

Coming soon to a home group near you:

More drug court referrals to NA!

By members of the South Florida and Florida Regional Public Information Subcommittees

Drug courts are expanding exponentially across the United States, and increasingly they are referring drug offenders to Narcotics Anonymous. With more dialogue and higher levels of cooperation (not affiliation) between NA and the courts, we can expect the number of new referrals to swell. Like many PI committees nationwide, the South Florida Region's Public Information Subcommittee sees an improvement in communication with the Drug Courts as the "Number 1 Priority" for the near-term. However, as is the case with any intensive PI effort, NA home groups need to be ready to absorb an influx of new members or we will miss an important opportunity to fulfill our primary purpose: to carry the NA message to suffering addicts.

The first drug court began in Miami in 1989 under the direction of Judge Stanley Goldstein. From this humble beginning, the drug court system has rapidly proliferated across the United States. Just two years ago, the National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP) cited 345 active drug courts nationwide with another 204 planned. More recent figures put the number of active US drug courts at 845, with that number expected to triple in the next five years. The drug court movement has grown to the point that many courts have divided into separate systems for adults and families & juveniles.

Because many judges have perceived Alcoholics Anonymous as a more stable and firmly established resource in their communities, drug courts have historically made the majority of their referrals to that fellowship. However, in the last ten years NA's growth has dramatically outpaced AA's. Today the difference in size of the two fellowships is not nearly as significant as it was ten years ago. NA's world service office reports that there are nearly 30,000 NA meetings worldwide (compared with AA's estimated 100,000). NA's availability and message of recovery from addiction rather than a specific drug have begun to serve as powerful attractions to those seeking solutions. As this trend continues, NA is certain to receive an increasing number of referrals from all sources, including the drug courts.

Treatment is becoming the first option of the judicial system as exemplified in a recently-adopted California law, which mandates all non-violent drug offenders to treatment rather than prison. With this trend expanding, we can expect that more drug courts will refer more addicts to NA meetings in the near future. If NA members and groups can rise to meet this new challenge, we can carry our message to an untold number of suffering addicts and gain a new level of respectability in our society.

Zonal Forum Addresses Drug Court Issues

At the July Southeast Zonal Forum weekend in Atlanta, a workshop addressed the impact of drug court referrals on NA. Attending the Zonal Forum were Regional Delegates, Alternate Delegates, members of various regional and area PI subcommittees and other interested NA members from Florida, South Florida, Alabama/Northwest Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina. For the most part, the issues discussed fell into two categories: misconceptions about Drug Court referrals and challenges that many NA groups are facing due to the infusion of new members. It was also clear that while many of these issues have been long resolved in South Florida, there remains room for improvement in our relationship with the drug court system.

Also apparent at this workshop was a shortage of literature (IPs, manuals, service guides, etc.) which might offer practical suggestions about how to effectively carry our message to members referred by the drug courts. Our Guide to Public Information was last updated in 1990, long before drug courts were in full

swing. With the wealth of experience that we have in South Florida, perhaps there is way for us to share our experience, strength and hope on this issue with the rest of the fellowship. More will be revealed on this.

Following is a brief review of some of the key questions discussed at the zonal Forum workshop.

Q. Is it NA's responsibility to sign attendance papers? We are not part of the judicial system.

A. Each group is autonomous and can do what it wants in respect to this issue. An important thing to remember is that an individual NA member (remember our Third Tradition) is requesting that his or her meeting attendance be documented. The request is coming from an individual member — not from the drug court. The Groups that do decide to sign attendance papers are trying to fulfill their primary purpose to carry the NA message to the addict who still suffers and to cooperate in a member's pursuit of recovery. Another important thing to remember is that many addicts are enrolled in these judicial programs voluntarily. While the threat of external consequences may have played a role in their decision, isn't that true for many of us as well. Many of these newcomers are being *referred* not *ordered* to attend NA meetings.

In respect to anonymity, many groups have bought rubber stamps with the Group's name — "Saturday Step" or "Hope Without Dope" — to validate attendance papers. In some cases, the Area PI Subcommittees provide the rubber stamps to Groups who request them. This addresses the concerns of many members regarding their own anonymity.

Q. Drug Courts referring a lot of newcomers to meetings can create a lot of problems. The ratio of newcomers to experienced members can be high, affecting the overall atmosphere of recovery, sponsorship etc. How do groups keep from being overwhelmed?

A. First, it is important to have good communication and dialogue with the drug court BEFORE challenges (if any) arise. Hopefully an Area and/or Regional Public Information Subcommittee has taken a pro-active approach to establish communication channels. Establishing an open and honest relationship includes establishing a single point of accountability within the local NA service structure and being realistic when discussing NA resources with drug court administrators. If and when issues come up, they can be discussed in a forthright manner and a solution can be found more easily if there is an existing relationship. If a large number of newcomers are being referred to a small meeting, communicate this fact to the drug court. Suggest that referrals be made to larger, stable, more established meetings.

Second, it is important to recognize that many of these are challenges which illustrate a group's need to be better prepared for newcomers. A group inventory — in which members brainstorm ways their group can more effectively handle newcomers — is often helpful. A newcomers' meeting, for example, can solve a lot of problems. Develop a special format which offers a lot of basic information about NA, a little about our steps and traditions, how we like to keep an atmosphere of recovery, how we encourage sharing our experience, strength and hope, what the "Clarity Statement" means, etc. Time can be allocated for newcomers to ask questions. A newcomer package of IPs and meeting lists can be given out. This can be done for thirty or forty-five minutes before the Group's regular meeting or as a breakout group chaired by an experienced group member. In this manner, the Group can provide a basic orientation to NA, which easily solves many common problems. A group inventory may provide alternative solutions, especially if group members are encouraged to think "outside the box" (to consider brand new ways) in approaching these challenges.

Q. How do we deal Drug Court referrals that disrupt meetings?

A. This is certainly not a new issue within our fellowship, nor is it a drug-court-specific issue. Each Group needs to decide how it will handle disruptive members. This should be addressed through an informed Group conscience at a business meeting. While Drug Court referrals may increase the number of newcomers, and that may, in turn, increase the incidence of disruptions, a group's inability to deal with this issue is not the fault of the drug court or the newcomer. This is an issue of group unity and a group's preparedness to provide an atmosphere of recovery in the midst of disease. An influx of newcomers only amplifies pre-existing problems. It is really not the option of the group to accept disruptive behavior as it

detracts from an atmosphere of recovery. Dealing effectively with disruptions is an essential part of fulfilling our primary purpose. Some suggestions are:

- Elect chairpersons with recovery experience. Make sure he or she understands that it is his or her *responsibility* (not *option*) to interrupt a disruptive member and ask them to respect the atmosphere of recovery in the meeting.
- Have a statement prepared and written ahead of time. If a disruption occurs, a prepared statement will support the Chairperson in knowing how to address the situation. Also, a Chairperson will often feel more comfortable dealing with the situation if they know that group conscience has chosen the words they are about to use. “We have found that while it is important to share, it is also important to listen” or something to that effect.
- Have an experienced member (or two) take the disruptive member in the hall and talk to them (and listen to them) individually.

Q. What about people being sent from Drug Court who are on other medications for depression, bi-polar conditions etc.?

NA has no opinion on outside issues, and this has been defined as an outside issue between a doctor and patient. Again, this is not a new or a drug-court specific issue. For a thoughtful discussion of this topic, see pages 98 and 99 of our Basic Text.

Q. In one Area, the Drug Court asked the PI Subcommittee when does a member get a sponsor and can the sponsor come to court for validation purposes?

A. The Drug Court was informed that beyond verification of attendance, NA cannot provide detailed information on individual members. NA does not verify or evaluate an individual member’s progress of recovery. Whether or not they have a sponsor, work steps, share at meetings, or even if they are staying clean. NA is a program for people who want it, not for people who need it, and it is up to the individual member to find a sponsor (or not) and learn our way of life. However, the decision to appear in drug court to support a sponsee will be left up to the individual sponsor.

This paper was first published in the South Florida Regional newsletter in August of 2001 as has been updated periodically to reflect additional data and insights.