder can signal that you want the person's attention. Meeting facilities that provide microphones often provide assistive listening devices (A.L.D.s) as part of their audio service. A.L.D.s can help hard-of-hearing members participate in the meeting.

Keep in mind, too, that communication can work both ways. Some groups have asked deaf members to give the A.A. talk, "speaking" in sign language, with the interpreter switching gears and translating for the benefit of hearing members.

Resources available: The Big Book and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* are available in ASL on videotape and DVD formats. The pamphlet, "A.A. for the Alcoholic with Special Needs," is also available in ASL on DVD, as well as audio CD formats in English, Spanish and French. These items produced by G.S.O. are close-captioned. Many deaf A.A.s participate in the *Loners-Internationalists Meeting (LIM)*, and in the *World Hello* correspondence service. *A.A. Guidelines (on) Carrying the Message to the Deaf Alcoholic* share experience and information. A large number of online meetings and computer bulletin boards are available. One source for information about these is the Online Intergroup of A.A., www.aa-intergroup.org

Alcoholics Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired

Simply getting to a meeting can be the biggest problem for the alcoholic who is blind or visually impaired. Intergroup/central offices and special needs committees often maintain lists of members who are willing to provide transportation to and from meetings and other A.A. functions. Some groups have asked their local intergroups to code Twelfth Step lists to identify such members.

It is helpful for the group to assign volunteers to guide blind or visually impaired newcomers to chairs, the hospitality table, and rest rooms until they are familiar with the surroundings. Meeting rooms should always be set up exactly the same

way, or else blind or visually impaired members should be alerted to any changes. Banging into a chair or table that wasn't there at an earlier meeting can be both dangerous and embarrassing.

One group's experience illustrates what can be done to help blind alcoholics not only get to meetings regularly but also to become full participants in the group. The chairperson asked for volunteers to take a young blind man to meetings once a month; the volunteers were assigned specific dates, and if they couldn't take their turn, they were responsible for finding a substitute. The response was immediate and generous, and the young man is now able to attend all group meetings. As a result of this Twelfth Stepping, group members have drawn closer to their blind friend. "In the past," one member recalls, "we would go up to Jim, shake his hand, drop a few niceties and stroll off. Now we talk to him, laugh with him. He is filled with gratitude for his sobriety, and we have all benefited from his presence."

Resources available: G.S.O. has available a list of A.A. books and pamphlets available in Braille and large-print editions, as well as on audiotape cassettes. For additional Braille material call G.S.O. 212-870-3312. The A.A. Grapevine produces a variety of theme tapes of magazine articles.

A.A.s with Physical Disabilities or Chronic Illnesses

Some physically challenged A.A.s can get to meetings; others cannot. In both cases, there's a lot the group can do to make it possible for these alcoholics to be active, participating members. For those who have difficulty walking or who are in wheelchairs, fellow members can 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. Check that nearby parking is available and that rest rooms are accessible. Most local meeting lists are coded to indicate meetings which are held in wheelchair accessible facilities.

Taking a meeting to a chronically ill member who is homebound can make a tremendous difference to him or her. The experience of one area's special needs committee tells the story well: "In the front of the meeting schedules, we enclose a notice headed, We Are Not Alone Anymore Group: 'This group is for homebound members. We would like to bring a meeting to you. There are no special A.A. groups, only individuals with special needs. The We Are Not Alone Anymore Group believes that when anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, the hand of A.A. will be there.' We list our phone

number and encourage homebound members to call for help. We also ask able-bodied A.A.s to volunteer their services."

"When we started," the committee chair says, "we were told, 'If you raise expectations, be sure you deliver.' That's something I keep in mind always. Most of our callers are older people, and they look forward to seeing us. Often a live meeting at home gives them a new lease on life, even if temporarily. Our oldtimers are as important at home as at meetings, and we're not going to let them disappear. We're just giving back to them some of what they've given to us."

Another area set up a "mobile group." The chair reported: "Volunteers will carry a regular meeting to members housebound for lengthy periods of time. The traveling unit will consist of a chairperson, a leader, coffee and cookies, a few camp-type folding chairs, and *no* collection plate!"

Resources available: Many homebound A.A.s participate in the *Loners-Internationalists Meeting (LIM)* as "Homers" and in the *World Hello* correspondence service. A large number of online meetings and computer bulletin boards are available. One source for information about these is the Online Intergroup of A.A., www.aa-intergroup.org.

Easy-to-Read Literature

Members with a limited ability to read can be less evident than A.A.s with other needs, and may find it difficult to ask for help. There are ways to provide information without causing embarrassment. The group's literature chair can make a point of announcing that many books, pamphlets, and Grapevine articles are available on tape. Or, if a member has trouble reading, the group can set up Step or Traditions meetings so that the Step or Tradition is read aloud at the beginning.

Resources available: There are audio- and video-cassettes, available through G.S.O. In addition, several pieces of illustrated, easy-to-read literature can be ordered from G.S.O.

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G.S.O.'s literature catalog has a separate section for Special Needs materials. You can order this catalog from G.S.O. at Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10115; 212-870-3400. Resources are also available from local and area special needs committees and from outside professional agencies that serve people with disabilities.

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SERVING ALCOHOLICS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS