

## Drug Courts: A Public Information Success Story

(Reprinted from NAWS Annual Report , 1 January – 30 June 1999, pages 12 and 13)

NA World Services has been focusing its public information efforts on national and international organizations for quite some time, though progress has definitely been inconsistent. A major financial downturn in the mid-eighties led to the closure of an office we had established primarily for PI purposes in Cliffside Park, New Jersey—just across the Hudson River from Manhattan, where many influential agencies concerned with drug policy are headquartered. In addition, throughout the eighties and early nineties much of the world-level PI work dealt with exploring how specific PI efforts could be conducted within the bounds of our Eleventh Tradition and with developing service material that would help local PI committees.

Looking back, we can see that it was critical for us to have those philosophical discussions because we were soon faced with situations that required our interaction with syndicated columnists, the United Nations, national governments, and correctional officials around the world. Sometimes we initiated the contact, but just as often, we were contacted unexpectedly. Having a clear and in-depth understanding of our Twelve Traditions enabled us to respond promptly and with confidence to these unexpected opportunities.

Meanwhile, some of our most effective PI efforts—those done by the average member through a chance encounter with someone in a position to encounter a great many practicing addicts—were making inroads in the medical community, the judicial system, the educational system, and so on. We could never have predicted the results of some of those chance encounters, but we can look back on them now. One of our favorite “results” stories came to us through our presence in 1995 at the US Department of Justice Forum on Volunteers in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Our representative at the event, a former member of the World Service Board of Trustees, was approached by US Attorney General Janet Reno who told him about an encounter that earned her respect for NA: Before she became the Attorney General, she had been a state’s attorney. One day, she was visited by a man she had sent to prison. He had come to thank her for sending him to a prison where he heard the message of Narcotics Anonymous and subsequently found recovery.

Though the anonymous man in this story was not specifically sentenced to attend NA meetings while in prison or as a condition of his parole, individual district and federal court judges have been incorporating mandatory attendance at twelve-step meetings and/or residential drug treatment into their sentencing for decades. In most places, addicts coming to NA because of a “nudge from the judge” have long been an unremarkable part of the meeting landscape. Most bring “court cards” that have spaces for the date, the group’s name, and/or location, and the leader’s or secretary’s initials. Occasionally, a judge has misunderstood NA and asked a group or an individual member to do more than this, perhaps monitor and report on the progress of someone’s recovery. In most cases, a PI presentation or even just a reasonable explanation to the judge sets things straight. Sadly, there have been some cases when a member has not been able to differentiate between cooperation, affiliation, and what constitutes NA’s expression of an opinion on an outside issue, and has therefore acted in ways that damaged NA’s reputation in the judicial, correctional, and treatment communities. Thankfully, these incidents have been rare, and they’ve been offset by the powerful example of hundreds of thousands of addicts getting and staying clean in NA, many of those coming to their first meeting because the judge insisted on it.

The term “drug courts” describes what in the US<sup>1</sup> is a marriage between the judicial system, the correctional system, and drug treatment. People who have been convicted of a drug-related offense are sent to drug court for sentencing, which will be some combination of custody, residential or outpatient drug treatment, and mandated attendance at twelve step meetings<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Parallels exist in other countries, though with differences that addicts from the US find surprising. For instance, addicts in “custody” in some countries may find themselves given furlough to attend a nearby NA convention.

<sup>2</sup> Most sentences don’t specify a particular twelve-step program and, in fact, this is often left to the discretion of the drug treatment component.

## Drug Courts: A Public Information Success Story (continued)

Drug courts are multiplying rapidly in the US, as are similar arrangements in many other places—Europe, South America, the Middle East, Africa, and throughout the Asia Pacific zone. We expect (and hope for) the impact on our fellowship to be enormous. Our challenge is to prepare our groups to handle a possible influx of newcomers who may have a wide variety of specific needs. The practical matters are straightforward enough. Do we have enough members with solid recovery willing to serve as sponsors? Do our groups have ways of making sure newcomers are welcomed and introduced to older members or do we leave that to chance? Do our areas have enough meetings with newcomer-friendly formats? Are our literature tables stocked with *Introductory Guides* and relevant IPs? Is there enough variety in our area's meetings to accommodate the needs of different types of newcomers?<sup>3</sup>

The philosophical matters aren't as straightforward, but they're every bit as important for our local NA communities to address. Do our members understand that our traditions are for *us* to follow? NA as a whole has no opinion on drug courts, but drug courts are free to have an opinion about NA. There's nothing in the traditions that prohibits us from cultivating good relationships with local drug courts. We can do this by cooperating with them: welcoming the newcomers they send us and signing or stamping their court cards, having our PI committee members meet with drug court professionals and providing those professionals with material that explains our program to the non-member.

We don't need to concern ourselves with the judiciary's motives for sending addicts to us. We don't even need to worry about the addicts' motives when they come to our meetings. As *It Works: How and Why* so aptly says, "The group is not the jury of desire." Many of us first came to NA to please someone else—a family member, our employer, the court—but we ended up staying for ourselves. Our business as a fellowship is to carry the message, not to decide who should hear it.

For our part, as the World Board, we plan to continue attending the annual NADCP conferences in the United States and pursuing contacts with other national and international organizations. We expect that other needs will arise at the group level as drug courts impact our fellowship, and we're counting on the fellowship to let us know what kinds of support you need from us to help you meet those needs.

### A Point of Information

- ◊ Prior to 1996, our PI efforts consisted mostly of the attendance at approximately four large international events on an annual basis. With the development of our Public Relations Statement of Purpose (see page 26 in *TWGWSS*), we sought to increase the public's awareness of NA's existence. One of the avenues we wanted to examine more closely was that of the correctional programs. Because of this redirected focus, our sales to the correctional market doubled over the last year.

### Did You Know That:

- ◊ The first drug court was created in Miami in 1989.
- ◊ 1999 figures from the National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP) cite 345 active drug courts, with an additional 204 planned.
- ◊ Drug courts exist for both adolescent and adult offenders.
- ◊ The impact of drug courts on our fellowship has the potential to be greater than that of treatment centers in the eighties.
- ◊ Group opposition to drug courts violates our Tenth Tradition as much as offering a public endorsement would.

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, a large percentage of existing drug courts are for juvenile offenders. If all of our meetings take place in the evening and don't end until close to or after the local curfew, underage addicts will not be able to attend.