

December 2020

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the winter edition of *Beyond the Bars*, a quarterly newsletter aimed at Regional PLOs and anyone interested in this vital aspect of service. Here you'll find articles, news and stories from AA members that reflect over 60-years of hands-on experience.

HMP The Verne Report for AA

Before Covid-19 hit our shores, AA Volunteers were visiting Residents of HMP The Verne every fortnight to hold a fellowship group. These groups were attended by Residents who enjoyed the encouragement, support and fellowship these meetings provided.

When the country locked down for the first time, most groups could no longer meet. This meant that the valuable AA fellowship meetings stopped at HMP The Verne. However, three members of AA's Dorset Prison Group made a commitment to regularly write in to the Residents who previously and regularly attended the fellowship meetings. The emphasis of the letters has been to encourage, support, offer wisdom and to remind Residents of the joys and freedom of abstinence.

The commitment shown by the volunteers in faithfully writing in every week or so has been outstanding. Nine months later the letters are still being regularly sent in to encourage, support and challenge Residents in their recovery.

Word got round the prison of these letters and now Residents who previously did not attend AA, both in or out of prison, are themselves wanting to embrace abstinence and asked to be on the list of letter recipients. From that small group of initial Residents attending the AA fellowship meetings at HMP The Verne, there are now more individuals that receive the letters than attended the initial meetings!

Some of the original Residents have since been transferred or released so there are more men now who read the letters who the AA volunteers have not met, but are positively impacting in a different way without face-to-face contact.

Some Residents have written back via the York PO Box. They write back to pass on their thanks and gratitude. They are so grateful to be receiving the letters and always look forward to receiving them. One Resident reported looking at temporary difficulties in a different, more positive light due to receiving the letters. He definitely has a more optimistic outlook. The letters have really helped him and others through this challenging time.

Of course the AA members do not write in for anything other than for a selfless purpose and to see Alcoholics in prison supported, but their commitment, particularly in these restricted times, has been outstanding and has positively impacted many Alcoholics at HMP The Verne. The letters have really helped Residents get through these uncertain and challenging times.

It has been such a blessing over the lockdown period for the Residents to receive encouraging and wise words, and has enabled them to remain positive. We are sure that this approach would work in other prisons around the country and would encourage this occurring in order men and women do not lose focus on their recovery in these challenging times.

Richard Homer
ISMS Recovery Lead
HMP The Verne
10/11/2020

An Inmate's View

I've often heard it said that alcoholism can hardly be a problem in prison as alcohol is unavailable. My own experience tells me another story. I believe there is an urgent need for AA representatives in all our prisons - some institutions have no AA cover at all.

So what does the potential or actual alcoholic inmate do if he or she decides they want help with their drinking? I am one of the fortunates. AA was available to me when I wanted it in a previous prison. Had it not been there, I would not have pursued it. My thinking at that time would have suggested that if there was no AA in prison, it must be because there's no need for it.

AA has transformed the lives of several inmates to my knowledge. Our actions and thoughts have been put on a more positive footing. We try to practice the programme in our daily living. This would be impossible if the hand of AA was not there to help and

guide us. We no longer feel the pain, frustration, loneliness and fear that accompanies the active alcoholic. We have thrown off the chains that bound us.

Today we have freedom. But in my view, not enough of us have that freedom - that situation need not prevail. We can well understand the reticence of some AAs at the thought of visiting prison. Gloomy, depressing place you may think. Look upon it as attending an AA meeting, which is what you *would* be doing. Come and share with us some of your experience, strength and hope and we will gladly reciprocate.

It is hoped that an AA group may be formed in this prison - talks are under way. Sponsors and visiting speakers will be urgently required and made to feel most welcome.

Until then - may God Bless you and keep you.

Anonymous

Reprinted from SHARE magazine November 1998

Alcoholics Anonymous

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Guidelines for Prisons Postal Service

Welcome to one of the most rewarding and rarely mentioned forms of Twelfth Step work. In addition to observing the rules in prisons regarding mail and correspondence, the following are suggested guidelines drawn from shared experience to help you when writing to AA members on the 'inside'.

1. We introduce ourselves by qualifying briefly in our opening letter.
2. We try to let the inmate know that writing, like all forms of sharing, helps us as much as it helps her or him.
3. We let the inmate know that he or she is not alone.
4. Correspondents should use their prison postal number for receiving mail rather than their home address. (The co-ordinator gives prison postal sponsors a number.)
5. We share sobriety and sobriety only.
6. We have found it best for all concerned if no emotional or romantic involvement develops.
7. If there is a desire to send a gift for a special occasion, we make it an AA book, AA literature, or *Roundabout/Share* magazine material. (Before sending literature, see if the prison will allow it. Many prisons will permit inmates to receive only literature sent directly from the publishers.)
8. In the spirit of the Twelfth Tradition, we respect the anonymity of our correspondents.
9. We encourage 'inside' AA group activity and stress that first meeting THE DAY the inmate leaves confinement.
10. We encourage 'inside' correspondents to notify GSO prior to their release so that GSO can set up a pre-release contact from their home community.

News Roundup

Security clearance

A number of PLOs are still experiencing problems in obtaining clearance for new volunteers. Issues include the length of time taken to receive a response, and the inclusion of questions which could compromise anonymity. One possibility for the delay is that different security companies are contracted to make the checks, and may not always have the same policy in responding.

Although these issues exist, GSO has been given assurance by the Ministry of Justice that all clearances should be completed in 4 - 6 weeks. The Prison Subcommittee is to make further enquiries and report back.

AA and the future for prison meetings

Since the closure of prisons across the country due to government restrictions, the possibility of virtual meetings continues to gain interest. In order for such meetings to go ahead, prison authorities would have to agree to the format, and prisoners would have to be comfortable that their anonymity would be protected.

In Scotland, each prisoner has access to a mobile phone, and can attend virtual meetings. This seems to be part of a more progressive approach, and one that hopefully will be reproduced across prisons in England and Wales in the near future.

Prison Postal Service

The new Guidelines for Prison Postal Service (see above) will be put before the General Service Board for ratification. All these points will be added to the new *Service Handbook*.



**DO YOU HAVE A DRINKING
PROBLEM?
DO YOU WANT HELP?
RING ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**
 **020 3916 00 97**

Polish-speaking Alcoholics Anonymous Helpline

Monday - Friday 19.00 - 21.00
Saturday, Sunday 17.00 - 21.00

www.aa-pik-wielkabrytania.org.pl
e-mail: pik.aa.london@gmail.com

Editor's Note: We would welcome any stories or articles from AA members willing to share their experience of life behind bars and how they found recovery. Also, the experiences of RPLOs within the prison system. Please email material to Adam:

beyondthebars@aamail.org

On behalf of the Prison Subcommittee, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!