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## **The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence**

William L. White

For more than fifty years, the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence has served as the leading voluntary public policy advocacy group in the United States on alcoholism-related issues. In 1942, Dwight Anderson, representing the Research Council on Problems of Alcohol, called for a “new public health movement” to change the way America perceived alcoholism and the alcoholic. That movement began two years later, when Mrs. Marty Mann founded the National Committee for Education on Alcoholism (NCEA). Mann drew her inspiration for NCEA from the success of other public health organizations that had been formed to support education, research and treatment for tuberculosis, cancer and heart disease.

Mann was aided in her initial efforts to organize NCEA by E.M. Jellinek of Yale University, Ruth Bangs of the New York Herald Tribune, Austin McCormick of the Osborne Association, Dwight Anderson of the New York State Medical Society, and Dr. Ruth Fox, a psychiatrist specializing in alcoholism. E.M. Jellinek was so taken by Mann’s vision that he offered the Yale Center of Alcohol Study’s sponsorship of NCEA. The new organization began operations in April, 1944, with an annual budget of \$13,000.

Mann established local NCEA branches around the country in order to pursue NCEA’s five-point program: 1) educate local communities about alcoholism, 2) establish local alcohol information and referral centers, 3) enlist the aid of local hospitals in detoxifying alcoholics, 4) establish clinics for the diagnosis and treatment of alcoholism, and to 5) establish “rest centers” for the long-term care of alcoholics. These local chapters were staffed by volunteers of recovered alcoholics and their family members, as well as physicians, clergy, and others concerned about the problem of alcoholism.

The primary means of changing public attitudes and public policies was through instilling in the American culture a set of “kinetic” ideas formulated by

Anderson and refined by Mann. The five ideas that were at the heart of NCEA's educational campaigns were:

- 1. Alcoholism is a disease.*
- 2. The alcoholic, therefore, is a sick person.*
- 3. The alcoholic can be helped.*
- 4. The alcoholic is worth helping.*
- 5. Alcoholism is our No. 4 public health problem, and our public responsibility.*

NCEA, along with the Research Council of Problems of Alcohol, Alcoholics Anonymous, and the Yale Center of Alcohol Studies, forged a “modern alcoholism movement” that affirmed hope for recovery from alcoholism, called for a new scientific approach to the study and resolution of alcohol problems, and laid the foundation for a national network of community-based alcoholism prevention and treatment programs.

### **Coming of Age (1950-1980)**

In 1950, NCEA separated from Yale to become an independent organization. This separation was facilitated by the financial support of philanthropist R. Brinkely Smithers and the Christopher D. Smithers Foundation. Signaling this new independent status was the board decision to change the name of the organization to the National Committee on Alcoholism (1950) and later to the National Council on Alcoholism (NCA) (1956). Through Mann's visits to communities across the country, the number of local NCEA/NCA affiliates grew from fourteen in 1946 to fifty-three in 1956.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, NCA focused on educating the public through its publishing activities and its influence upon the press, radio, television and motion pictures. Major initiatives included lobbying to change policy positions on alcoholism by major medical and public health organizations, hosting alcoholism-themed conferences for helping professionals, and lobbying for federal legislation for funding to support local alcoholism education and treatment efforts. As the number of local NCA affiliates reached 80, NCA successfully pushed the passage of landmark federal legislation (the 1970 “Hughes Act”) that provided federal funding for local alcoholism treatment programs.

During the 1970s, NCA helped expand alcoholism treatment and occupational alcoholism programs and provided organizational sponsorship of the

American Society of Addiction Medicine. NCA also intensified its educational campaigns to destigmatize alcoholism through its media blitzes, seeding television shows such as “Maude” and “All in the Family” with information on alcoholism, and by hosting professional education and training events. The boldest of such activities was its 1976 “Operation Understanding.” In this highly publicized event, fifty-two prominent Americans proclaimed their recovery from alcoholism.

Another significant change within NCA in the 1970s was the decision to no longer have alcohol industry representatives on the NCA board.

### **Retrenchment and Renewal (1980-2002)**

Marty Mann died 22 July 1980. She had served as NCA’s Director for twenty-four years and had continued to influence NCA’s advocacy vision until her death. Her speaking and writing exerted a profound influence on American attitudes toward alcoholism, and her political savvy and spellbinding oratory coaxed many state and federal legislators into formulating public-health responses to the problem of alcoholism. Following Mann’s death, NCA experienced a period of financial struggle. The Smithers Foundation provided crucial financial support to NCADD during this period.

In 1990, NCA changed its name to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD), bowing to the growing integration of the alcoholism and drug addiction fields. The debate over the name change signaled a larger uncertainty regarding NCA’s future direction as an organization. Many local NCADD affiliates had taken on the responsibility of providing local treatment services--services that progressively dwarfed their public education and public policy activities. As a result of these changes, relationships between NCADD and its affiliates weakened. By 2000, the number of local NCADD affiliates, which had peaked at more than 230 affiliates in the early 1980s, dropped to below ninety.

Today, NCADD is undergoing a renewal process. The board has recommitted NCADD to its historical public education and public policy mission and to rebuilding the grass roots affiliate relationships that have contributed to the organization’s greatest successes. NCADD continues its media campaigns, taking leadership roles in Alcohol Awareness Month and National Recovery Month activities. It reaches Americans through cable television programs, its newsletters and publications, and through the more than 10,000 visits per month to its web site. NCADD also continues its public policy advocacy activities by supporting parity in insurance for addiction treatment and in serving as a watchdog over the

marketing practices of the alcohol industry.

Perhaps the best measure of NCADD's effect on American perceptions about alcoholism is its successful inculcation of its core ideas. In 1943, the year before NCADD's founding, only six percent of Americans surveyed believed alcoholism was a disease. Fifty years later, eighty-seven percent of Americans believed alcoholism was a disease.

## References

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