



Accessibility for Those with Additional Needs

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What Additional Needs Is all about

Most of us can find a meeting on a meeting schedule, get to it, enter and sit down, and hear the spoken message of recovery without a second thought. However, there are some for whom this is not possible. They need additional help in order to do what most of us take for granted. In other words, they are addicts who, for a number of reasons, have *additional needs*.

The Fifth Tradition states that *our primary purpose is to carry the message to the addict who still suffers*. However, it is often not enough to share only our recovery. We also need to recognize when our meeting space cannot be easily approached or entered and/or the message our group is carrying cannot be easily obtained. The reason may be a poor choice of location for our meeting. When this happens, we should make every effort to remove the barriers which make finding recovery difficult for some addicts.

This pamphlet was developed to provide information to our fellowship on how to go about accomplishing this task. There are many things we can do within our service structure and at the group level to help addicts with additional needs find recovery. For example, H&I subcommittees can evaluate accessibility of their meetings. PI subcommittees can stay updated on the accessibility of all facilities listed in meeting schedules and provide the information, where necessary, to agencies. Literature subcommittees can educate our regions on the needs, capabilities, and limitations of addicts with additional needs. Convention and activities subcommittees can ascertain that facilities are accessible and that convention flyers and schedules make note of this. Groups and areas can compile rosters of individuals who are willing to provide assistance and/or transportation to addicts with additional needs.

The best thing we can do is to examine our own attitudes and prejudices towards others and begin to make necessary changes. One of these changes may be in the way we speak. We need to avoid words that diminish individual dignity or magnify disability. Many common labels for individuals who have additional needs are demeaning and inaccurate. We should avoid them at all cost. The following three categories of additional needs seem to be the most common, although there are others:

| For individuals who are | accessibility means |
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| deaf/hearing-impaired | receiving the spoken and written message |
| blind/visually impaired | receiving the written message and help in getting to meetings |
| in wheelchairs/use walkers and mobility impaired | getting into and maneuvering within meeting places and, in some cases, transportation |

The therapeutic value of one addict helping another is without parallel. As with all addicts, when we help an addict with additional needs we help carry the message of NA recovery.

Addicts with Hearing Impairment

There are several types of hearing loss and just as many words to describe them. *Deaf* is generally used to characterize individuals who have lost most or all of their hearing. *Hard of hearing* describes those who can hear only with difficulty.

Communication

There are many ways in which hearing-impaired individuals communicate with others, including speech and lip reading. Some prefer written notes. Of the manual communication methods, sign language is most popular. A few practical considerations need to be followed when communicating with hearing-impaired individuals. For example, when first meeting a hearing-impaired individual, we can observe how they communicate with hearing people or make contact by getting their attention first. Speaking slowly and clearly in a normal tone of voice helps. It is also helpful to use short sentences and maintain eye contact, even with an interpreter present. When listening to a hearing-impaired addict speak, pay close attention. Writing a note to a hearing-impaired person is always acceptable, but keep thoughts organized and the note concise.

Using an Interpreter

Whether or not to use an interpreter should be the choice of the addict with the impairment. First and foremost, we need to make sure we have only qualified interpreters in our meetings. If our group does not have the funds to cover a qualified interpreter, an outside agency for individuals with additional needs may be able to assist with this expense. According to the Seventh Tradition, our group cannot ask an outside entity to pay for services provided in our meetings, but the impaired individual can. In many cases, they will also have experience with such agencies.

When an interpreter is present, he or she is there to serve only as facilitator. When speaking, face the hearing-impaired individual, not the interpreter, and speak at a normal tone and pace. In a group setting, position chairs so that everyone in the group is visible, and allow only one addict to share at a time. The interpreter may need a moment to finish signing, so be sure to pause between comments.

Using Other Tools

Some hearing-impaired individuals prefer technological tools which help improve hearing in a group setting. When these tools are used in a meeting, it should be announced and emphasized to the group that such a tool is an amplifying device and not a recorder. It is also possible for hearing-impaired individuals to communicate on the telephone if they have a Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD), most commonly known as a Text Telephone (TTY). However, both the caller and the recipient must have one. Unfortunately, most people—with or without hearing loss—do not own a TDD/TTY due to the high cost of owning one.

Addicts with Visual Impairment

Although there are many types of visual impairment and each individual's situation will be different, for the sake of simplicity we will discuss blind, visually impaired, low vision, and sight-impaired addicts as one group of addicts with additional needs.

Accessing NA Literature

The most common method for visually impaired addicts to access our literature in recent years has been the use of cassette tapes. The WSO has a variety of tapes and NA recovery literature available for visually impaired addicts. Outside agencies, both government and private, may also be helpful resources and have some have NA materials available.

Technological solutions, such as photocopying machines which can both duplicate and enlarge items may be available to help visually impaired addicts access our literature. Also, most addicts with visual impairment have friends in the fellowship who are willing to record various pieces of recovery literature. (*A word of caution:* anyone who agrees to record literature should be careful to read the text exactly as it is written without personal interpretation or editorial comments included.) In addition, it is now possible by using

computers and special devices and software, to scan, enlarge, and even read literature to individuals who cannot see. When using technology, it is important to remember that as with any other copyrighted material, limits are placed on the reproduction and distribution of NA literature. The guidelines for each situation may vary, so it is best to contact the WSO with any questions.

Meetings

When providing transportation to visually impaired addicts, there are some practical considerations to keep in mind. For example, do not honk the horn unless you are sure that the person will recognize your car. If someone is carrying a white cane, anyone traveling with him or her should either get out of the way or announce their own location. Some visually impaired addicts may need guidance up and down stairs, hallways, or to and from the car. Those with a guide dog may need little assistance, if any, as the dog is trained to do most of the work.

In most cases, visually impaired persons will ask for the information they need in order to be comfortable within their surroundings. A few minutes should be spent pointing out emergency exits, restrooms, and if necessary, the layout of the restroom. They may also need help getting coffee and finding a seat. As a courtesy, have everyone in the meeting introduce themselves. When greeting a person who is visually impaired, be sure to request a hug before making physical contact and do not touch their dog without asking permission. Just as importantly, never stay silent if a visually impaired addict enters the room alone. Each visually impaired addict's needs may be different, but there is one rule that applies to every case: *never* grab, pull, or push a visually impaired individual in an effort to be helpful. When in doubt as to the level of assistance someone needs, ask.

Addicts in Wheelchairs and Mobility Impaired

Although circumstances have changed in recent years to make recovery possible for most addicts, many meetings are still not accessible to addicts using wheelchairs. In this case, accessibility means more than being able to pass through the front door, such as an operable ramp into the facility with parking nearby, restrooms which allow access to everyone, wide doorways, and meeting rooms which are not congested. Make sure your meeting location meets these minimum standards of accessibility. If it does not, seek a location that does if you want your meeting to be accessible by all addicts. These considerations should also be made for all NA functions, service meetings, and conventions. Make sure that meeting lists and flyers identify meetings and/or events as wheelchair accessible, and be sure to provide H&I and PI subcommittees with this information.

Once an accessible facility has been secured, individuals can help by volunteering to greet and assist addicts in wheelchairs. The volunteers need only to be willing to provide a smile, a greeting and a hug, and be able to lift and carry a wheelchair if necessary.

For more information about accessibility for those with additional needs, please refer to *Additional Needs Resource Information* (WSO Catalog Item No. 2114).