

A.A.® Guidelines

Accessibility for All Alcoholics

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.

Accessibility challenges apply to all alcoholics who have difficulties participating in Alcoholics Anonymous, whether those are mental, physical, geographic, cultural, or other factors that vary among people. Some of these alcoholics may experience barriers to accessing the A.A. message, including the literature, meetings, Twelve Step work, and the service structure. For the purpose of these guidelines in defining the accessibility issues that many alcoholics face, we refer primarily to persons who are blind or and/or deaf, have hearing and/or vision loss, those who are housebound or chronically ill, those who are living with the effects of brain injury or stroke, and many others who may have various kinds of abilities. Barriers to the message of Alcoholics Anonymous are not always readily evident.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ACCESSIBILITIES MODIFICATIONS

When most of the people in our meetings are able-bodied, sighted and hearing, it's easy to be unaware of accessibility barriers. There is also diversity in how people share and participate. Thus, the isolation that an access barrier may cause may not be readily evident.

Respect for the dignity of others is the foundation for all our efforts to carry the message to alcoholics with diverse needs, with emphasis on identification rather than on how we are different. As one A.A. member who is Deaf put it, "I'm just an alcoholic, like everyone else here. I have the same need to be a 'worker among workers' and not be singled out for special treatment. If you can just make the program available to me, I'll do what I have to do to work it."

It is important also to invite all members to participate in every aspect of service within the group or at an A.A. event. Communication works both ways and groups can ask members who are Deaf or have diverse physical or mental abilities if they would like to give A.A. talks. For example, interpreters could switch gears and translate a Deaf member's experience for the benefit of hearing members. The goal is to include all alcoholics in the wonderful experience of belonging to a group and partaking in the full range of benefits of membership.

Beyond assisting those in your own group or committee, sharing about carrying the message to alcoholics with diverse needs through workshops and presentations at A.A. gatherings, such as area assemblies, conventions, conferences, round-ups and Regional Forums can help others to become better informed.

If we can do a better job of reaching out to alcoholics who may face barriers to accessing the A.A. message, we help them to carry the message to other alcoholics they may already know or will come into contact with, providing a powerful example that it's possible to achieve sobriety despite access barriers.

CARRYING THE MESSAGE TO A.A.s WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES AND/OR CHRONIC ILLNESSES

Our Fellowship includes A.A. members who are brain injured, confined to their beds with a chronic illness, or who use wheelchairs, walkers or crutches. Members of a group may feel stymied when first faced with these out-of-the-ordinary challenges but, in fact, there are many modifications which can be made so that alcoholics with diverse needs can be active, participating members of a "regular" group. Some adjustments are simple and some are more complicated—but there are many that are possible.

Often A.A.s take a meeting to an A.A. member who is home- or housebound. "I can't tell you," one hospitalized A.A. reported, "what a difference it made in my mental and emotional state when those six people showed up in my room carrying the message of A.A. and all the love and support of our Fellowship. And they did it twice a week for three months, until I was able to make meetings again! I was so down in the dumps before; I really had sort of given up—and, to be honest, I had started thinking I might as well have a drink, since I was dying anyway. But hearing the experience, strength and hope of others in the program inspired me to fight both my illnesses—the cancer and my alcoholism. I don't know what I would have done without A.A. at that low point in my life."

For members with physical diversities who aren't confined to bed, A.A.s in their group often 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. It is important to identify meetings accessible for wheelchair users in local meeting schedules. It is also important to make sure restrooms at the meeting place are truly wheelchair accessible, with space enough to maneuver in the room or stall.

Services and material available for members who are chronically ill and/or have limited ambulatory ability include the *Loners/Internationalist Meeting (LIM)*, a newsletter for A.A. members who are in isolated areas, at sea, or home- or hospital-bound (known as Homers) and stay in touch with other members by mail and newsletters. For information about *LIM* call G.S.O., 212-870-3400, or email LIM@aa.org. Many A.A.s share via online meetings. You may contact the Online Intergroup of A.A. (www.aa-intergroup.org) for further information.

CARRYING THE MESSAGE TO A.A.s WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD-OF-HEARING

People who are Deaf have profound hearing loss and cannot understand speech through hearing, even when sound is amplified. People who are Hard-of-Hearing are those with hearing challenges that impair their understanding of speech sounds. For members who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing, the use of a professional American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter is encouraged. Interpreters allow members who are Deaf and hearing members to *share* experience, strength and hope

with each other, which supports full participation in our meetings and service functions. Hearing A.A.s, however, should not let the lack of ASL skills or an interpreter prevent them from reaching out to Deaf alcoholics. Pen and paper, as well as text messaging, are excellent tools for starting up a conversation. The Accessibilities Committee, home group members, or members of the District Committee can compile and maintain a list of meetings where ASL interpreters are available, as well as a list of ASL interpreters who are willing and able to sign at A.A. functions. The cost of ASL interpreters can be a factor for groups. In some areas, the intergroup or district committees provide financial assistance and/or help coordinate efforts to make signed meetings available.

Some intergroup/central offices communicate with A.A. members and newcomers who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing through the Video Relay Service (VRS). To use VRS, a person who is Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing must have video conferencing equipment or a videophone, and a high speed Internet connection. VRS enables a person who is Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing to make and receive telephone calls through a communications assistant who is a qualified American Sign Language interpreter. For many individuals who are Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, VRS is closer to "functionally equivalent" telephone services than any other form of relay service.

With the help of local central office/intergroup, district or area Accessibilities Committees, A.A.s can initiate efforts to start new A.A. groups or meetings that are more accessible to members who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing. It is important to reach out to the Deaf community in your area when thinking of starting a new meeting that is to provide ASL translation. Make up flyers; give them out at other interpreted meetings, and send them to local professionals who work with Deaf alcoholics.

Services and material available for alcoholics who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing include DVDs of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and the pamphlet "Access to A.A.: Members Share on Overcoming Barriers," all in ASL. (The ASL version of "Access to A.A.: Members Share on Overcoming Barriers" is currently titled "A.A. for the Alcoholic with Special Needs.") G.S.O. can provide the following pamphlets, which have been written for reading and signing purposes: "A Newcomer Asks," "A Brief Guide to Alcoholics Anonymous," "Translation of the Twelve Steps," "Translation of the Twelve Traditions," "Is A.A. For You?," "Do You Think You're Different?," "How It Works," "This is A.A.," and "Is A.A. for Me?" Members who are Deaf are welcome to participate in the LIM. For more detailed information see the A.A. Guidelines on Sharing the A.A. Message with the Alcoholic Who Is Deaf.

CARRYING THE MESSAGE TO A.A.s WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION

For A.A. members who are blind or have low vision, simply getting to the meeting room can be the biggest problem. The Accessibilities Committees, home group members, or members of the District Committee can compile and maintain a list of sighted members who are willing to provide transportation to and from meetings and other A.A. functions. Several groups have asked their local central office or intergroup to code Twelfth Step lists to identify members who are willing to provide transportation. The member with blind or low vision may ask for assistance in orienting to the surrounding of the A.A. meeting room.

Services and material available to help the alcoholic who is blind or has low vision include books and pamphlets available in Braille, in large print, and/or on CD.

EASY-TO-READ LITERATURE

If you become aware that a member might have a limited ability

to read, there are several ways to be helpful without embarrassing them. For instance, when your group's literature chairperson announces which books and pamphlets are available at that meeting, they can also mention the numerous books, pamphlets and Grapevine articles which are available in audio formats. Or, if you think a member of your group might have limited reading skills, you can structure your Step and Traditions meetings so that the Step or Tradition is read aloud at the beginning of the meeting—which is great for everyone!

Services and material available to help A.A.'s who have intellectual or cognitive processing difficulties include CDs and DVDs; illustrated, easy-to-read literature, such as "Is A.A. For Me?," "Twelve Steps Illustrated," "Too Young?," "What Happened to Joe," "It Happened to Alice," and "It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell."

ACCESSIBILITIES COMMITTEES

Accessibility issues apply to all alcoholics who have difficulties participating in Alcoholics Anonymous. Throughout the Fellowship, A.A.s are discovering that the common bond of recovery can transcend these access issues whatever the barrier in receiving the A.A. message may be.

Some A.A. entities are attempting to meet these diverse needs by forming Accessibilities Committees. In some localities committees name themselves according to the particular need addressed, such as "Homebound Committee." Members of Accessibilities Committees often explore, develop and offer resources to make the A.A. message and participation in our program available to everyone who reaches out for it. A G.S.O. staff member who serves on the Accessibilities assignment is available as a resource to share Accessibilities experience and to answer questions from local Accessibilities Committees.

In the interests of good communication and working together, Accessibilities Committees are encouraged to keep their area committees and local central/intergroup offices informed of their activities. It is also helpful to work closely with committees handling Public Information and Cooperation with the Professional Community in terms of keeping the public and appropriate agencies informed about A.A. being accessible to alcoholics with diverse needs.

HOW TO ORDER A.A. ACCESSIBILITIES MATERIAL

The final section of the catalog Conference-approved Literature and Other Service Material lists a wide range of literature and audio-visual material for alcoholics with diverse needs.

SUMMARY

Our Big Book says, "We are people who normally would not mix." What is most important is to speak the language of the heart. This is especially true when someone is a little different from the others. But group unity grows stronger when all members are included and respected and able to function as fully-participating members of the group, and everyone's sobriety is strengthened. When faced with the challenges of meeting the diverse needs of some members, we would do well to remember A.A.'s Responsibility Declaration: "When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am responsible."

Please share with the General Service Office your experiences and successes in carrying our A.A. message of recovery to alcoholics with diverse abilities and needs. GSO will in turn share your experience with A.A. members.

The General Service Office publishes an Accessibilities Checklist to help groups determine the overall accessibility of their meeting spaces. The checklist is included below and is available from the General Service Office.

ACCESSIBILITIES CHECKLIST

For Meetings and Groups

How accessible is your meeting? This is a guide to help reduce the physically based access barriers that a person may encounter when attending meetings in your location. Accessible meeting locations are physically accessible so that anyone may arrive on site, approach the building, and enter the meeting without barriers.

Introduction

Following are some questions your group can answer to determine the overall accessibility of your meeting space.

PARKING:

- Are an adequate number of accessible parking spaces available? (9 feet wide for car, plus 5-foot wide access aisle)
- Are spaces close to accessible entrances?
- Are spaces marked with identification signs?
- Is the parking area or street clear of snow, ice, or other debris?
- Is a path of travel by wheelchair accessible from the street or parking area?
- Are the sidewalks even and in good repair? Are there curb cut-outs to facilitate access to the sidewalk?

ROUTE OF TRAVEL:

- Is the meeting place accessible to public transportation?
- Is there a clear route of travel that does not require the use of stairs?
- Can any potential obstacles along pathways — including hanging objects — be detected by a person using a cane or other mobility device?
- If the meeting is at night, is the pathway well lit?

ENTRANCE:

- Does the entrance have steps, a threshold, or other physical barriers?
- If so, is there a ramp, lift, or an alternate entrance that is accessible?
 - Is the ramp excessively steep? Does it have railings?
 - Is the lift in good working order? If the lift is operated by a key, does someone on location have possession of the key or know where the key is kept?
 - Is there signage indicating the location of the alternate accessible entrance?
- Does the entrance door have adequate width (32") and clearance to accommodate a wheelchair?
- Can the doors be opened by someone in a wheelchair or would he or she need assistance?

INSIDE THE BUILDING:

- Is there level access from the wheelchair accessible entrance to the meeting area?
- If not, are there ramps to enable someone in a wheelchair to reach the meeting? (Lifting someone over steps or stairs is not an acceptable solution for access.)
- If there is an elevator or a lift, is it in good working order? If the elevator or lift is operated by a key, does someone on location have possession of the key or know where the key is kept?
- Are corridors and door widths (32") adequate for passage of a wheelchair?
- Are corridors reasonably clear to allow safe passage for everyone?

RESTROOMS:

- Is at least one fully accessible restroom available?
- Are the stall doors operable?
- Is there adequate space for a person in a wheelchair to maneuver within the stall? (44" for forward movement and a five-foot diameter or T-shape of clear space to make turns.)
- Are there grab bars on the walls behind and to the side nearest the toilet?
- Can the faucet be operated without grasping, twisting, or turning?

THE MEETING ROOM:

- Are chairs set up with adequate aisle space for a wheelchair?
- Is the lighting adequate?
- Is there a designated section for members who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing?
 - If so, is there adequate space for a sign language interpreter to sit with easy access to that group?
- Is someone available to welcome people and orient them to the meeting space as needed.
- Is the coffee service accessible to a person in a wheelchair or with another type of mobility device?
- Is A.A. literature available that addresses the needs of individuals with diverse abilities?
- Does the local intergroup/central office know that the meeting space is available to people with diverse accessibility needs?

Additional information about Accessibilities and setting up your meeting space may be available from your district or area Accessibilities Committee or your local intergroup/central office. You may also want to search the internet for a variety of Accessibilities Guides and information. In addition, the following accessibilities materials are available on our A.A. website at www.aa.org.

1. A.A. Guidelines — Accessibility for All Alcoholics (MG-16)
2. A.A. Guidelines — Sharing the A.A. Message with the Alcoholic Who Is Deaf (MG-13)
3. Serving All Alcoholics (F-107)
4. Access to A.A.: Members Share on Overcoming Barriers (P-83)
5. Accessibilities Workbook (M-48i)