

H & I COMMITTEE OF NORTHERN CA

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION - INSIDE VISITATION & SPONSORSHIP SERVICE (working version)

PURPOSE: to provide a system to connect prisoners with at least a year remaining inside, who wish to avail themselves of outside sponsorship with outside volunteers willing to perform that service. Volunteers for the Inside Sponsorship Service CANNOT also go into the institution as H&I meeting volunteers.

BACKGROUND: In many other areas of the country sponsorship is often provided by cleared Corrections Committee volunteers who bring A.A. meetings into the facilities they serve. While well-intended, this approach conflicts with how the CDCR and therefore the NorCal H&I Committee view overfamiliarity, and it can lead to issues of favoritism in the meetings. Additionally, cleared volunteers are required to sign PREA agreements, which require reporting of certain information. These two factors prevent the performance of adequate sponsorship by regular H&I meeting volunteers.

However, since our committee's stated purpose is "to carry **the message** of Alcoholics Anonymous to the alcoholic who is confined", and since sponsorship, like providing A.A. literature and meetings, is an essential component of carrying the message, our suggestion is to create an "inside sponsorship service" under the remit of the Northern CA H&I committee which would operate in addition to, but entirely separate from, our inside meeting activities.

PROBLEM: existing approaches to sponsorship of prisoners may be inadequate to provide this vital component of recovery.

- CDCR understandably prohibits overfamiliarity on part of current H&I volunteers.
- CDCR prohibits program volunteers from going in as visitors, so H&I Meeting Volunteers can't visit inside members privately.
- PREA mandates that certain information MUST be reported to the administration by cleared volunteers
- Due to *monitoring of all written communication*, sponsorship thru Corrections Correspondence Service from A.A.'s General Service Office in New York (including J-Pay email system), while of immense value, may discourage full disclosure.
- While prisoner-to-prisoner sponsorship offers an excellent solution for many inside members, some may feel a reluctance to reveal ALL their story to another prisoner, as the rigorous honesty required could put them in jeopardy. Alliances can change on the inside and the consequences of revealing information could be far greater than on the outside.
- Privately setting up outside sponsorship relationships thru individual H&I meeting volunteers requires passing information or messages in and out of the facility, clearly a violation of the prison regulations.
- Sponsorship of individual prisoners on the part of an H&I meeting volunteer who brings in meetings creates issues of favoritism and bias.

PILOT PROGRAM SOLUTION:

- Create a Sponsorship Service Coordinator for each institution, working with the current Major Institution Coordinator.
- Recruit volunteers from local H&I committees, Area Intergroups, General Service districts and A.A. meetings who wish to sponsor "inside" A.A. members.
- Distribute pamphlets to members who attend H&I A.A. meetings, informing them of the service and providing a PO Box address where they could send a request for visitation. Prisoners must attend inside A.A. meetings to be eligible.
- Upon receipt of a request, the Sponsorship Service Coordinator contacts a volunteer who then completes a CDCR request for visitation clearance. This simple review process involves no PREA forms, no TB tests or lengthy clearance procedures.
- Once the volunteer is approved for visitation, the first visit is scheduled. After the initial visit, the inside member and the volunteer will decide if they want to continue working together. Neither the sponsee nor the sponsor is under any obligation to continue the relationship – like all sponsorship, it is entirely voluntary on both sides.

BENEFITS:

- Enables one alcoholic working directly with another – cornerstone of our program of recovery. We suggest to every newcomer on the outside: "get a Big Book, get a sponsor, go to meetings, work the steps" – can we make this a reality for those on the inside as well?
- Prisoner's private business is confidential from the prison population.
- No hierarchy either at meeting level or on the yard – we remain a society of equals.
- Since "visiting sponsors" wouldn't need CDCR "staff clearance" as H&I meeting volunteers do, they won't sign PREA agreements or be subject to CDCR staff regulations, so no legal concerns about disclosure issues or overfamiliarity.
- Offers an opportunity for the prisoner to talk about real sponsorship at parole hearings.
- When operated by the H&I Committee, as opposed to individual A.A. groups, this system provides prison administrators with accountability of an established service committee with a proven track record since 1946, whose sole purpose is to carry the message of A.A. to the alcoholic who is confined.
- The reality is that prisoners HAVE requested outside sponsorship and A.A. members HAVE indicated they wish to sponsor members on the inside – this service could benefit both while enhancing our committee's ability to carry the message to the alcoholic who is confined.