



#31 meeting attendance cards

This paper, written in 2002, is meant to serve as a response to the numerous inquiries we have received from groups regarding meeting attendance cards. The meeting attendance card phenomenon is multinational in scope. We are aware of it occurring in parts of North and South America, as well as in Asia, the Pacific Rim, and Europe. Please note, however, that we are working from our North American experience, and your own national or local situation might greatly affect the appropriateness of this bulletin.

The group is the final authority in this matter. The suggestions offered here are merely intended to aid groups in their decision-making processes.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many of our groups have experienced a dramatic increase in the number of people attending an NA meeting with a meeting attendance card of some type. The group is asked to validate that person's attendance by signing the paper, sometimes referred to as a court card. (When we use the terms *meeting attendance card* or *court card* we mean any one of an assortment of signature cards or other papers a person presents for a signature to verify their attendance at an NA meeting.)

Many of these attendance cards came about as tools developed by drug courts to verify the mandatory attendance component of their sentences. Our initial interactions with drug courts began in the United States in 1998. There were approximately 100 drug courts in operation in the US at that time. It is projected that there could be 1500 drug courts in the US alone by 2004! Similar programs have begun to spring up in other countries as well. The strategies presented in this resource paper will help equip groups and members to welcome the additional newcomers without being overburdened.

One of the principal concerns expressed over and over again is whether signing a meeting attendance card conflicts with the guidance expressed in Traditions Six and Ten. We don't believe that it does in principle—though we encourage each group to discuss this question for themselves, just as we have done. The rationale for our thinking is: If a group were to report on members' attendance, their behavior, whether they stay for the whole meeting, their participation or lack thereof, or report somehow on the nature of their recovery, we might say that the line between cooperation and affiliation had been crossed. But when, at the request of people attending our meeting, we simply provide verification of their attendance without any consideration of why they are requesting that verification, we believe that is a reasonable approach that doesn't endorse or affiliate with the requesting agency.

We must remember that our intent here is solely to carry the message; it is not to serve as an agent of, or assistant to, an outside organization. Addicts

arrive at the doors of Narcotics Anonymous for a variety of reasons, many times relating to external pressures. Ultimately, their desire to stay in NA will depend on whether or not they have a desire to stop using drugs. Our purpose—to carry the message of recovery from drug addiction—remains the same regardless of the reason(s) a person may come to our meetings.

Clearly, the Fourth Tradition leaves the final decision to each group as to whether or not to accommodate meeting attendance cards. We would ask that in making your decision you include in your considerations whether it is our place to judge the desire of anyone to stop using. Our literature, in discussing Step Twelve, states, "It is absolutely none of our business to decide who is ready to hear the message of recovery and who is not. Many of us have formed such a judgment about an addict's desire for recovery and have been mistaken." (*It Works: How and Why*, Narcotics Anonymous World Services, Inc. 1993, p.120) How many of our members first came to NA not sure whether they were really addicts or whether they were just here to please someone else?

Some groups have expressed a frustration and a feeling of being challenged by an influx of people with meeting attendance cards coming to their meetings. Some have gone so far as to tell individuals with these cards that they are not welcome at that group. While we understand the frustration these groups might feel, we would encourage you to avoid such behavior.

Sometimes when a group in a small or rural NA area is feeling overwhelmed by attendance cards, they seek help from their area service committee. A discussion is held at area to determine which groups are best able to accommodate a large influx of newcomers and which groups might be unable to maintain their atmosphere of recovery under this circumstance. An area meeting list is prepared for agencies that send individuals to meetings with attendance cards to be verified, showing which groups will sign the cards and which will not. Cooperation among the groups within an area, and between the area and referral agencies, enables each individual group to conduct its recovery meeting with a minimum of disruption to the essential atmosphere of recovery.

Two primary goals of a Narcotics Anonymous group are to help its members stay clean and to carry the NA message to the addict who still suffers. If we don't make individuals feel welcome at their initial exposure to Narcotics Anonymous, why would they come back? In addition, accommodating this protocol strongly enriches our public relations and fosters goodwill toward Narcotics Anonymous.

STRATEGIES

Some groups express concern at someone actually *signing* the cards, fearing for the signer's personal anonymity or even the potential for the signer to be required later to testify in court about this signature. There are other options that might assist those who have this concern. The secretary, group service representative, or some other trusted servant or NA member has the option of writing the name, date, and time of the meeting and signing only his or her first name and last initial, or the group can have a group stamp made and simply stamp the card so that no one individual needs to sign it. Some groups have a group business card printed that lists the name of the group, the time it meets, etc. These are dated and placed on the literature table and can be picked up by anyone who needs them to verify meeting attendance on that date. Any of these methods will acknowledge that the individual appeared at an NA meeting and will do so without compromising the anonymity of another NA member.

One or more of the following suggestions might help a group to be successful in their accommodation of meeting attendance cards.

- ◆ When individuals ask to have a meeting attendance card signed, a trusted servant or other group member signs it at his or her convenience.
- ◆ Indicate clearly in your meeting format that, in order to minimize any disruption to the recovery meeting, meeting attendance cards are collected at the beginning of the meeting and can be retrieved at the end.
- ◆ Have a designated member sign, stamp, or pass out the cards off to the side, thus avoiding the need to actually collect and redistribute them.
- ◆ Process the cards at the beginning or at the end of the meeting. Your group will decide what works best in its unique environment.
- ◆ Request that people new to Narcotics Anonymous respect the group by not being disruptive or "cross-talking" during the meeting.
- ◆ Make it clear that everyone is welcome, but that group rules exist so that recovery will be available for newcomers and oldtimers alike.
- ◆ Ensure that an adequate supply of local meeting schedules is available so that new people know for future reference where all the local meetings are held.

Potential NA members come to their first meetings from many referral sources. If your group resources are being challenged by a large contingent of addicts attending from a facility of some type, consider contacting your area service committee for help. Your area public information subcommittee might be able to contact the referral source director and explain the

dilemma, depending on your local situation. If other NA meetings are available, it is possible that the facility might send some of their residents to one meeting and some to another so as not to overwhelm the group's ability to welcome the attendees at either location.

Another strategy to consider when a group's resources are at risk of being depleted is to inquire as to the possibility of renting a space for a new meeting at the drug court facility. This enables some members from the community to support this meeting without the meeting overwhelming another group's atmosphere of recovery, ability to provide sponsorship, or ability to remain self-supporting when faced with the sheer numbers of newcomers appearing at one time.

Many areas are discovering that a service committee presentation to their local drug court stating what we can do, as well as what we can't do, is helpful. This will go a long way toward eliminating, or at least reducing, the confusion that can result from the interaction between Narcotics Anonymous and the judiciary. Whereas we certainly don't endorse or align with the judicial approach to drug addiction, there are many in the legal and correctional fields who do believe in Narcotics Anonymous. We cooperate with the professional community by providing information about what Narcotics Anonymous is and what we offer.

"NA as a whole has no opinion on drug courts, but drug courts are free to have an opinion about NA. There's nothing in the traditions that prohibits us from cultivating good relationships with local drug courts. We can do this by cooperating with them: Welcoming the newcomers they send us and signing or stamping their court cards, having our PI committee members meet with drug court professionals, and providing those professionals with material that explains our program to the non-member." (The above paragraph has been excerpted from the *NAWS, Inc., Annual Report*, 1 January-30 June 1999, p. 13.)

CONCLUSION

Drug courts, meeting attendance cards, and mandated attendance at NA meetings have become a reality of life and can be compatible with our primary purpose. A Narcotics Anonymous group has two basic choices in facing this reality: be proactive, have a plan of action, and then consistently carry through with it; or choose not to validate the attendance cards when they are presented. Ultimately, this is the group's choice to make. We would urge you—when making your decision—to seek the course of action you feel is most likely to help the addict who still suffers. NAWS may be a valuable resource for your group in deciding what is the best course of action. Feel free to contact the World Service Office for assistance.