

HOSPITAL & INSTITUTION COMMITTEE OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

INMATE VISITATION & SPONSORSHIP SERVICE (working version)

PURPOSE: to provide a system to connect inmates 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 "inmate 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 inmates 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 inmate visitors, so H&I Meeting Volunteers can't visit inmates 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 inside sponsorship offers an excellent solution for many inmates, some may feel a reluctance to reveal ALL their story to another inmate, as the rigorous honesty required could put an inmate 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 inmates on the part of an H&I meeting volunteer who brings in meetings creates issues of favoritism and bias.

HOW IT COULD WORK:

- Create a Sponsorship Service Coordinator for each institution, responsible to 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 inmates. These volunteers would NOT get clearances through the CDCR, but rather would meet with inmates through the Inmate Visitation process.
- Distribute pamphlets informing inmates of the service and providing a PO Box address where they could send a request for visitation.
- Upon receipt of a request, the Sponsorship Service Coordinator contacts a volunteer who then completes a CDCR request for visitation. 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 set up.
- After the initial visit the inmate and the volunteer will decide if they want to continue working together. Neither the inmate nor the visitor 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?
- Inmate'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 clearance as H&I meeting volunteers do, they won't sign PREA agreements or be subject to CDCR volunteer regulations, so no legal concerns about disclosure issues or overfamiliarity.
- Offers an opportunity for the inmate 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 inmates HAVE requested outside sponsorship and A.A. members HAVE indicated they wish to sponsor inmates – this service could benefit both while enhancing our committee's ability to carry the message to the alcoholic who is confined.