

A.A.® Guidelines

Sharing the A.A. Message with the Alcoholic Who Is Deaf or Hard-of Hearing

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 ALCOHOLICS WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD-OF-HEARING

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

Whatever the external access barrier in receiving the A.A. message may be, groups and members can become aware of various access issues, keeping in mind that all alcoholics want to be part of the whole. The goal is to enable every alcoholic to be an active and full participant in the group, and some may need more than just a passing handshake, a pamphlet, and a cup of coffee. And just because we don't often see alcoholics who are Deaf in A.A. meetings doesn't mean they are not out there suffering.

In terms of carrying the A.A. message to alcoholics who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing, there are a variety of ways to communicate. American Sign Language (ASL) is a primary means of communication in the Deaf community and is a unique language, with its own grammar and sentence structure, and many groups use trained professional ASL interpreters to help carry the message to members who are Deaf. Writing, typing, and alternative technical methods can also be helpful, such as videophone, texting, and cellular video messaging. But whatever means are used to communicate, what's most important is to speak "the language of the heart." Encourage the newcomer to take A.A. literature and invite them to come to another meeting. Ask for their phone number or email and contact them as you would any other newcomer. Invite them to coffee and other Fellowship events. Alcoholics who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing need to fully participate in A.A. meetings in the same way that hearing members do. Encourage and facilitate participation in Twelfth Step work and other service activities.

ASL INTERPRETERS

American Sign Language (ASL) is not merely English shorthand; it is a completely separate language. A Deaf person's comprehension of English depends on how well they know English as a second language.

If there is a need for an interpreter, try to arrange to have a sign language interpreter at the meetings that Deaf alcoholics attend. It is desirable to use professional interpreters to insure reliability and expertise/

proficiency. Knowing ASL is not the same as being an interpreter who is trained and qualified to effectively translate between languages and cultures. Numerous areas have developed experience with the situation and groups may want to contact their local Accessibilities Committee, intergroup/central office, general service district or area committee, or a local agency to see if they can help in providing information about ASL interpretation at meetings. Additionally, the member who is Deaf may be able to bring their own interpreter. Often, however, when a person who is Deaf brings their own interpreter that member is likely paying for the interpreter out of their own pocket. Expecting them to do so on an ongoing basis is a problem the group should look into, as not every alcoholic has the means to afford such an expense.

A growing number of groups are providing signers to interpret for their members who are Deaf. Additionally, interpreters allow Deaf and hearing members to share experience, strength and hope with each other, as communication with the Deaf is not a one-way street. Most groups will agree to having a non-A.A. interpreter attend its closed meetings in such cases, recognizing that professional interpreters adhere to a strict code of ethics which assures the confidentiality of the A.A. meeting.

Accessibilities Committees and local service offices often maintain lists of qualified interpreters available for hire 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. Some agencies provide interpreters for people who are Deaf.

Whatever arrangements are made should be based on a group conscience decision arrived at after full discussion at a group 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? It is important that a full consensus on these points be reached in advance, and if the decision is reached to hire an interpreter, that person should be introduced to the group before meetings, emphasizing the assurance of confidentiality.

It is important, however, not to let fears about money become the focus. Our primary purpose is to carry the message and, as the A.A. Responsibility Declaration indicates, "When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there." And for that, each one of us is responsible.

For non-A.A. interpreters, certain concepts (like Higher Power, anonymity, sponsorship, etc.) are specific to A.A. and it can be helpful to provide interpreters with copies of pertinent A.A. materials, such as A.A. pamphlets or books. Additionally, if time and opportunity allows, it might be helpful to have a C.P.C.-based conversation to orient them to A.A., if they are not familiar, to outline the format and norms of the particular meeting or group, and to answer any questions they may have about A.A.

OTHER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

An increasing number of A.A. members are learning sign language in order to communicate with members who are Deaf. Some learn enough to greet Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing newcomers and encourage them to keep coming back. It is a benefit to the group to know ASL or be willing to learn it in order to communicate with Deaf members in their primary language. However, like any other language, there is a vast difference between one who may have reached a basic level of proficiency and one who is a professionally trained interpreter. Nevertheless, A.A.s should not let a lack of ASL skills prevent them from reaching out to Deaf alcoholics.

Initially it may be difficult to convey feelings through another person, so try to communicate as directly as possible. Visual communication is important, and a wave of the hand or a tap on the shoulder can signal that you want the person's attention. Usually, it is more appropriate to approach members who are Deaf with paper and pen, a dry erase board, or a smartphone to type out a conversation. We must remember that our A.A. experience is the most important thing we have to share.

A.A. members who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing may need a few special considerations when attending an A.A. meeting. For those who have a fair amount of hearing, seating near the speaker may be all that is required. Others may require the use of a sign language interpreter, and members who are Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing/DeafBlind rely on a clear and accessible view of their ASL interpreter. The interpreter is usually positioned near the speaker, therefore, the Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing/DeafBlind members generally require seating arrangements near the speaker.

Those A.A. members who do not know sign language can maintain regular communication with members who are Deaf by video phone, texting and video messaging. The system used for the video phone is known as the Video Relay Service, a video telecommunication service that allows Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing individuals to communicate with hearing people in real time via a sign language interpreter over video telephones and similar technologies. Information on this service can be found over the Internet.

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 alcoholic who is Deaf is comfortable reading and writing in English, the Loners/Internationalists (LIM) correspondence service is one way to share his or her experience, strength and hope with other alcoholics. The *Loners-Internationalists Meeting (LIM)* is a confidential

bimonthly bulletin sharing excerpts from LIM members' letters that are sent to the General Service Office.

Some Deaf members actively participate in online A.A. meetings. A large number of online meetings, some videotaped in ASL, are available, as well as computer bulletin boards. One source for information about these is the Online Intergroup of A.A., www.aa-intergroup.org. It can also be helpful to contact the local A.A. community via area, district and intergroup/central office websites and webmasters who may be able to forward contact requests to local A.A. members who are willing to correspond via email and text message. Further information can also be obtained by contacting the Accessibilities desk at G.S.O.

A.A. MATERIAL FOR ALCOHOLICS WHO ARE DEAF

The catalog of A.A. material lists literature and audio-visual material both for alcoholics who are Deaf and for sign language interpreters.

Alcoholics Anonymous (the Big Book), *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and the pamphlet "A.A. for the Alcoholic with Special Needs" 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 subtitled for the Deaf.

PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COOPERATION WITH THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY COMMITTEES

Based on responses G.S.O. has received from professional agencies, we encourage local P.I. and C.P.C. committees to contact local and government agencies that work with the Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing/DeafBlind communities, as well as professional groups like healthcare and social workers, judicial and law enforcement agencies and ASL interpreter schools. We also understand that it is valuable to offer to put on an open A.A. meeting or a Public Information meeting about Alcoholics Anonymous and to provide information about available A.A. resources.

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

Often, local C.P.C. committees will exhibit A.A. literature at conferences which are focused on services for people who are Deaf. Some C.P.C. service people also make presentations about A.A. and available services to these types of conferences and professional meetings. But, whatever the focus of the conference or professional meeting, pamphlets and information directed to alcoholics who are Deaf should always be included.

A.A. EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

Here are some points to consider when planning a conference or meeting that will be attended by A.A.s who are Deaf:

- Reserve interpreters well ahead of time because they are in great demand. It is also suggested to seek interpreters who are familiar with A.A. and its twelve-step program.
- 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.

- In designating reserved seating for members who are Deaf, reserve at least a couple of rows so Deaf members can spread out to allow each person adequate visual access to the ASL interpreter. Mark the area or the seats, "Reserved for ASL Users."
- On event flyers and programs, be sure to indicate which meetings/sessions will be ASL interpreted.
- Stick with your plans once you have announced that an event is to be interpreted. People who are Deaf are very likely to travel far distances for events that are interpreted. If the event has concurrent meetings and workshops, plan for the availability of at least one interpreter per time block.
- 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 and be sure to include that information on all flyers and registration forms. If possible, list a phone number that

accepts text messages, or an anonymity-protected email address, that people who are Deaf can access for more information.

CONCLUSION

A G.S.O. staff member who serves on the Accessibilities assignment is available as a resource and facilitator of communication among local Accessibilities Committees. This staff member ensures that inquiries from and about alcoholics who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing are given the proper information and are referred to the local A.A. committee for further action. You can contact the Accessibilities desk at G.S.O. by calling (212) 870-3400 or emailing access@aa.org.

For information on local meetings and services, use the Internet to contact intergroup/central offices in your area.

We encourage you to keep us informed of your experience in carrying the message. We look forward to hearing from you, and wish you good luck in carrying the message. "I am responsible ... when anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am responsible."

The General Service Office publishes an Accessibilities Checklist to help groups determine the overall accessibility of their meeting spaces. The following is an excerpt from that checklist, as it related to carrying the message to alcoholics who are Deaf.

THE MEETING ROOM:

- 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 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. Accessibilities Checklist for Meetings and Groups (SMF-208)
3. Serving All Alcoholics (F-107)
4. Access to A.A.: Members Share on Overcoming Barriers (P-83)
5. Accessibilities Workbook (M-48i)

