

Alcoholics Anonymous: A view from the bench

I was asked to give my views concerning AA from the perspective of 22 years as a trial judge. My first 5 years were in adult traffic court, and the last seventeen in the Juvenile system. During this time I have come to believe that AA is the only program that consistently works.

When I began my career, the docket contained hundreds of D.U.I. offenses. It wasn't long before I realized how important the first step, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable," was to the rehabilitative process. Few of the defendants had any insight into how out of control their lives were and the underlying reason for that. One example that has forever stayed in my mind involved a middle-age man who had multiple D.U.I.'s. He stood grasping the podium, shaking and wobbly. He was dressed in the standard orange jump suit and cheap flip flops from the jail. His former wife and his children sat behind him. I learned from his wife that they had once had a happy family, but that was gone. Wives and children can only see dad in this situation so many times. They divorced. The children rarely saw him. He had been a successful business man. He'd lost the business due to his chaotic behavior and lack of dependability. He had many friends. They, too, dropped out of his life. I asked if he had ever taken steps to deal with his alcohol problem. He replied, "No, why do you ask?"

In searching for programs, I eventually found AA. Two nice gentlemen met with some of the judges and what developed was an evaluation and referral program. The first line of resistance when courts try new ideas is cost. No problem, the program's free. The second roadblock were lawyers because the clients felt there was a stigma to participating in something with "Alcoholic" in the name. No problem, it's anonymous. Finally, people perceived going to AA meant they had a problem. That leads me back to my first point, that the emphasis on recognizing the problem is the first part of the program.

We still had some foot draggers who would insist they were not alcoholics after the evaluation said otherwise. One of my colleagues solved this by saying, "OK, then you can go to the meeting and be a good example for those that are."

Since I have been in the Juvenile Court, I find much the same attitudes prevail. Every day Juvenile Court Judges remove children from their families because of the parents' substance abuse. I wager the vast majority of our cases require drug and alcohol assessments and treatment as part of the case plan for the return of the children. It is undoubtedly the goal most often achieved.

The youthful offenders with alcohol related offenses have already developed the shell of denial. When a child tells me he doesn't have a problem, my common rejoinder is, "You're sitting in a courtroom. You're looking at 60 days in jail. It's because of your using. Most people consider that a problem."

In our sophisticated world of drug courts and D.U.I. Court, there will always be a place for AA

Signed, A Juvenile Court Judge