

Iowa Judicial Conference - One Good Panel Deserves Another

NA members in Iowa took part in the June 14, 1988, Judicial Conference on Alcohol and Drugs, an event attended by three-quarters of the state's judges. NA's participation in the event was solicited after two judges on the conference organizing committee attended a similar affair in Reno, Nevada. There, a panel gave the judges their first introduction to Narcotics Anonymous. While in Reno, the judges also attended an open NA meeting. They were impressed. Appreciative of what Narcotics Anonymous could mean for addicts in trouble with the law, they contacted the local helpline upon their return to Des Moines, seeking to include NA on the Iowa conference program. They were referred--per the P.I. contingency plan--to the regional P.I. chairperson.

The judicial conference had already scheduled a panel presentation from Alcoholics Anonymous. NA members were simply added to that panel, and given an additional opportunity to make a separate presentation to the judges. Participating in the panel were Iowa's regional service representative, the regional P.I. committee chair, the Des Moines area P.I. chair, the chair and vice chair of Iowa's regional hospitals and institutions committee, and a member of the WSC P.I. Committee from Iowa City.

Using an outline--released last April--on speaking to non-addicts, the panel members introduced Iowa judicial officers to NA history, literature, H&I panel services, phonelines, and our belief in "the therapeutic value of one addict helping another."

Staying away from personal "war" and recovery stories helped panel members avoid expressing opinions on outside issues. "They wanted us to give our opinion of what they were doing wrong," one panel member reported. "We informed them that we couldn't give such opinions, but that we would be happy to provide information and answer any questions they might have about NA"

The only real problem reported concerned the panel's stock of NA literature, which they had hoped to distribute to those attending the conference. "We expected to be able to get literature from the Des Moines area the day before the presentation," a panel participant wrote. "But the literature committee was out of some of the IP's we wanted. We learned a valuable lesson from this: order literature ahead of time."

By all accounts, NA's participation in the Iowa judges conference was a success. "I am quite certain," one of the conference organizers wrote to the regional chairperson after the event, "that each time a person with a drug problem appears before any of the judicial officers attending the conference, [those judges] will consider NA"

Court Cards--Contact and Cooperation

Iowa regional P.I. committee members met with representatives of Iowa's Department of Corrections in August 1988 to review the use of signature cards to verify the attendance of parolees at NA meetings. The committee requested the session following a discussion at their regular June meeting. At that meeting, committee members had expressed their unwillingness to condone the practice of signing such attendance cards.

"Our traditions state the importance of non-affiliation with outside institutions," Iowa's regional P.I. chair wrote in his letter requesting the conference. "We fully support parolee-addicts being allowed to attend NA meetings." But in the parolee's eyes, signature cards link Narcotics Anonymous with state correctional authorities. "This does not allow for the trust that works when one addict helps another."

The committee also expressed another concern. Forcing addicts on parole to seek out a signature verifying meeting attendance might put them unduly in the spotlight--and feeling anything but "anonymous." "In order to maintain the anonymity of those in attendance, we cannot sign attendance slips. In light of this, we request a meeting with representatives from the Iowa Department of Corrections so that we may address this issue.

"Many addicts have credited professionals such as yourselves," the P.I. chair's letter closed, "for directing them to NA. Within the Department of Corrections, we know that you work with many addicted individuals. We hope that we can come to a mutual understanding that is beneficial to these individuals, the Department of Corrections, and Narcotics Anonymous."

According to one of the NA participants in the meeting, it was not the intention of the P.I. committee to tell parole officers how to do their jobs, or even to reach a compromise with them. The committee's intention was simply to discuss their position on attendance cards, explain the NA program, and make themselves available for any questions the state officials might have.

The P.I. committee's request was met with a spirit of great cooperation. The department's deputy director and the chief of the department's Bureau of Support Services instructed all district parole supervisors to attend. And the department's report of the meeting was nothing but positive.

"NA's concern regards forced attendance [of parolees]," the bureau chief wrote, "and the requirement that Narcotics Anonymous sign an attendance sheet. Narcotics Anonymous remains open to attendance by parolees, [and] attendance at NA [meetings] is voluntary. Narcotics Anonymous feels any requirement that places them in a position to be viewed by attendees as authority figures, or holding affiliation with an authority group, negates their attempts to offer anonymity to parolees attending...meetings. This is programmatically dysfunctional"--that is, building NA verification of parolees' attendance into a referral program undoes the very thing the Department of Corrections is trying to do. The chief's report concluded with support for the development

of methods other than signature cards for verifying parolee attendance at NA meetings.

One particular alternative to signature cards, distancing NA from the appearance of acting as an agent of the parole office, yet providing the Department of Corrections with parolee attendance verification, was discussed. "NA may be able to work more closely with Community Corrections," a member of the WSC Public Information Committee wrote after the meeting, "by providing H&I meetings where attendance can be monitored by those working within those institutions." Such meetings, it was suggested, could be held in the conference rooms of local parole offices, or in halfway houses operated by the state.