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The Hand of Fellowship in Hospitals and Prisons

The exciting story of AA's growth among men and women in institutions, as told by the Institution Secretary of General Service Headquarters to the 4th General Service Conference in April.

WITH the co-ordination of the work of all institution groups, one great difference between these groups and regular outside AA groups has become apparent. It has frequently been said that it is only necessary to have two AA members, in order to have an AA meeting. However, the success and growth of an institution group is dependent upon two outside factors, as well as on the desire and sincerity of the members themselves. First, any in-patient or inmate group is more successful if it can function as nearly as possible along traditional lines, with its own officers and committees, similar to outside groups. Secondly, the ultimate success of AA for both the patient and the inmate is directly comparable to the support the group receives from AA itself. The first condition is dependent upon the cooperation of the institution and

the second upon the cooperation of the outside AA groups.

As an example of the necessity of this kind of cooperation, it would seem apparent that the large increase in hospital groups in the past year, from 101 groups a year ago to 154 at the present time, is in large measure due to the increased interest on the part of many state hospitals as well as doctors, following the establishment of state commissions and the legislative recognition of alcoholism as a public health problem. This, coupled with the increased awareness on the part of many AA members of the enormous potential for Twelfth Step work available in hospital groups, has stimulated a more concrete and definite planning for the support of these hospital groups through outside AA cooperation.

For example, in many localities it

is now accepted procedure that the job of supplying speakers for the regular meetings at a hospital group shall be divided among several groups in the area. This serves a double purpose, in that it relieves any one group, or group of members, of carrying the load alone, and it provides the patients in the hospital with a broader understanding of the program and personal contact with more outside AA members. Since sponsorship has always been considered a part of any hospital program, it frequently happens that a patient will find among the speakers a man from his home town who is happy to introduce him to AA in that community upon his release.

Another example of the increased interest on the part of many AA members in the whole institution program is the response to the special literature package plan, which was instituted at General Headquarters last summer, in an effort to gain more support for the institution groups. This plan provides outside groups and members with the opportunity of purchasing \$4.00 worth of pamphlets, specially priced at \$3.00, if intended for an institution group. *The Grapevine* cooperated in this so that the total price of an institution literature package, including a year's subscription to *The Grapevine* if desired, comes to only \$5.00. The overwhelming response was heartwarming indeed. Over 300 orders were received in the first month after the announcement, and the groups are still using

this institution literature package as a method of supporting the institution groups.

The prison groups, also, have increased in both group numbers and membership this past year. A year ago there were 176 prison groups with an estimated membership of 9,000. As of today* there are 234 prison groups with an estimated membership of over 12,000. The growth of prison AA these past few years has been dramatic, and as these figures demonstrate, this growth is continuing.

COOPERATION IN TEXAS

The most inspiring example of cooperation and interest on the part of penal authorities occurred a few months ago in the State of Texas, where the Prison Board recommended that AA become an integral part of the entire Texas Prison System and that an AA group be encouraged to function within each of the fourteen units of the System. This decision of the Prison Board of the State of Texas could be the forerunner of similar action in other states, but it is important to recognize that this cooperation on the part of institution officials is only one of the factors necessary to the healthy growth of an inmate group. It is up to AAs "on the outside" to provide these inmate groups with meetings, with literature, and above all with the extended hand of fellowship.

The past year has demonstrated

* April, 1954.

that there are more and more AA members who are meeting the challenge offered in helping prison AA. Although many local areas have long had active Institution Committees who have been cooperating to the fullest with the entire institution program, such as in the State of California, in the Boston area, and in New Jersey (to mention but a few) this past year has seen the development of such Committees, or Fellowships as they are sometimes called, on a state-wide basis: The Big Brothers of AA in Ohio; a Committee in Oregon; a Fellowship Group, patterned somewhat along the lines of the Illinois Fellowship for Alcoholic Prisoners, has begun to function in the State of Washington; the State of Indiana has also instituted a Fellowship for Alcoholic Prisoners; and there is a Fellowship in the State of Arkansas. Colorado has established a cooperative program involving the joint efforts of the inmate group, the prison administration, the parole board and the outside groups of Colorado.

EX-INMATES ACTIVE

All of these fellowships or movements, many of them sparked by ex-inmate AAs, involve some sort of direct contact between an individual outside AA member and the inmate during his pre-parole period. This eliminates the transition period from the prison group to the outside group which is so dangerous to the ex-inmate, for it is during this period, with its loneliness, frustrations and

feeling of social inferiority, that the alcoholic is most severely tempted to return to alcohol. With these programs, however, the inmate being released can be met at the prison gate, and his advent into the group is already prepared. Thus he does not feel hesitant about his reception, and can continue without interruption his efforts to build a new way of life.



What are the results of all this institution activity? AA's primary purpose is to help the sick alcoholic to recover through our AA program, if he is interested, and since this institutional membership is an integral part of AA, a few figures which indicate the degree of success of the inmate AA member upon his release are of interest.

One group with an active list of 103 members, which has been in existence a little over two years, has reported that out of 73 members released, 64 are making good on the outside. One of the largest of the prison groups with a reported membership of 400, reports that out of a

total of 463 inmates who have been either paroled or discharged this past year, less than 10% have been returned. Another smaller group has reported a similar percentage: since the group was organized, 61 have been discharged or paroled, and of that total only three have been returned as parole violators.

SCREENING NECESSARY

Although these two outside factors of institution cooperation and outside AA cooperation are of tremendous importance, the job that the inmates themselves are doing is an outstanding one. They themselves are making individual and collective efforts to maintain the quality of the groups so that this cooperation, so deeply appreciated, may continue. For example, the idea of screening in any AA group is abhorrent to all of us who are familiar with AA's Tradition that anyone is a member of AA who says he is. However, most of the larger prison groups have discovered that some sort of screening process is necessary, in order that the group may not be disrupted by men who are not sincere in their approach to the AA program. This has happened in different ways in different groups. Some groups have a regular Screening Committee on inmates, who interview the prospective member. Other groups have plans whereby beginners' meetings are held for a long enough period of time to insure a degree of sincerity upon the part of the prospective member before he is finally

admitted into the group membership.

They have continued to increase their own services, and since "sharing the experience," has been the basis of so much of AA, the inmates themselves have made tremendous progress along these lines. When the institutional work first became coordinated at General Service Headquarters, there were approximately eighteen inmate AA publications. At the present time there are over 50 of them, and most of them include as many of the inmate groups as possible on their mailing list. In addition, tape recordings are invaluable for this basic sharing and the exchange of tapes is also progressing rapidly. There are now tape recordings available at twelve of the prison groups, two groups having as many as seventeen tapes on hand.

GSH INSTITUTION SERVICE

Our services to the institution groups are based largely on this "sharing of experience." Exchange Bulletins for both the prison and hospital groups are compiled bi-monthly and are mailed to all groups and Institution Committees. Hospital lists and prison lists are compiled annually, and incorporated in them is information which can assist, also, in this "sharing." For example, on the prison list, publications and tape recordings are listed, as well as information as to the restrictions and privileges of correspondence. In addition, each new prison group receives suggestions on the formation of an in-

mate group, and "quotes from penologists."

Such a report as this inevitably deals with the over-all picture, but let us not forget that in prisons and hospitals as in AA everywhere, the individual is the important thing. The personal growth of inmate members is something that we are keenly aware of at Headquarters, for it is our privilege to read their letters each day. It is a constant source of inspiration, to watch the transition in correspondence, from bitterness and resentment,

to faith and understanding, and the sure knowledge that love is the key with which all of us can unlock the prison we have built around our hearts. The following quotation was included in an inmate's letter, and it seems to express this progress in fellowship: "I sought my God, my God eluded me. I sought my soul, my soul I could not see. I sought my brother, and there I found all three."

*by Eve, formerly
Institution Secretary, now
"rotated" to a new job*