

Custody and Alcoholics Anonymous

Published on 3 December 2024 Written by Sergeant Richard Scullion, City of London Police

Practice note: collaboration to support those whose alcohol consumption has contributed to their arrest

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I am a sergeant in the City of London Police and have worked in custody management training and partnerships since 2020. Two years ago, I launched a collaboration between our custody and **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** to help people in custody find alternatives to excessive and dangerous alcohol consumption.

What is AA?

AA is run by its members, all of whom are alcoholics. There are 4,400 AA meetings in the UK each week and a worldwide membership of two million. The only condition of joining AA is the desire to stop drinking. There is no waiting list. AA meetings are immediately accessible and free to enter.

Members are not trained counsellors. They are alcoholics who are helping fellow alcoholics in need. From my work in the collaboration, I have observed that alcoholism has impacts across all of society. No one is better or worse off than someone else when they have an addiction.

Custody procedures

As part of the collaboration, on being booked in, any detainee whose alcohol consumption has contributed to their arrest is given a leaflet entitled 'It sure beats sitting in a cell...'. This was produced by AA London North Region specifically for the collaboration and asks the reader to consider the impact alcohol is having on them. It includes testimony from someone who went through prison and describes 'drinking against his will' to feed their alcoholism, but who now enjoys both a happy home life and successful professional life on achieving continued sobriety.

Custody provides a window of opportunity when someone is willing to seek help. Our addiction support worker in custody will suggest to the detainee that they speak with AA. We, as police, are not here to make any assumptions that those who come into the custody suite intoxicated are alcoholics. But we encourage the detainee to think about their alcohol consumption, especially as it

may have contributed to their arrest.

If a detainee agrees, we will put them in contact with the AA 24-hour helpline. They can speak in confidence and, if they would like to, an AA member will arrange to meet them on release. AA will see anyone regardless of the reason for being in custody and we share absolutely no information. If they are likely to be remanded in custody, AA can reach out to them through the prison AA fellowship. There are 160 **AA fellowship meetings** in and within walking distance of the City of London, operating seven days a week.

The police take a purposely hands-off approach so that the person can take the first steps themselves to address their drinking. There will be an entry on the custody record that contact with the AA helpline has been made, but AA does not disclose the content of the discussion or whether a meeting has been arranged.

We cannot insist on someone attending AA for a case disposal decision. Engagement must be what the individual wants to do. If, however, they want to evidence attendance, the AA meeting secretary can provide them a 'chit', which they can show. This does not guarantee sobriety but confirms attendance at a meeting.

Collaboration

The support AA provide is fantastic. I initially expected a lukewarm or even hostile response from those who had passed through the criminal justice system. But I could not have been more wrong. I meet with a group of people who see being arrested as a wake-up call – a positive, life-changing experience that they needed. Through these meetings I have met some hugely inspirational people who are living fulfilling lives in service to others.

Alcoholics Anonymous appreciates very much this cooperation with the City of London Police. It makes a real difference to reach people who may have a drinking problem and found themselves in a custody cell, as the person is more likely to realise a serious need for change in their lives. We hope this type of cooperation can be rolled out nationally."

Adam, AA London Region North

Records are not kept so we cannot collate statistics. But I am confident that future testimonies will be shared which mention the support provided by the collaboration.

AA have open meetings which anyone, including officers, can attend to listen to examples of lived experience.

Furthermore, a number of AA members have come into City of London Police to share their testimony during training days. This has given officers the opportunity to ask questions they would not have the opportunity to ask elsewhere.

I would encourage any force interested in implementing a similar collaboration in their own area to reach out to their local AA branch. Please feel free to contact me through 'Going equipped' and both AA and I will help make that connection.

- Peer reviewed by Sergeant Andrew Jackson, South Yorkshire Police

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