

D.W.I.'S and COURT SLIPS IN A.A. MEETINGS

A Report on the Experience of the Maryland Area of Alcoholics Anonymous

Why This Report Was Written - Maryland was, as far as we know, where the signing of court slips in A.A. meetings first began. We have had nearly nine years of experience with court slips, from the first solitary D.W.I. in 1978 to many thousands in recent years.

Our experience has gone from early euphoria at "so many new-comers" to concern, frustration, dissension, and finally, to a general realization that our survival was threatened. In this report, we'll share our recent experiences with court-directed D.W.I. offenders, and actions that were taken by our Area General Service structure.

In the past few years, Maryland has had, we believe, the greatest number of court-monitored D.W.I.'s per capita in the nation. In our experience, these numbers were a result of time, together with the existence of an almost endless supply of D.W.I.'s and various pressures to do something about them.

We will share how the growth of the court slip program here created conditions substantially different from those which are the basis of the current G.S.O. Guideline, which seem to underlie the opinions expressed in the Guideline. We had a variety of problems not mentioned in the Guideline; several of them will be described here.

Finally, we'll share decisions made by the Maryland Area Group Conscience in connection with the D.W.I./court slip problems, and how they were made; we'll also provide a brief description of related conditions in Maryland less than a year following those decisions.

We believe that other A.A. Areas could be affected as we were. We hope that those Areas may benefit from our experience: that is our primary purpose here.

To those Areas, which haven't encountered the D.W.I. issue, we offer the following as a narrative of an Area becoming engulfed by a problem from without, how that problem affected our Common Welfare and our Unity, and how the Group Conscience came to respond. Comparable issues could arise in the future which might affect your Area. We hope that you also might find the following to be helpful.

Growth of the D.W.I. program in Maryland - Exact numbers are not known to us. However, based on information from people within the monitor system, we can make a fairly accurate conservative estimate of how many were being monitored as of early 1986. We believe that more than 14,000 (perhaps as many as 20,000) D.W.I.'s were carrying court slips into A.A. meetings to be signed.

The majority of D.W.I.'s were required to get signatures at five A.A. meetings a week. Some needed only one per week. We estimate that the average was at least three per week, which translates to an aggregate of more than 42,000 D.W.I.'s in our meetings each week. (This adds up to more than 2,100,000 slip signatures per year by Group secretaries.) Total A.A. population in Maryland is just over 13,000.

Pressure in some areas was much greater than even these numbers indicate. Certain locales were targets for intensive D.W.I. crackdowns. A.A. Groups in and around those locations were inundated. Most rural communities were barely affected by the court slip problem.

The numbers were continuing to increase. The state was hiring more and more D.W.I. monitors. There were projections of up to 40,000 D.W.I. arrests per year, with most of the offenders to be sentenced to A.A.

The Area Committee Responds - Problems became so severe that in January, 1986 the Maryland Area Committee shifted responsibility for D.W.I.-related matters from its C.P.C. Committee to the Area Delegate and Area Chairman. They became responsible for all liaisons with the state, the D.W.I. monitor system, and with all A.A. entities in the Area. They were also asked to assess reports of problems related to D.W.I.'s and court slips. The Committee felt that this had become, by far, the Area's most urgent priority.

The Delegate and the Chairman commenced to do what the Committee had asked. They'd been early supporters of the signing of court slips. However, after reviewing the situation as it had developed they each concluded that things had gotten out of hand and that a crisis existed.

D.W.I. Related Problems As of Early 1986 - For several years, there had been a bitter debate throughout Maryland A.A. about whether the signing of court slips violated A.A. Traditions: specifically Traditions Six (Long Form) and Ten. We had a minority group operating vigorously in accord with A.A. Concepts. They and their adherents used every opportunity to speak out in opposition to the court slips.

Area Committee Meetings, Assemblies and Intergroup Meetings were continually disrupted by acrimonious debate. Most G.S.R.'s, after attending their first Area Assembly, vowed never to return. The business of A.A.'s Third Legacy of Service was brought to a virtual halt. Unity in Maryland A.A. had almost completely disappeared.

Also, the great majority of our A.A. meetings were in disarray - our Common Welfare was in deep trouble. Thus, it was in the principles stated in our First Tradition, that our Area's priorities became clear. Here are some of the ways in which our Common Welfare was being damaged:

A great many of our Groups were experiencing severe crowding conditions. Space, which had accommodated regular attendees, could not contain the flood of D.W.I. bodies. Meeting rooms were packed from wall to wall. They suffered all the possible discomforts of too many people crammed into too small a space. Fire laws were being broken. Noise levels were disruptive. In many cases, speakers were not heard and the meeting purpose was lost.

The presence of so many D.W.I.'s was, in many other ways, an ominous one. Few of them had any desire to be there other than to have slips signed at the end of the meeting. Many of them resented us, considering A.A. a part of the state's punitive system. Most of them cared little for what was going on and not at all for the other's who were there.

The D.W.I.'s had no conception of nor regard for A.A. anonymity. Details of personal A.A. stories, together with names, were broadcast throughout the community - e.g., into schools where A.A. members taught. In many meetings, A.A. women were intimidated and felt unable to share personal stories and/or problems in the presence of D.W.I.'s.

Ministers of several churches in Maryland were expressing great distress at the chaos, damage and thefts of church property traceable to D.W.I.'s. Stories began to appear in major newspapers headlining descriptions by ministers of discarded drug paraphernalia, bottles and other debris in connection with A.A. meetings. Some churches evicted Groups from their long-time meeting places. A number of others were threatening to do so "if A.A. did not clean up its act with D.W.I.'s".

The exodus of old-timers from A.A. meetings had accelerated. They felt that, because of the D.W.I.'s, our A.A. meetings had deteriorated to the point where they were no longer enhancing recovery. Also, newcomers from sources other than the courts were lost in the shuffle. And behavior of D.W.I.'s in and around our meetings was worsening.

A.A. Groups were going underground. More and more members were deciding to avoid D.W.I.'s and the controversy surrounding them. The times and locations of these meetings were known only to invited attendees.

Tangible cooperation from state functionaries was almost non-existent, even though our C.P.C. Chairman, Delegate and Area Chairman were in frequent contact with them. We used every means to make them aware of our problems and the need for solutions. At one point, they promised that some very large state-conducted meetings would be initiated in several armories, to relieve the pressure. Like other promises, it has never been kept.

These, then, have been some of the problems experienced throughout the Maryland Area of A.A. There have been a variety of other problems, some unique to local situations; these have been as disruptive and damaging as the ones described above.

It was clear that if the situation was allowed to continue irreparable harm could be done to the program of recovery in Maryland. Therefore the Delegate made a decision to make known the facts, as well as his opinions, and to bring them before the Fellowship.

Informing the Area Group Conscience - At the April 1986 Area Committee Meeting, the Delegate presented a detailed report of problems being caused by the court slip program throughout the Maryland Area. He followed his presentation with a proposed resolution that "henceforth our cooperation with the state would be only to the extent of providing speakers for large D.W.I. meetings hosted and conducted by the state."

That would, in effect, terminate all cooperation by the Area Service structure in the signing of court slips. After discussion, the Area Committee voted, by a margin of 51 to 2, to support the Delegate's suggested resolution, and recommended that it be brought before the following Area Assembly.

Copies of the Delegate's report and the resolution, together with the vote of the Area Committee Group Conscience, were sent to all of the Area's D.C.M.'s with the request that they be distributed to and discussed with the individual A.A. Groups.

Also, a report of the Committee's action, and of the forthcoming vote by the Area Assembly appeared in the MARGENSER Newsletter, which is mailed to all G.S.R.'s (as well as Area Committee members and others).

In addition, the Area Assembly notification, mailed three weeks prior to the Assembly, included the Delegate's report to the Area Committee, results of the Committee's vote, and an announcement that the resolution would be voted on by the May 17, 1986 Area Assembly.

Our objective was to use every available means to insure that the G.S.R.'s and other Assembly members would be fully informed. (During the course of the May 17 Assembly, the Chairman asked for a show of hands of those who hadn't read the Delegate's Report, etc. Of more than 300 in the room, only three raised their hands.)

The process of informing was carried over into the May 17 Assembly itself. Prior to the vote on the Delegate's resolution, there was an open sharing session during which all sides on the court slip issue was heard. Assembly members were also reminded of their "Right of Decision", as described in the A.A. Concepts.

The Two-Thirds Requirement and the Vote - At the outset, the Delegate made it known that passage of his proposed resolution would be a major action as defined in the A.A. Concepts; therefore it would require a two-thirds majority vote by both the Area Committee and the Area Assembly. (The Area Committee vote, as stated, had been 53 to 2.)

All possible steps were taken to insure that only bona fide members of the Assembly would vote (G.S.R.'s, D.C.M.'s, officers). Following the open sharing session, the vote was taken. The tally was 154 to 57 in favor of the Delegate's proposal on D.W.I.'s. That is that Area cooperation would be limited to the providing of speakers for special D.W.I. meetings organized and monitored by the state.

All but a very few who were part of this process agreed that it had been handled fairly, and agreed to accept the fact that the voice of the Area had spoken.

A letter was sent all registered G.S.R.'s in the Area, advising them of the Area Assembly's decision, and asking that the Groups support that decision in the spirit of Unity. The response was amazing, with a very large number of the Groups each deciding independently to support the Assembly's action.

A second letter was sent to the Groups, updating them on the many Group Conscience decisions following the Assembly, and again making a call for Unity on the issue. More Groups voted to follow the decision of the Assembly. A small minority of Groups decided to continue signing the D.W.I. court slips.

Since we felt that we'd adequately stated the case for Unity on court slips, no further letters have been sent nor are any planned. Even so, an on-going attrition of slip-signing Groups is under way through which, we believe, virtual unanimity will be achieved.

Conditions of the Group Conscience Decision - Several dramatic changes have occurred within Maryland A.A. following the Group Conscience vote at the May 17, 1986 Area Assembly, including:

- Over-crowding of meetings has almost totally disappeared
- Complaints about A.A. meetings by churches have virtually ceased
- Old-timers who'd left are returning to meetings
- Complaints about breaks of anonymity have ceased
- Assemblies, Committee Meetings are more positive and productive
- Our Third Legacy work has returned to the forefront
- Efforts toward our Common Purpose have revitalized
- An atmosphere of Unity and Fellowship has returned

We continue to provide speakers for five D.W.I. meetings in public facilities, conducted by monitor personnel. While the State has never sent the quantity of D.W.I.'s agreed upon to these meetings, we feel that for now they justify our participation.

A very small minority of the Groups in the Maryland Area, less than 10%, has yet to follow the Area Group Conscience; they continue to sign court slips. A new problem has arisen: state employees who are also A.A. members have started new "groups" solely for the purpose of signing D.W.I. court slips. They give every evidence of being affiliated with the state, yet they seek A.A. recognition. Further, nothing can be learned about whether or not they are self-supporting.

The pain and chaos of the past has brought with it certain rewards. As a result of the long and vigorous debate on the court slip issue, we now have, among other things:

- Broader awareness of how Groups, Districts and the Area function
- Deeper appreciation of the Assembly Group Conscience process
- Many more regular Tradition meetings than we'd had before
- Greater awareness of the purposes and meaning of the Concepts

This, then, is the essence of an Area's experience with court slips. And of how the strength of First Tradition principles was used to retain us in Unity and to restore our Common Welfare. We hope the above will benefit others, as it is in sharing our experience, strength and hope with each other that we may together help insure A.A.'s future.

Maryland Area General Service