

# NATIVES FORM OF ALCOHOLICS

# OWN BRAND ANONYMOUS

## Native AA Chapter Makes Headway in Fighting Alcoholism

A special Native branch of Alcoholics Anonymous, working with Bureau of Indian Affairs cooperation in Fairbanks, is showing

success in helping to rehabilitate Native alcoholics that could not be reached by other methods or by conventional AA chapters.

About 150 persons have made some improvement as a result of the program.

The special chapter follows the general group therapy idea of AA. A person joins when he admits to himself that he has a problem with alcohol, and decides he wants to improve himself.

The chapter meets weekly, and the members discuss their own experiences and solutions for their problems.

Although the AA approach has proven effective in many cases, it has in the past showed little help for Natives. BIA officials examining the problem discovered the problem was in communications—the Natives were not able to join in the group discussion.

One reason for the lack of communication was that the

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# Alcoholics Anonymous . . .

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Natives were accustomed to white men dominating any meeting in which both groups were involved. A BIA social worker commented that former practices at many meetings held by governmental agencies had contributed to this factor.

In addition, there was a language barrier—even a person with a good grasp of English often had trouble with the more technical terms used in discussing alcoholism.

To break down the barrier, the BIA and the regular Alcoholics Anonymous chapter have helped organize a separate Native AA chapter. The BIA provides a meeting place and the regular AA chapter provides much help, but the chapter is run by the Natives themselves.

The BIA has hired several rehabilitated Native alcoholics to act as advisors to help people join the chapter. They are available any time, night or day, and can provide food and housing for the alcoholics.

If necessary, these aides can board the alcoholics at a recovery house long enough to dry them up. Then they are introduced to the Native AA chapter.

Although the advisors give some help at the meetings, the major improvement comes from the group discussions of the chapter. Thirteen to 20 persons, in various stages of recovery, attend each meeting.

Bob Carroll, a BIA social worker, explained that many of the alcoholics have become cut off from society by the time they seek help. The AA chapter puts them among people who understand the situation, and acts as a bridge to reintroduce the alcoholic to normal society.

Recovery from alcoholism is slow, and the alcoholics often slide back. The AA recognizes this, and will try and help the person who realizes he is about to slip. In addition, they will allow the person to come back and try again after he fails.

After the person has made some progress, the BIA can offer assistance through its programs. The Community Action Program has helped by providing jobs for several

people.

The BIA would like to locate more jobs for these recovering alcoholics, because idle time is a major contribution towards the backsliding. However, those who most need something to do are the ones most liable to start drinking again as soon as they receive a paycheck.

A general scarcity of jobs in the Fairbanks area makes it even harder to arrange work for people who are not recovered to the point where they can be relied on.

Judging the results of the program is hard, because no alcoholic is ever cured. One of the Native aides admitted that he has to live on a day-to-day basis—he has to fight each day to stay sober for that day.

However, the BIA reports that about 200 people have attended meetings in the year since the program started, and 150 of these showed improvement.

In discussing problems and bringing the person back into society, the program has had success a few non-alcoholics have attended meetings and discussed other problems. Chapter members are requesting they meet three times a week, instead of the present once a week.

At least two members have progressed to where they can fully participate in the regular AA meetings, and several others are almost to that point. Several of the Natives who have taken part in the chapter are now successfully holding jobs.

One of the aides commented that, by staying sober himself, he was providing encouragement to those who had formerly known him as a fellow alcoholic. In return, his work was helping him in his own battle to stay sober. The four aides hired in Fairbanks represent four Native groups—Eskimo, Athabascan, Tlingit, and Haida.

Although the program has been successful among Native men, it has not worked very well among women. One problem is that most persons recognize their problem when they run out of the resources to buy more alcohol—and the woman has the ability to get drinks as long as she has any beauty left.

The BIA has, however, hired a rehabilitated Native woman alcoholic to attempt to reach this group. She will start her work next month.

Some failures are to be expected, explained social worker Bob Carroll, because alcoholism is the disease that is most difficult to treat without requiring placing the victim in an institution.

The alcoholic is using drinking as anesthesia to avoid some problem he is unable to face. Carroll called the AA method "the most promising approach so far."

One of the aides added that an alcoholic often became a good "con artist", and would appear to recover because they see some immediate benefit. Only when a person really recognized his problem could real progress be made, he said.

A State judge in Fairbanks called alcoholism "Alaska's number 1 public health problem", and added that 90% of the court cases—except for minor traffic violations—involved exposure to alcohol either at or before the crime.

At present, he said, there was no general rehabilitation program except AA. He added that persons in the jails were being allowed to attend the meetings.

The State Division of Mental Health is setting up some projects, assuming that they can obtain Federal grants. Alcoholism is excluded by law from the regular state treatment program.

The only other present arrangements are to pay for admission at a special hospital in the Lower 48, or to obtain help from the Veterans Administration, whose program is just starting.

Another Alcoholics Anonymous program is underway in Anchorage, and the BIA is working towards offering it in smaller communities. One of the aides was in Kotzebue this week to organize a project, and another one has described the program to communities along the Alaska Highway.

The aides are available to villages at their request, but the BIA lacks travel funds for the aides. Generally they have been dropped off by BIA officials on other trips, and the villages have provided food and housing for their stay.