

March 2019

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the spring edition of *Beyond the Bars*, a quarterly newsletter aimed at Regional PLOs and anyone interested in this vital aspect of service. Here you'll find articles, news and stories from AA members that reflect over 60-years of hands-on experience.

A Day in the Life of a Regional Probation LO

When I volunteered for the vacant post of Probation Liaison Officer (PLO) at North West Region, it was for the same reason, three years earlier, I had volunteered to take on Probation Liaison for Cheshire East Intergroup. I still had the words of the then PI Officer in the forefront of my mind. 'Where's the gratitude?' he had asked of Intergroup, somewhat despairingly, after many fruitless attempts to fill the long vacant post.

There is no doubt in my mind that I have benefitted much more from my regional service than has either our Fellowship or the multitude of suffering alcoholics still out in the wilderness. I have made some wonderful friends and met members who have been and surely will remain an inspiration to me. In particular, the members who have heeded the Fellowship's pleas and have come forward to take up vacant intergroup posts with such determination and enthusiasm fill me with a sense of both joy and humility.

The region LO post is of course much less 'hands on' in terms of dealing with probation staff and probationers than Probation/Social Services LO at Intergroup. Guideline 13 tells us that, apart from communicating with and collating information from the Intergroup Probation/Social Services Liaison Officers, another function of the Region P/SS LO is to encourage intergroups where activity is slow or non-existent. Feedback from those intergroups without a PLO and my former experience as an intergroup PLO made me very conscious that lack of information about the role was a major obstacle to encouraging others to become interested.

I therefore set about compiling a starter pack for prospective Intergroup PLOs in NW Region. This was not in an attempt to tell anyone else how they should perform the role, but simply to detail all the things I had discovered during three years of service at intergroup level. Hopefully, this would make the task of taking up a vacant Probation LO post less daunting and also to help make that role, once commenced, as fruitful as possible.

Once completed, the starter-packs availability was publicised as part of the quarterly reports to Region. Most of the intergroups requested copies and favourable feedback was received about the principle of providing service material of this nature, albeit non-conference approved, to help fill vacant posts. At the time of writing, NW Region now has seven intergroups, with PLOs who are actively engaging with their local probation offices, and a further three intergroups that are covering probation activity with other officers. This is a welcome improvement on probation activity three years earlier.

Whilst the starter-pack principle was undoubtedly well-received, I believe the constant requests made to intergroup representatives at each region meeting, to go back to their intergroups to raise awareness of and enthusiasm for Probation Liaison, possibly contributed more to the filling of vacant posts than anything else. That, together with keeping everyone informed about the ongoing developments in liaison between AA and the Probation Service nationally.

Whilst a Regional P/SS LO is less likely to have to face dealings with National Probation Service (NPS) staff than at intergroup level, some situations can warrant regional LO involvement. I was particularly fortunate to have involvement with setting up a countrywide cooperation between AA and Derbyshire

Probation Service through an initial contact made at intergroup level. Three intergroups cover Derbyshire, each one attached to a different AA region, so it was important to maintain effective communication and present a consistent message in each area.

The numerous visits to Derbyshire PS Headquarters with fellow members from adjacent regions, together with Sunday morning meetings at a cafe in the Peak District to discuss our approach, were very uplifting. When this culminated in a written agreement of understanding between Derbyshire PS and AA, it was one of the emotional highlights of my RLO term because it made me realise anything is possible in service providing we have patience, humility, determination, and continue to carry the message simply and honestly ... no more, no less.

Charles H

Former P/SSLO

North West Region

A Letter to Polish-speaking inmates

My name is Tomek and I'm an alcoholic. Before I came to my first meeting in 2011, I had been divorced, knifed a couple of times and sacked from a few jobs. I was unshaven, longhaired, toothless and arrogant, and pretending to be a rock fan. I didn't speak with most of my old friends and family. Instead I ran in my head a lot of vengeance plans as a response to many resentments.

At the very end of my drinking I was thinking of suicide and constantly about alcohol. 'Today, just one' – but I never stopped on one. Once, at night, I had been waiting for my ex -wife in bushes next to her flat. Thank God I was too drunk to hurt her. Since I came to AA, not freely at first, my life has changed. Craving for drink has left me, and for other substances too - even smoking.

Sanity returned with self-respect and a lot of gratitude. I have rebuilt my relations with my family, and now I have my own. Calmness appears each time I enter an AA meeting. It's a privilege now not a punishment. All I have to do is to remember a couple of simple rules – like readiness to be helpful to those who cannot be free from the drinking obsession.

Thanks to my British friends I can see Polish inmates in AA meetings within UK's prisons. Most of us are here because of our own drinking or using. I feel a bit nervous walking down the prison corridor, but at the meeting room I can breathe freely. They talk a lot about freedom – peace of mind and how to find it. If

you're reading this you might ask the person who gave it to you for details of meetings at your place. I know how hard it is to admit to a drinking problem, especially in a foreign language.

I used to say, if I know how to order booze in English, I can also say in English what I intend not to do again, because my drinking wasn't safe for me or for others. Please come and just listen. If you ask, I'll send books concerning alcoholism and how to live with it. If you wish we can swap letters and talk about this addiction and recovery. They might be checked but we can have contact, so you won't be alone in sickness. Just ask for a 'postal sponsorship' through York. If your sentence is close to an end I know how difficult is to walk outside 'dry'. It is a trick of the illness - If you pick one drink it won't be the last one. New problems and new suffering instead of celebration. We can pick you up from the gate, quite often it's a safe new start.

Please give yourself this one hour and come to the meeting. If you don't like it, OK. But if you find some similarities I can only pray for your persistence, because many try to stop drinking on their own with no results. In this illness it works only when I talk to other alcoholics.

Best wishes and hope to see you somewhere. Who knows, so many good surprises have happened to me already.

Tomek

PLO for Polish-speaking London Intergroup



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**DO YOU HAVE A DRINKING PROBLEM?
DO YOU WANT HELP?
RING ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

☎ 020 3916 00 97

Polish-speaking Alcoholics Anonymous Helpline

Monday - Friday 19.00 - 21.00
Saturday, Sunday 17.00 - 21.00

www.aa-pik-wielkabrytania.org.pl
e-mail: pik.aa.london@gmail.com

(Tomek's article is reproduced in Polish below)

Mam na imię Tomek i jestem alkoholikiem. Zanim trafiłem na swój pierwszy mityng AA w 2011 roku, byłem już po rozwodzie, raniony nożami, wyrzucony z kilku prac. Byłem nieogolonym, zarośniętym, bezzębnym arogantem, udającym fana rocka. Nie odzywałem się do połowy rodziny i starych przyjaciół. W zamian żyłem planami zemsty na skutek uraz.

Na koniec picia myślałem już tylko o samobójstwie i o następnej butelce. „Dziś tylko jedna” – ale nigdy nie kończyłem na jednej. Raz nocą czekałem w krzakach na swoją byłą żonę, ale dzięki Bogu byłem zbyt pijany, żeby ją skrzywdzić. Odkąd jestem w AA, bez radości na początku, moje życie zmieniło się, opuścił mnie przymus picia oraz używania innych substancji, w tym palenia.

Wróciły pocztytalność i szacunek do siebie, a przez to dużo wdzięczności. Odbudowałem więzi z rodziną i założyłem własną. Ogarnia mnie spokój za każdym razem, kiedy wchodzę na mityng. Teraz to nagroda, a nie kara. Wszystko, co muszę robić, to pamiętać o kilku prostych zasadach, jak gotowość do bycia pomocnym tym, którzy nie mogą się uwolnić od przymusu picia.

Dzięki wsparciu brytyjskich przyjaciół, mogę widywać się z polskimi więźniami na więziennych mityngach. Większość z nas trafiła za kratki przez swoje picie i ćpanie. Jestem spanikowany idąc więziennym korytarzem, ale uspokajam się, docierając na mityng. Mówią dużo o wolności, tej w duszy i o tym, jak ją znaleźć. Jeżeli czytasz te słowa, poproś tego, kto je dostarczył, o szczegóły mityngu w Twoim więzieniu. Wiem, jak trudno przyznać się do problemu z picciem, zwłaszcza w obcym języku.

Zazwyczaj mawiam, że skoro potrafiłem zamówić butelkę po angielsku, to mogę też zrozumieć po angielsku co robić, żeby po nią już nie sięgać. Moje picie stało się niebezpieczne dla mnie i innych. Proszę, po prostu przyjdź i posłuchaj. Jeśli chcesz, wyślemy Ci książki o chorobie alkoholowej i jak z nią żyć. Jeżeli chcesz, możemy pisać do siebie listy o uzależnieniu i zdrowieniu. Mogą być one sprawdzane, ale przynajmniej utrzymamy kontakt. Nie zostaniesz sam w swojej chorobie. Zapytaj o „postal sponsorship” przez York. Jeżeli niedługo wychodzisz, to wiem, jak trudno jest przekroczyć próg na sucho. To kolejny podstęp tej choroby, która chce, abyś sięgnął po ten pierwszy łyk – ale to nigdy nie kończy się na jednym. Rezultatem jest nowe cierpienie zamiast świętowania. Możemy Cię odebrać spod bramy – często jest to początek bezpiecznego startu.

Proszę, daj sobie tę jedną godzinę na mityng. Jeżeli Ci się nie spodoba, to OK. Ale jeśli znajdziesz jakieś podobieństwa, to mogę tylko modlić się o wytrwałość dla Ciebie,

ponieważ wielu próbowało rzucić picie o własnych siłach – i dlatego bez rezultatu. W tej chorobie zdrowieję tylko wtedy, kiedy rozmawiam z drugim alkoholikiem.

Najlepsze życzenia i mam nadzieję, że się gdzieś zobaczymy. Kto wie? Tak wiele dobrych niespodzianek mnie spotyka.

Tomek Alkoholik

News Roundup

Through the Gate

For many inmates, the hardest part of a prison sentence is the end. Temptations faced on the outside are still there, and without help many succumb on release. The ‘Through the Gate’ scheme has proved to work across the country, linking newly-released inmates with AA members who can get them to meetings and provide support.

In order to do this successfully, a 12-Step list is needed, drawn from AA members in the UK willing to cover prisons in their catchment area. If you would like to go on the list, please contact your intergroup or region PLO and ask for details.

Prison/Probation Seminar

A seminar is to be held in York on Saturday 29th June as part of AA’s Prison & Criminal Justice Partnership initiative. Speakers will include government ministers, prison officials, and AA members who have experience of both recovery and service in prisons.

The Seminar is open to all regional and intergroup Prison and Probation LOs, and anyone interested in this aspect of service.

Insurance for Prison Meetings

Prison meetings are the responsibility of the intergroup that covers that particular area and can be added to the intergroups’ insurance policy at relatively little cost. In the past, some prison meetings have been uninsured, mainly because of confusion as to their status.

Regions share a joint responsibility in ensuring that prison meetings are covered and can take up this obligation wherever necessary.

Editor's Note: We would welcome any stories or articles from AA members willing to share their experience of life behind bars and how they found recovery. Also, the experiences of RPLOs within the prison system. Please email material to Adam: beyondthebars@aamail.org