

Finding Your Way Back In –

The Accountants Confidential Assistance Network (ACAN) is Saving Licenses and Lives

There was a time when addicted and clinically depressed CPAs would simply burn out at some point. A troubled professional would desperately keep his/her dark secret until the day arrived when it could no longer be hidden. Perhaps they bungled a critical work assignment and lost their job. Or worse, their personal demons landed them in the legal system and forced the state's licensing authority to end their career altogether.

But that was then. Today, more and more professionals dependent on drugs or alcohol are seeking out – or are being directed to – the Accountants Confidential Assistance Network (ACAN). What began as an informal outreach from volunteer CPAs in recovery grew into the Concerned CPA Network and three years ago became ACAN, a fully funded statutory peer assistance program. Passionate support from TSCPA and the Texas State Board of Public

'out.' Well, through the ACAN program, the State Board is trying to protect the public while still keeping our CPAs 'in.' It is simple to just banish someone [with legal issues stemming from alcohol abuse]. But rather than take the punitive approach, it is the State Board's philosophy to take a rehabilitation and prevention approach, to get and keep people licensed."

Such inclusive and proactive measures are critical. If Texas CPAs follow the pattern, there may be up to 10,000 professionals in our state struggling with some level of addiction and depression.

"A statistic many people find startling is that about 75 percent of people with drug and alcohol problems are employed," explains **Craig Nauta**, TSCPA's ACAN director. "One of the key purposes of the program is to let people know they are far from alone and to lower the barriers to them getting the kind of assistance they need."

Been There

One of ACAN's champions knows firsthand what a lifesaver such assistance can be. Eight years ago, past president of the Dallas Chapter and current chairman of the TSCPA Peer Assistance Committee **Patsy Culver**, CPA-El Paso, decided on her own that enough was enough. She had heard about a group of professionals who were helping one another stay sober and deal with the underlying causes of their addiction. Culver chose to reach out.

"The road to recovery is pretty scary. When you are a recovering alcoholic, you are worried about the stigma as a professional," recalls Culver, who has chosen to give up her anonymity to serve as an ACAN spokesperson. "It is absolutely a personal choice – it's up to you to tell folks when you're in recovery, not anyone else. I no longer have a problem with it; this comes from years of

sobriety. When new participants and candidates first come in, they're shell shocked and not sure how to start. If you throw in 'everyone's going to know' on top of everything else . . . it can be too much."

In addition to confidentiality, Culver says the program works because "it's your peers." Culver calls it "getting help inside the tent." The idea is that another CPA is likely to be more capable of best understanding the unique stresses of the profession and is also more able to relate to specific triggers than attendees at other, more general 12-step program meetings.

Culver remarks: "We've also taken an extra step in the way of mentoring. AA has sponsors, but ACAN – especially for CPA candidates – will also have some professional mentoring, a byproduct of the program. Although our primary goal is to get you well, you will also make a professional friend."

Referred by TSBPA

During the past three years, over 150 CPA candidates have been sent to ACAN by TSBPA. Whenever a candidate files the application of intent, he/she is required to self report alcohol or drug convictions on that application; the State Board also does their own background check and investigates any instances of this nature. They may simply call the candidate and discuss what happened, or they may determine it is best to send the candidate to ACAN. Practicing CPAs who show up in the legal system because of addiction issues are also referred.

A young CPA who has successfully been through the program tells her story.

"The problems that brought me to ACAN were bad, but the people in the program didn't treat me as if I were a bad person. They explained alcoholism to me and then let me decide what

To help those in need of assistance, a 24-hour hotline is provided at 1-866-766-ACAN.

Accountancy (TSBPA) is slowly but surely reversing the toll addiction and abuse has taken on the profession. Licenses and lives are being saved.

Bill Treacy, TSBPA's 20-year veteran executive director, adamantly rejects the kind of bureaucratic mindset that seeks to punish and exclude. He says: "People have this image of government agencies as entities that try to not be accommodating, that exist to keep people

steps to take. I came to realize that the legal problems I had didn't define the person I was, but that there was a direct correlation between those problems and alcohol. There's a saying, 'I didn't get in trouble every time I was drunk, but every time I got in trouble, I was drunk.' It is like having a double life . . . I felt like there was something really wrong with me that I couldn't define. It wasn't until I started working the 12 steps with my ACAN mentor that I realized that something deeper than alcohol was going on. The program helped me stop using alcohol to deal with issues in my life. I didn't agree with everything in the program at first, but the way ACAN works is that it gives you a foundation to build your personal program around. ACAN gives you the tools to help yourself, and to help others once you're better, which is what I hope to do. It is a disease, but I wasn't treated like I was the disease. And I wasn't alone."

Nauta says that ACAN mentors receive eight to 12 hours of training each year to deal with issues pertaining to mental health, addiction, intervention methods and anger management. The program administrators and volunteers continue to maintain and grow their database of support resources – visiting AA groups, doctors, outpatient services and residential treatment centers. ACAN has also consulted with the Texas Bar Association about their similar, highly successful program. Several other state societies are in the process of formulating like programs for their CPAs.

"The Bar Association's program has reduced the stigma for their members," says Nauta. "We want to see that happen for our CPAs as well, for addiction to be addressed like high blood pressure or diabetes – get the information, get the treatment, manage the condition."

Culver says that CPAs have to remember that the license must be upheld "in appearance and in fact." She adds: "You have to face that you're an addict and get help or even if you think you aren't, you still have to figure out how to stay out of trouble. We arm you with facts so that you can determine whether you have a problem or not."

One rising star in the profession found himself sidelined with an alcohol-related arrest after celebrating with friends one night. He was devastated.

"I hadn't committed fraud – in my mind, a public intoxication ticket was not pertinent to my qualifications or my practice or my accomplishments. It seemed a little drastic . . . you can't imagine all the facets of my life this affected. But I had to make sense of what the process was trying to accomplish for me," he says quietly as he looks back. "I do think I am a better person now after going through the ACAN program and working with a sponsor. I was severely depressed. My work had been exemplary, five star ratings, and I was in the middle of the interview process with a prominent international firm . . . then this."

But however conflicted, he is grateful for the support he received from the fellow professionals in the program, especially his mentor. "I never doubted that he cared and that he understood. The greatest thing about ACAN is the people. I have the utmost respect for John especially, and that's an understatement. I met with him at the weekly meeting in Dallas, but he would also just have lunch with me and talk. There are many CPA professionals like myself out there who do need the help that ACAN provides. I guarantee you that once they get to know the volunteers, it's going to feel like home."

Converging Paths

Culver says that whether voluntary or mandated by the State Board, everybody has a common bond in ACAN. "Your story of how you get here may differ, but once you're in ACAN, recovery is much the same. Most of the folks who come into the program are very serious about it – they want to keep their license. The best recovery is one you're fully invested in."

Nauta says that the ACAN help line continues to be manned around the clock, 866-766-ACAN (2226). Whether it's a CPA who has decided on his/her own to seek help or someone who needs not only help but information about all the different variables when involved with a State Board action, volunteers are standing by.

"Weekly, we have calls from college students who are worried about their background check and afraid they might be disqualified from becoming a CPA. We are able to encourage them to continue pursuing that career path," assured Nauta. "We hear from people who are concerned about a co-worker and want to know how to help. Sometimes it's an employer, or an employee who doesn't know how to tell their employer about being treated for depression. That 866 number is a great first step to overcoming that fear about what's going on in their life or someone else's. This is a good safe place to start."

About ACAN

ACAN is a statutory peer assistance program dedicated to helping Texas CPAs, CPA candidates and accounting students struggling with alcohol, drugs and depression.



CPAs who turn to ACAN for help are assigned a mentor. Across the state, more than 25 mentors receive eight to 12 hours of training each year in issues pertaining to mental health, addiction, intervention methods and anger management. Many other volunteers are available to lend overall support and share their own experiences.

Of the 170 candidates referred to ACAN by the State Board over the past three years, at least 17 are now fully licensed CPAs. Many already certified professionals have been able to retain their licenses by going through the program, and countless others come to ACAN independently to improve their lives and health.

To learn more about the services provided, please go to the website at tscpa.org/resource/peerasst. Also, the ACAN hotline is open 24/7 at 866-766-ACAN (2226). Groups and Friends of Bill Wilson meet regularly in Austin, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio; hotline volunteers can direct you to a meeting in your area. There is no risk. By law, all information, communications and reports received, gathered or maintained by ACAN are strictly confidential.

