



CENTER OF EXCELLENCE
FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH IN NURSING FACILITIES

Establishing 12–step Meetings in Nursing Facilities

The 12-step program is a widely recognized and effective practice used to support recovery from substance use disorders. Through group meetings, individuals are provided with a structured, supportive environment where they follow 12 steps aimed at helping them develop new coping strategies to foster long-term sobriety. These 12 steps meetings offer guidance, encouragement, accountability, and a safe space for participants to come together and focus on their recovery. Two of the most well-known programs utilizing this model are Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) (National Library of Medicine, 2013).

Establishing a 12-step meeting within a nursing facility is an innovative and compassionate way to support residents on their recovery journeys. By integrating this type of meeting, your facility demonstrates a proactive commitment to advancing substance use services and providing a recovery-friendly environment.

This toolkit, created by the Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health in Nursing Facilities, is a step-by-step guide to starting a 12-step meeting. It offers insights into the 12 steps, strategies for launching an NA or AA meeting, and practical resources to ensure a sustainable, impactful program that supports residents' recovery and creates a sense of community.

Benefits of Resident Participation

Participation in 12-step meetings offers significant benefits to nursing home residents needing this level of support.

Participation provides:

● Peer Support:

Being part of a group of people with shared experiences cultivates a sense of belonging and reduces isolation. Residents gain emotional support from others who understand their journey.

● Accountability:

Regular participation in meetings help residents stay accountable for their recovery and health goals, reinforcing commitment to sobriety, personal growth, and physical and mental well-being.

● Abstinence:

Participation in 12-step meetings is helpful in promoting abstinence from alcohol and other substances.

● Sponsorship:

Residents connect with sponsors who guide them through the recovery process, offer mentorship, advice, and practical insights gained from their own experiences.

● **Safe Space for Sharing:**

Meetings provide a confidential, non-judgmental space where residents can openly share their challenges, successes, and setbacks, fostering healing through honest conversation.

● **Continuation of Support:**

Meetings offer continued support to residents who may have already been involved in 12-step meetings in their community prior to the nursing home admission.

● **Person Centered Approach:**

Provides additional recovery options for residents.

Understanding the 12 Step Format

Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) are structured, spiritually based 12-step programs that recommends completing the steps in order. While both follow similar protocols for sharing and responding in meetings, the specific 12-step work differs between the two. Both programs encourage individuals to rely on a higher power of their choice for support, and are non-denominational, not tied to any particular faith.

◆ **Focus Areas**

- NA provides support meetings on alcohol and any substance use disorder.
- AA provides support meetings on alcohol use only.

◆ **Who Can Attend NA or AA Meetings?**

Residents with a history of substance misuse, those currently misusing alcohol or other substances and/or those seeking to maintain sobriety.

Common Meeting Formats:

NA and AA meetings typically last one hour. The leader opens the meeting with a welcome, acknowledgement of new members, and group reading. All meetings follow a structured format and center around a topic of recovery. Some of the most common meeting formats are:

- **Open Discussion:** Leader opens the meeting and selects a topic for discussion.
- **Speaker Meeting:** One or two members are pre-selected to share their story.

- **Beginners Meeting:** Designed to help newcomers, this meeting is led by a group member in long term recovery.
- **Step Study Meetings:** Meetings are devoted to studying each of the 12-steps in rotation. Utilizing NA or AA specific literature. (see appendices for NA/AA commonly used literature).

At the end of the NA and AA meetings, leaders may distribute different colored tokens to celebrate periods of sobriety.

Understanding the Role of a Sponsor

Sponsors play a key role in the 12-step program by guiding, supporting and mentoring newer members through the steps. Typically, in long-term recovery with at least one year of sobriety who have completed the 12 steps themselves, sponsors serve as confidants who understand the challenges of recovery. They help residents navigate each step and follow the program's guidance.

Sponsors can help newer members in many ways such as:

- Maintaining regular contact
- Offering support
- Sharing experiences
- Providing accountability
- Offering suggestions
- Answering questions

Both NA and AA provide guidelines for the sponsor relationship in their literature. While there are slight differences between the two, the fundamental principles of the sponsor relationship remain consistent across all 12-step programs.

Access to Sponsors

The standard meeting format will allow time for sponsor inquiries. Selecting a sponsor can be a challenging decision. If residents seek assistance in deciding, consider using the following discussion points:

- Evaluate the potential sponsor's length of time in recovery.
- Assess how well the resident feels he/she can relate to and trust the potential sponsor.
- Ensure the potential sponsor has the availability to meet regularly.
- Confirm whether the potential sponsor has a sponsor of their own.
- Discuss any preferences the resident may have for their sponsor.
- Remind the resident that close friendships or romantic relationships can make sponsor interactions difficult.



Residents who are unable to find a sponsor can consult with the 12-step leader to explore alternative options and receive recommendations for connecting with sponsors from local meetings.

Getting Started

Getting a 12-step meeting started within the nursing facility requires only a few steps.

Assess whether the facility has residents with a history of alcohol or substance use disorders to determine whether a NA or AA meeting is in line with the facility's needs.

Determine whether the facility has residents who:

- ◆ Are actively misusing alcohol or other substances within the facility or during leave of absence.
- ◆ Are requesting to attend a 12-step meeting.
- ◆ Attended 12-step meetings in the past. If so, what type?
- ◆ Are in active recovery and need ongoing support.

Making your plan:

Include the following in your planning:

- Look for at least two (2) champions to help establish the meetings.
- Ask residents about their interest.
- Obtain resident feedback.
- Include the multidisciplinary team in the planning process.
- Include staff that may be in recovery or have an interest.



12 Step Volunteers – Things to Consider

- Are volunteers required to fill out certain forms or a volunteer package?
- Is a background check required?
- Establish a process to ensure that new volunteers joining after the program's launch undergo a background check, if required.
- Determine orientation requirements.
- Review confidentiality policies.

How to Request a 12 Step Meeting

Starting a 12-step meeting in a nursing facility is easy and accessible. Regional offices of 12-step programs connect with local groups for guidance and support. Follow these simple steps to bring the benefits of a 12-step meeting to your facility:

Step by Step: Narcotic Anonymous Request

1. Access the Narcotic Anonymous World Service Website.
2. Select “Find NA Near You.”
3. Select “Find NA Near You” again.
4. Enter your City, State/Province or zip code and click search.
5. Scroll to the bottom of the page to “Websites and Telephone Numbers Listed by Location.”
6. Each state is listed, click on your state.
7. Each state is divided into several regions. Select the region closest to your area.
8. Contact the regional office with the phone number or email provided. ([appendices for sample email.](#))
9. Request to connect with the Hospitals and Institutions (H&I) Chairperson. Inform the chairperson that you are interested in establishing a NA meeting at your nursing facility. (H&I members are dedicated to bringing the message of recovery to individuals who may not have full access to regular NA meetings.)
10. Schedule an initial meeting with the H&I chairperson to discuss your facility's needs.



Step by Step: Alcoholic Anonymous Request

1. Access the General Services Office for Alcoholics Anonymous.
2. At the top of the page- select “Find A.A. Near You.”
3. Enter your state.
4. Scroll to the bottom of the page to “location listing” by state.
5. Each state is listed, click on your state.
6. Each state is divided into several regions, select the region that is closest to your area.
7. Contact the Intergroup/Central Office with the phone number or email provided. ([appendices for sample email.](#))
8. Inform the Intergroup/Central Office representative that you are interested in establishing an AA meeting at your nursing facility.
9. Schedule an initial meeting with the representative to discuss your facility’s needs.

Initial Meeting with Chairperson or Representative

Discuss the following during the initial meeting:

- ◆ Your needs, expectations, and limitations.
- ◆ Confidentiality policy.
- ◆ Meeting frequency, duration, day, time, and location. (This may vary based on your needs. Consistency is important.)
- ◆ Number of volunteers that will participate.
- ◆ If background checks are required of each volunteer.

In addition:

- ◆ Review paperwork that will be required of each volunteer.
- ◆ Review the facility volunteer requirements and get signatures if applicable.
- ◆ Determine the required NA or AA literature needed for the meeting.

Preparing the Facility

- ◆ Promote specifics of the meeting – time, location, and type – on bulletin boards, newsletters, activity schedules, and during staff meetings.
- ◆ Inform the residents and the entire nursing facility team about the establishment of the meeting.
- ◆ Share the nursing facility's designated 12-step meeting point of contact.
- ◆ Remind nursing facility staff about confidentiality of residents and volunteers.
- ◆ Identify a dedicated meeting space, large enough to accommodate participants for a weekly 1-hour meeting.
- ◆ Include the 12-step meeting and type on the nursing facility monthly calendar.
- ◆ Follow your agency's policy for assigning staff to monitor the area/meeting.

Technical Assistance

For FREE technical assistance in starting a 12-step meeting, please [CLICK HERE](#) to submit a request to the Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health in Nursing Facilities (COE-NF).

Appendices

Sample Email to Chairperson/Representative

Subject line: Establishment of 12-step Meetings In a Nursing Facility

Hello, my name is [XYZ], and I am the [XYZ] at [XYZ] Nursing Facility] located {XYZ}. I am exploring the possibility of establishing in-house 12-step meetings for our residents. We have identified a growing need for these services and are seeking support from a local 12-step group to bring the message of recovery to our facility.

Your help in setting up these meetings would be appreciated, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss the process with someone. Thank you in advance for your assistance. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,



Digital Resources

- **Narcotic Anonymous (NA):**

Official Informational Pamphlets (IPs), and booklets include, but are not limited to, the following materials:

- An Introductory Guide to NA
- Twelve Concepts for NA Service
- Who, What, How and Why
- Welcome to NA
- Recovery and Relapse

- **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA):**

Official readings, pamphlets, and resources include, but are not limited to, the following materials:

- AA Preamble
- How It Works
- The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous
- The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous

Virtual Meetings

When in-person meetings are not feasible, residents can take advantage of online virtual meetings.

- In The Rooms hosts more than 160 free online recovery meetings each week.
- NA Nooners hosts an online NA meeting available worldwide via Zoom.
- AA Online Intergroup offers international AA meetings online.

Alternative to Spiritually Based Groups

SMART Recovery (Self-Management and Recovery Training) is a support group designed for individuals who prefer a secular, self-empowering approach to recovery. SMART Recovery provides specialized meetings and resources tailored to various communities, including family & friends, veterans, first responders, women, and more. Meetings are facilitated by trained leaders.

References

- National Library of Medicine. 12 Step Interventions and Mutual Support Programs for Substance Use Disorders: An Overview.
- Narcotics Anonymous World Services.
- General Services Office for Alcoholics Anonymous.
- Narcotic Anonymous Sponsorship-Information Pamphlet-11 Revised.
- Alcoholics Anonymous Questions and Answers on Sponsorship.
- The Twelve Steps of NA.
- The Twelve Steps of AA.