

The Story Court Cards in A.A. in Southern California



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A.A. and the Court System

Alcoholics Anonymous and court systems all over the United States have been working hand and hand almost from the beginning of A.A. In fact, it was our court system that indirectly help put Ebby T. and Bill W. together.

It was a Judge who had he followed the law, should have given Ebby some serious jail time for crashing his car while drunk into a woman's home. He might have even had him committed to an asylum. But because two members of the Oxford Group offered an alternative, the Judge released Ebby in to the care of these two gentlemen. This lead to Ebby's meeting Bill and passing along to him a solution to his malady.

Many alcoholics were incarcerated or committed to mental hospitals by the courts as a way to help the drunk stop drinking. Almost all would return to drink in a short time of their release. Several of the stories from our Big Book shows how the courts dealt with alcoholics prior to the formation of our program. In the 1st edition we have the story called "A Ward of the Probate Court" and in the second edition "Joe's Woes" are both examples of how the courts reacted to this social problem.

In the early issues of the AA Grapevine, we find stories, almost monthly, of AA and the Courts working with each other. We found many of the early groups inviting Judges and peace offices to special meeting to help educate them on the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. They help them to see the alcoholic as a sick person and not a bad person. Many offered their help and alternatives to incarceration.

As AA's reputation for being successful with alcoholics, more and more Judges began offering AA as an alternative to jail time. As more and more drunks were sent to A.A. it became apparent to Judge Emerson there should be some sort of way to verify if a defendant attended the A.A. meetings.

The next few pages are some information about the development and implementation of the use of court cards in the Southern California area.

Two examples from different ends of the country virtually have the same results.

AA Grapevine April 1946,

A.A. 's Aid Washington Judge

During February, the Washington, D. C., Post carried a story on its front page to the effect that Alcoholics Anonymous have "salvaged" all but two of 35 drunk case defendants referred to them by a municipal judge since the beginning of the year.

According to the newspaper account, two members of the Washington Group spend six mornings a week in court conferring with the prospects. They serve in answer to the request of the judge, who averred that he felt discouraged with present methods of dealing with alcoholics.

The judge refers only those cases whom he considers worthy of A.A. guidance, asking them to step aside for interviews. He recommends a system of "screening" such defendants, to avoid court appearances in many cases, and has urged a meeting of civic leaders for discussion of the handling of drunks and revision of the laws now governing disposition of their cases.

AA Grapevine July 1946,

The Eye-Opener, Los Angeles, Calif.: "Through the aid and eager cooperation of Judge John J. Ford, with Probation Officer W. W. Lord, a really outstanding experiment has been tried.

"In six weeks' time, 81 alcoholics were released on waiver without appearing in court. They had made no promises but only had indicated a real interest in A.A., and in the judgment of the A.A. member there at the time were worth taking a chance with.

"Upon hitting the street, they were told more about A.A. and then directed to the first available meeting. However, they were also told they were not on probation and were under no compulsion by the law to have anything more to do with A.A. The decision was theirs to make.

"Sixty-four have been sober for periods ranging from a few days to six weeks; seventeen fell by the wayside almost at once. So far these first ones have brought 19 others into the meetings to find out what A.A. is all about. ."

August 14, 2003

Dear Charley,

As promised you at Frank H. Memorial, here are some notes that I sent a lady in Iceland about the Court card that you wanted covered at the Archives meeting. Bud M. will be there who was co-originator of the court card.

what I did not cover in this essay was the standards that Judges, probation, parole Officers and Employers need to Identify the alcoholic and then how to structure a court order and orders for probation/ parole, employment that are required to make it effective.

A Judge usually has the blood alcohol content at the time of the arrest (0.20 or greater) or number of prior arrests 2 or more) which will identify alcoholism 95% + of the time correctly).

Then, the orders must be, attend 2 or more AA meetings per week verified by the secretary or group leader by signing, dating and signature or initials.

The form of the card goes something like this (with many variations that have developed over the years since 1966-?):

"The bearer has attended a regular meeting of AA, clean, sober and stayed the full meeting"

Date: _____ Group: _____
secretary/meeting leader: _____

Then I placed 1 to 15 spaces under the above nomenclature.

This was the key to getting some of the people coming through my courtroom. I always set a date for them to come back and see me a month or two later with the proof. The simple message I always tried to impart was:

"You either do this or I will put you in jail " I stopped pleading or lecturing to them. I do not care what the reason for their drinking or the circumstances of "This time" drunk was.

When I had a homeless wino type (4th stage alcoholic) person, I would sometimes give them 90 meetings in 90 days and check up on their verification every couple of weeks. This was a better detoxification method than jail. (In the early days, we had no detox centers or recovery houses to send them. These are of recent origin thank the lord.) I am attaching the essay. Hope it comes through. Good luck on your meeting. wish I could join you.

Judge Leon Emerson, Retired

AA COURT CARD

A. USE & NECESSITY

Alcoholics Anonymous attendance is the best and most effective method of sobriety ever created. It is an introduction to a group of good people meeting together to share their strength hope and experiences to assist themselves and others to living a clean and sober life, law abiding and responsible as citizens.

1. AA is probably responsible for 90% or more of all sobrieties.
2. AA Court Card was created to verify attendance at AA meetings and see that the Judge's order is carried out.
 - i. When they are still drinking, or using alcohol or drugs they are incapable of keeping promises to a judge or anyone else.
 - ii. The writer has never found a better way to see that defendants in his court would attend these meetings than the AA Court card. He received promises for years and months to attend but few were ever found to attend.
 - iii. There is no membership list or record of attendance at a meeting of this voluntary organization. Judges, Probation, Parole officers and employers have found the AA Court card very useful in verifying attendance at AA. The more meetings they attend the better they get in every area of their life.
 - iv. The writer and Bud MC. created this card together. (Bud now has over 49 years of grateful sobriety)
 - v. If the Judge can keep a person sober and clean in any way, the less likely they will be repeating crimes against society such as driving under the influence, domestic violence, larceny and theft, as well as other crimes.
 - vi. AA cost nothing. There are no dues or fees. There are no officers, professionals, or superiors supervising the

attendance or sobriety. It is a voluntary organization of men and women who meet about once per week to exchange their strength and hope and experiences to live one day at a time sober and clean.

- vii. Each member will gratefully give freely of their time to assist their fellow alcoholics to stay clean and sober. They often will go to any length to assist another in their sobriety.
 - viii. They have a custom of sponsorship that is unique. It is indescribable. Like a big brother or big sister, teacher and mentor, advisor and good friend all rolled up in one. It is often a very close relationship going on for months or years.
3. A practicing alcoholic finds it very difficult to survive day-by-day, hour-by-hour. They have often lost their job, family, and friends because of their addiction. If they still have them, they are often on a strained relationship with all significant others. AA becomes a family of friends ever helpful to one another.

PRACTICAL USE OF THE AA COURT CARD

1. The card was created in the mid-1960s to verify attendance at AA, a voluntary organization.
2. I order the attendance at AA by a probation type of sentence. My clerk or courtroom Bailiff gives the card to the defendant with his name and case number on the card, usually using his first name and initial to assist in his anonymity.
3. Defendant is given a date to return to court (or to a probation person) on a day certain usually about a month or so away. They are ordered to return to the court or probation officer on a periodic basis. I like one month away for the first report. As they become more compliant and seem to be doing better by attendance at more meetings than required, I lengthen the reporting period accordingly.

4. He is directed to attend AA meetings and get the Secretary or meeting leader to sign or initial their card and return with it to the courtroom or reporting point.
5. The card can be used for verifying attendance at classes or domestic violence or psychological therapy sessions.
6. My prototype card has 15 lines on the card and can be used and filed in court file if it is practical or necessary to do so.
7. It calls for the name of the meeting, date and secretary's name or initials.
8. The Secretaries usually pick up the cards at the beginning or have them dropped in the basket passed around for the tradition contribution and signed while the meeting is going on. The defendants then pick up the cards at the end of the meeting from the secretary's table.
 - a. This seems to encourage the attendees to come at the beginning of the meeting, stay for the meeting and meet other people at the end.
 - b. Each secretary can do it as they wish. AA is a voluntary organization and the judge has no authority to dictate how it shall be done.
9. The Judge can easily detect forgeries by looking at the card. If it is all signed with the same pen or pencil, same surface, uniform and looks unused or unwrinkled it generally is a phony. I have found them easy to spot over the years.
10. I react to a forged card in various ways, depending upon the defendant and the circumstances of the forgery and sometimes the type of crime, which brings him or her under the jurisdiction of the court.
 - a. If I have a courtroom full of people reporting, I sometimes will give the forger two or three days in jail. I don't like jail generally because it is expensive and cumbersome to the system. I try to find more practical and effective solutions.
 - b. Sometimes I will give a person an order to attend every night for 30 or 60 days (for repeaters). Sometimes I will request them to bring a sponsor in with them. Sometimes

I will require an educated person to bring me a one-page review of the first three chapters of the AA big book or the first three traditions in the 12 and 12 book of Steps & Traditions. I work on a case-by-case basis.

- c. I try never to over react to an addict's transgressions. They are addicts and are still practicing their diseased condition. Lying and cheating is a symptom of their condition. They are just trying to feel good, get along and survive day by day. Punishment may make me feel like I am doing my job for society but it probably will do them more harm than good. No two addicts are alike and they cannot all be treated the same with any practical effectiveness.

- d. Court cards are easy to file. No form is required or always used. The original form is still being generally used. Some courts just print a letter size sheet and give them to the alcoholic or addict. They are cumbersome and get soiled and destroyed easily and seemingly easily lost. The cards easily fit in a man's shirt pocket. We printed them green originally because that was the left-over stock the printer had from another completed job when he volunteered to print up the first thousand back in the mid-sixties.

SOME DO's AND Don'ts IN USE OF COURT CARD

- A. Never direct probationers to go to a AA meeting. When too many "new be" come into an old AA meeting, resentments develop from some of the old timers who no longer feel comfortable with so many new young people around leave and go to other meetings. The upside is that many of those with resentment, a big book and a coffee pot go out and form a new meeting. (Meetings in Downey, a city of 90,000, in the suburbs of Los Angeles, CA. went from three meetings per week to about 40 in three years)

- B. Never ask an AA to go to a meeting and take role or spy on others. What takes place at the meeting must stay there and that includes whether a person was there or not.

- C. Never try to tell an AA secretary how to run their meeting or how they collect and sign the court cards. Most of the secretaries now say, " send me all you've got". The people

are coming in, sobering up and staying. Bud will often ask people at an AA meeting how many came in initially carrying a court card. He reports that sometimes half the hands will go up.

- D. Los Angeles general office secretary sent out a memo to all the Secretaries several years ago, which suggested that they pick up the cards, sign them during the meeting and return them at the end of the meeting. This encourages them to stay the full meeting and receive some of the advantages thereof.
- E. Never ask a Secretary to certify or guarantee the sobriety of a person. Members of the fellowship will take care of that. They seem to flock around the person and try to help in any way they can.

AA HAS BEEN EXPREMELY COOPERATIVE

- F. Originally the fellowship was upset. This was a voluntary organization and here I, an outsider, not even a member of the fellowship forcing AA attendance. The Southern California groups representative, one Cliff W. (who later became a dear friend) was the elected Panelists to the General Service Office in NY came to visit me to discuss the matter informally of the court card in my chambers. We kicked around the various ramifications. He agreed that AA was large and powerful at that time (mid-sixties) and no matter what I did it probably would not hurt AA.

We finally resolved that they could run AA as usual and I could run my courtroom as I saw fit and within the purview of my duties. We were both sure that we could get along all right. AA was willing to help in any way. I remember he commented that in one way or another everybody was "forced" to come into AA, whether family, doctor, employer or just by being sick and tired of being sick and tired.

- G. Some of the secretaries became quite upset and wrote Bill W. the co-founder of AA in New York. He in turn

wrote a letter to the central office of AA in Los Angeles and asked them to investigate this situation and write him their observations.

H. I spent an evening with a committee appointed by the secretary of the AA Los Angeles Central Office. These were all strangers to me and I felt a little uncomfortable. I wanted to cooperate in every way I could. In no way, did I want to unduly interfere with their organization I had no jurisdiction over them and they were not part of any governmental or criminal justice system. None of us expected that AA would become an "arm" of the court. I was asking them to cooperate, why not listen to their wishes and concerns. They were quite sincere in their enquiry. I later found one of them was an Appellant Court Justice; another was a tough litigation attorney. Their incisive questioning seems to be looking for an ulterior motive, either publicity profit or just a plain ego power trip in some way. Strangers then, they later became very dear friends.

1. I have often wondered what the letter/report contained that went to Bill W. whose very name we greatly revere. I never felt it was my place to ask. Just curious.

I. I felt all-alone in the meeting. I was not a member of AA nor did I want to pay any entrance fees by doing a lot of drinking. (I had enough troubles already trying to learn to be a good judge) There was never in any books I had read or any of my training of 10 years in the law that helped me with my problem.

J. Years later, I met the successor of Bill W. at the General Service Office in New York who came out to Salt Lake City to speak to the large AA meeting held at the Summer School on Alcoholism taking place at the University of Utah. I was teaching a class of Judges, Police Officers and Probation Officers at the one-week school in the Criminal Justice Section which I co-lead. He came to the

classroom to hear my scheduled talk on the use of the court card. We later had lunch. He told me that their research in New York of the court card found that we had originated it in Downey, California. I was naturally pleased and complimented by his information. I think that was the first time I realized that we had first started the court card.

July 4, 1992

Leon Emerson, Retired Judge
Bud Mc.