

WHAT IS AN INSIDE VISITING SPONSORSHIP SERVICE?

A service to connect A.A. members "behind the prison walls" with outside sponsorship.



In A.A. we are not alone. At its core the Fellowship remains simple and personal - one alcoholic working with another alcoholic, sharing experience, strength, and hope.

PURPOSE

To provide a system to connect alcoholics confined in State Prisons (with at least a year remaining inside) who wish to avail themselves of outside sponsorship, with outside volunteers willing to perform that service on a continuing, monthly basis. **Volunteers for the Inside Sponsorship Service are classified for entry into the prison as Visitors, not as Program Volunteers.**

Most prison systems throughout the country, including California, mandate that cleared Program Volunteers are not allowed to enter the prison as "visitors". By having a separate group of volunteers who enter the prison as Visitors rather than Program Volunteers, we can provide the vital service of sponsorship to AA members on the inside, while avoiding conflicts with the rules and regulations of the prison and State Civil Codes.

Volunteer anonymity is protected through the use of a dedicated P.O. Box, and through cooperation on the part of the prison administration. The program is currently intended for use in State Prisons but could be expanded to include other facilities where the population is confined for a relatively long-term period.

WHY? WHAT IS THE DEMONSTRATED NEED?

Current methods have been unable to provide the widespread, consistent sponsorship to alcoholics behind the walls that we consistently provide on the outside. To newcomers on the outside, we often recommend: 1) go to meetings, 2) get a Big Book, 3) find a sponsor to work the steps.

For close to eighty years, Corrections Committees have been bringing in meetings, and bringing in literature, yet, as committees, we haven't been able to provide that third necessary component of sobriety: sponsorship. We need only ask ourselves "**Would I be sober today if I didn't have a sponsor?**" to understand the vital need.

In some cases, cleared meeting volunteers have sponsored members on the inside, but that creates conflicts with the rules and regs of the prison – conflicts that could endanger our committees as a whole. In many cases, sponsorship is obtained through our Corrections Correspondence Service, which is highly successful, but all prison mail is subject to monitoring and the face-to-face intimacy of in-person sponsorship is lacking. Inside members sponsor each other, again an excellent method, however we've heard repeatedly that many on the inside are reluctant to disclose certain information to other members on the yard due to the consequences which could occur if disclosures were revealed. And finally, local meetings have attempted to provide sponsorship, but it's neither dependably sustainable over the long-term, nor does it provide the institutions with the accountability provided by established Corrections Committees. Sponsorship by a single group can also result in a highly singular point of view.

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HOW IT WORKS

Because our purpose is to provide a service to alcoholics desiring sponsorship and not to simply provide visitors to people confined in prison, we direct our efforts to members attending inside meetings in the following manner:

- Corrections meeting volunteers bring sponsorship brochures to the inside meetings they conduct and distribute them to interested members.
- Brochures also include the prison form to request an official visitor.
- The inside member completes the brochure application, signs the request for a visitor and sends both to the PO Box listed in the brochure.
- The PO Box is monitored regularly by the Sponsorship Institution Coordinator (all prisons should have a separate coordinator)
- Incoming requests are matched with outside volunteers. The matched volunteer completes the 1-page request for visitation and submits it to the prison and begins writing letters to the sponsee.
- Once the notice of clearance is received, the volunteer/sponsor can begin in-person visits with the inside member/sponsee.
- WE DO NOT MANAGE SPONSORSHIP. We have no AA authorities, no gurus – every volunteer/sponsor is free to sponsor as they see fit.
- Once the initial visits have been completed and the sponsee and sponsor have agreed to work together, the match is complete. As on the outside, both sponsor and sponsee are free to end the relationship at any time, and another tentative match can be arranged.
- The Sponsorship Coordinator continues to forward mail between sponsee and sponsor.

BENEFITS

Establishing an Inside Visiting Sponsorship Service *under the auspices of the Area Corrections Committees* and entirely separate from the normal Program Meeting Volunteer system, provides the following benefits:

- Visitors are not required to abide by STAFF rules and regulations, as are regular Program Volunteers; they comply simply with prison rules for visitors.
- Clearance as a visitor requires only a simple 1-page clearance application, not the 25-30 page applications required of Program Volunteers
- Visitors aren't required to get TB tests or to sign PREA agreements
- Visitors can speak privately without being monitored and visits can last as long as needed.
- Increases the pool of available sponsors; not everyone is sponsored by the same few sponsors; variety of approach
- Disclosure of intimate details to an outside member avoids the possibilities of members' sensitive information getting out on the yard
- Enables many more outside AA members to volunteer for service without onerous clearance requirements, thus strengthening our Corrections Committees and AA as a whole.
- Potentially better outcomes at parole hearings for inside members who can demonstrate their experience with our program of recovery through our twelve steps: potentially reduced recidivism of sponsored members
- Volunteer's anonymity is protected for common welfare
- Prison has accountability when service is provided by established Corrections Committee

SERVICE POSITIONS

As initially stated, this service should be organized separately from the meeting services the committee provides. The following committee positions are suggested:

- Sponsorship Committee Chair for the sponsorship service – oversees service efforts, selects Institution Coordinators
- Sponsorship Institution Coordinator for the service at each institution – recruits volunteers; with Sponsorship Committee Chair establishes relationship with institution administration; organizes and tracks all necessary paperwork; conducts orientations (all volunteers should be oriented prior to assignment with sponsee)
- Sponsorship Volunteer – engages in sponsorship with inside member; visits in-person at least monthly; communicates via letter to supplement visitation; uses other communication as approved by committee for security (i.e.: video visitation, anonymous phone system). **Requirements:** gender same as prison population, five years continuous sobriety, solid sponsorship experience, knowledge & practice of AA's Steps and Traditions.
- Sponsorship Liaisons – communicates with other local service committees & assists in recruiting volunteers.
- Bi-lingual Coordinator – assists Coordinators for each institution in implementing service for non-English populations where necessary .

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