

# Corrections and Alcoholics Anonymous

## A Crucial Connection

BY NANCY MCCARTHY



istock/ Vladimir Vladimirov

**A**s the world's first and oldest Twelve Step recovery program, Alcoholics Anonymous, founded in 1935, has long made it a priority to work with people in custody. Inspired by those among its members who have served time, A.A. groups brought meetings into jails in the Northeast as early as 1940, even before Alcoholics Anonymous had arrived in many U.S. cities.

Today, Alcoholics Anonymous continues to play a crucial role in helping alcoholics in custody to stay sober in jail or prison while providing them with a network of support as they transition back into the community. According to a recent study published in the journal *Addiction Science and Clinical Practice*, 58% of adults in state prisons and 63% of people who have been sentenced to jail have Substance Use Disorders (SUDs).<sup>1</sup>

“People who consume alcohol in large quantities or who have been diagnosed as abusing alcohol are a good deal more likely to engage in crimes of various types than people who don't abuse alcohol,” says Richard Rosenfeld, Curators' Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri.

## How does A.A. help alcoholics in correctional facilities?

A.A.'s General Service Office (GSO) in New York has a Corrections desk, which acts as a clearinghouse for information, providing support for alcoholics in jails and prisons by connecting them with the Corrections Correspondence service (CCS), where A.A. volunteers write to people in custody on a consistent basis, in English or Spanish. Available in both the U.S. and in Canada, the CCS has served over 5,000 people in the last five years. G.S.O. makes the initial connection, randomly matching inmates with a drinking problem and outside AA members who live in another region away from that correctional facility. Because correctional facilities often have rules prohibiting direct contact among local AA volunteers and inmates, the letters exchanged through CCS from another region might provide an alcoholic behind the walls with his or her only personal connection to another AA member.

If there is no or limited access to meetings within a facility, CCS offers access through a one-on-one with an outside member. As an inmate named Kevin M. says: “A guy named Joe B. began writing to me and helped me navigate the complete lockdown of our prison due to

COVID-19 last year. Joe has helped keep things real for me.” (Institutional caseworkers or parole officers can get information on the Correctional Correspondence Service by emailing [corrections@aa.org](mailto:corrections@aa.org) or writing to Corrections Desk, General Service Office, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163.)

Alcoholics Anonymous also makes A.A. literature accessible to inmates. Probably more than any other A.A. writing, *Grapevine*, A.A.'s monthly magazine, is the most popular among inmates. It features personal stories written by and for A.A. members — stories that reflect the lives and experience of sober alcoholics today — and every July features an issue devoted to stories of recovery behind the walls. The physical magazine is widely available, but *Grapevine* has also recently begun putting audio and digital material on tablets that have the potential to reach into hundreds of facilities.

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A.A. members are experienced in setting up A.A. groups within correctional institutions — there are roughly 1,500 A.A. groups in correctional facilities in the U.S. and Canada. Local A.A.'s often provide an outside “sponsor” for the group, as well as regular speakers, but the people in custody within the institution can hold and run the meetings themselves. In this regard, local A.A. corrections committees are eager to provide information and education to corrections officials. Volunteers are willing to hold informational seminars on virtual platforms, or to make such presentations within correctional facilities, once volunteers and visitors are allowed to return.

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Importantly, A.A. members are diligent in working with administrators to understand and follow all facility regulations. Matthew Magnusson, current Warden of Maine State Prison, says he will welcome A.A. members back into the prison as in-person meetings resume.

“One of the best things about our outside A.A. group is that I have complete trust in them. They understand that this is a fluid process and things change minute by minute and sometimes meetings are cancelled at the last minute. But they keep their commitments. This is important for a population which has had a lot of people in their lives who have let them down. When our local A.A. partners make a commitment to show up, they do it. That gets noticed.”

## Bridging the gap

Another essential part of A.A.’s support for people in custody comes as they are preparing to leave the correctional facility. A.A.’s Bridging the Gap program, in which A.A. members volunteer as temporary contacts to help those in custody become acquainted with A.A. and to attend A.A. meetings in their home areas after they are released, allows for continuity once the person is released, helping them to stay sober for the long term. Corrections committee members connect with corrections staff to attend transition events, either via virtual platform or

in-person, where they offer to sign up people in custody for Bridging the Gap programs. Corrections committee members also introduce those who are about to be released to such recent A.A. innovations as the Meeting Guide app. Available on a phone, tablet or computer, the Meeting Guide app is connected to hundreds of local A.A. central offices, allowing users to access updated information about meeting locations and times, as well as the nearly endless variety of A.A. meetings, from meetings for newcomers and young people to Spanish-speaking meetings, gay, lesbian and trans meetings and secular (or “atheist/agnostic”) meetings, to name just a few.

Carrie Pettus, PhD, MSW, is a professor at Florida State University and founding executive director of the Institute for Justice Research and Development. She has spent over 25 years doing social work in criminal justice settings. “A.A. has some components that are super-critical for people’s success. Some people getting out of prison do not have enough positive social support, and that is something that I think is really central to A.A. There are expectations and accountability to the A.A. community and to your sponsor about being honest with yourself and with others. A.A. also provides an informal social support network, rather than solely relying on inpatient or outpatient treatment, which means individuals will have people who are going to be a part of their network indefinitely.”



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## How do corrections officials perceive A.A.?

Randall Liberty, the Maine State Commissioner of Corrections, has 36 years of experience in the field of corrections and law enforcement, serving as a prison guard, Sheriff of Kennebec County and Warden of the Maine State Prison. His life-long work in corrections, as well as a personal family history of alcoholism, has convinced him of the importance of an active Alcoholics Anonymous presence within a prison population. He says: “Peer recovery is a priceless gift for many people. I am so pleased with the approach of A.A. in

the state of Maine. For a resident in my care, it's one thing to have a hired clinician, but when you also have a volunteer who takes the effort to be there and takes time away from their lives, it helps residents know that someone cares and also that they will be with you in your transition out into the community. When residents get out, they need housing, clothing, employment, but they also need access to treatment. A.A. works with people who are challenged economically. It has an open heart and an open door and people can build a network of recovery."

Brent Jahnz is Program Director for the Pine County Jail in Pine City, Minnesota. The Pine County Jail, he says, "considers itself a restorative jail—we try to build success for people." Among the numerous educational, religious or therapeutic based programs the jail offers are Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. "I think we've had A.A. since I started as a guard in 1983," Jahnz says. "We have had A.A. speakers come in who have spent time incarcerated and they can be respected and believed."

During the pandemic, the jail offered weekly video-conferencing A.A. meetings, which are set up with the help of A.A. facilitators from outside the jail, but under normal circumstances Jahnz's institution hosts numerous in-person meetings for inmates. "I honestly believe that every time they attend," he says, "we inch them a bit closer to making a real change in their lives."

Scott Kernan is the former California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) Secretary, who retired in 2018 after more than three decades of service. He began his career in 1983 as a corrections officer at San Quentin State Prison.

"In the early 1980s," Scott says, "San Quentin was one of the roughest prisons in the country." It helped him decide, as he has said, that prisons shouldn't be there to only to "lock people up safely." In his role as CDCR Secretary, he believed in creating a "system that provides hope" for people in custody. Alcoholics Anonymous is certainly one of the programs that assist in enabling that goal.

"A.A. is a great help," he adds, "I think it is an absolutely necessary program both on the streets and inside the prisons. If you can provide that kind of structure on a regular basis for inmates from alcoholics who are similarly situated, that kind of outlet is very valuable."

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### Alcoholics Anonymous Official Website

The Meeting Guide app can be accessed through this site.  
<https://aa.org>

### A.A. Corrections Committee Desk

The A.A. Corrections committee desk at [aa.org](https://aa.org) provides information for corrections professionals and links them with local corrections committees in their area.  
[https://www.aa.org/pages/en\\_us/corrections-committees](https://www.aa.org/pages/en_us/corrections-committees)

### About A.A.

A.A.'s newsletter for professionals.  
[https://aa.org/pages/en\\_US/about-aa-newsletter-for-professionals](https://aa.org/pages/en_US/about-aa-newsletter-for-professionals)

### Box 459

A.A.'s Monthly Newsletter.  
[https://aa.org/pages/en\\_US/box-4-5-9-news-and-notes-from-gso](https://aa.org/pages/en_US/box-4-5-9-news-and-notes-from-gso)

### Grapevine

The International Journal of Alcoholics Anonymous.  
<https://www.aagrapevine.org>

### La Viña

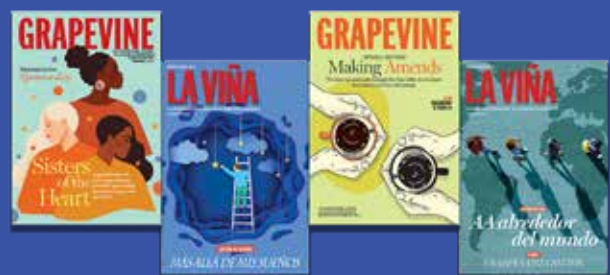
Grapevine's Spanish-language sister magazine.  
<https://www.aalavina.org>

### Find Local AA

A state by state link to A.A.'s central offices.  
[https://www.aa.org/pages/en\\_US/find-local-aa](https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/find-local-aa)

### Online Intergroup

A.A.'s directory of online meetings.  
<https://www.aa-intergroup.org>



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## A.A.'s long-term effectiveness

Although it is widely recognized that Alcoholics Anonymous is a highly accessible, low-cost resource for alcoholics within jail and prison populations, the effectiveness of A.A.'s program of recovery is sometimes underestimated because the program was begun by peers — alcoholics themselves — rather than professionals. What has come into sharper focus with a groundbreaking 2020 study is just how effective A.A. is at keeping alcoholics sober. This rigorous independent study, published by the medical journal *Cochrane Database of Systematic Review*, examined 25 previous studies involving 10,565 participants around the world. It found Alcoholics Anonymous works as well as other scientifically proven treatments for alcoholism, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), outpatient treatment by a doctor and alcohol education programs, and in fact outperforms these methods when it came to longevity of sobriety.

“One of the reasons why A.A. helps more people over the long-term,” says study co-author John Kelly, “is through its ability to keep people actively involved in its recovery-focused peer support social network.” When an individual goes to an A.A. meeting and hears a story of drinking that sounds like theirs, Kelly points out, “it provides a reappraisal of people’s alcoholism. You see over and over again how people got into recovery, the positive outcomes.” Keith Humphreys, the study’s other co-author, says, “You can walk into a meeting feeling down on yourself and destitute and then you see someone who at one point was just like you and now they’re doing great.” In other words, what alcoholics hear in people’s stories are the stories of their own recovery, reinforced by each meeting they attend.

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## “A gateway program”

Now retired, Steve Emrick has spent 30 years running arts programs and other volunteer programs in California’s prison system, at one point living on the grounds of San Quentin with his family. He has had a long acquaintanceship and respect for A.A. “I coordinated the [A.A. volunteers] and I saw their commitment. I would talk to different inmates and hear their stories on what A.A. had to teach and how it helped them. They’d be standing in line for chow and get upset about something and then think, ‘Hey, it’s me, I can control this.’”

Steve’s comments underscore the fact criminal thinking and addictive thinking share certain cognitive deficits — errors in reasoning based on faulty premises which include denial, justification and rationalization. Only A.A.’s first Step mentions alcohol — the rest are aimed at changing behaviors.

Steve continues: “One thing I saw was that Alcoholics Anonymous was a kind of gateway program. Lots of the time, after inmates joined A.A., they would finish their GED or realize they had anger management issues or feel they wanted to connect with their family or take parenting courses. They progressed even more as they worked on themselves. If you can get A.A. and support it in an institution you are going to see people coming out as better citizens and better prepared to give back to society.”

The experiences reported by corrections officials and others in this article clearly show allowing Alcoholics Anonymous volunteers to set up meetings in institutions

is valuable, and even life-saving for people in custody suffering from an addiction to alcohol. The seminal Cochrane Review study proves not only A.A. works, but it is cost-effective (John Kelly calls it “the closest thing we have in health care to a free lunch”). A.A.’s dedication to helping alcoholics in facilities has been praised by numerous corrections officials. Working closely with corrections administrators during the Covid-19 pandemic, A.A. volunteers redoubled their efforts to reach suffering alcoholics inside facilities as well as to help those who were being released to find an A.A. connection in the outside world.

“As Warden, if people arrived in my care who needed help of any type, we worked to help them with recovery,” says Randall Liberty. “It might be substance abuse issues, it might be mental health or trauma, it might be neglect and poverty. But the type of help A.A. provides is different. It provides fellowship, in the sense of belonging, from people who have traveled the same journey as other alcoholics and can speak that truth that only another alcoholic knows.”

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tsai, Jack, and Xian Gu. “Utilization of addiction treatment among U.S. adults with history of incarceration and substance use disorders.” *Addiction science & clinical practice* vol. 14, 1 9. 5 Mar. 2019, doi:10.1186/s13722-019-0138-4



*Nancy McCarthy worked with the Missouri Department of Corrections, Board of Probation and Parole from 1984-2017. During her tenure, Ms. McCarthy served in a number of supervisory positions which included Regional Administrator for the St. Louis Metropolitan area from 2003-2017. She assisted with the development and implementation of a number of community-based programs focused on assisting individuals diagnosed with substance abuse disorders. Ms. McCarthy currently serves as a consultant for the Institute of Justice Research and Development (IJRD) 5-Key Model for Reentry, a multi-state study on informing the Safe Streets and Second Chances Initiative on re-entry reform. In 2016, Ms. McCarthy was appointed to serve a six-year term as a Non-Alcoholic Trustee for the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous-United States and Canada.*

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