

# EUOPRIS INTERVIEW



**EuroPris** talks with Caron McCaffrey

Director General, Irish Prison Service

## **Could you tell us about your career path? Why have you chosen to work in the prison and correctional field?**

I was appointed Director General of the Irish Prison Service on 13 December 2018. I have worked within the Justice sector for the last 19 years and at Director level in the Irish Prison Service since 2008. I started my career in the then Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in 2000 before transferring to the Irish Prison Service in 2006 as Press and Programme Manager. A career in the Prison Service offers a unique opportunity to make a positive difference to the lives of our prisoners and a safer community for us all.

## **How many prison establishments do you oversee?**

As Director General, I oversee 12 institutions consisting of 10 traditional “closed” institutions and two open centres, which operate with minimal internal and perimeter security. I also have responsibility for 4 support units, the Operational Support Group, Prison Service Escort Corps, Prison Service College and Building Services Division, in addition to the Irish Prison Service Headquarters based in Longford.

## **How many prisoners are in prison at the moment in Ireland?**

As of 28<sup>th</sup> May 2019 there were 3,998 prisoners in custody.

**How many staff do you manage?**

The overall staffing compliment of the service is 3,326 made up of 3,150 operational staff, 52 non-operational staff (including healthcare and psychology services) and Irish Prison Service Headquarters which has a total staffing of 124.

**What are in your opinion the required attributes and qualifications of someone wanting to be a prison officer?**

It is my view that the attributes a Prison Officer can bring to the role far out way the qualifications. The Irish Prison Service make sure that all training needs and supports are afforded to Prison Officers to ensure they have the necessary qualifications to fulfill their role. One common attribute among our Prison staff is the strong sense of values. As an organisation we have defined the most important of these values as: teamwork, integrity, potential, safety and support.

Our Prison Officers have the greatest impact on our prisoners, they have the potential to make a real difference in the lives of our prisoners and their families. All Prison Staff have the ability to positively interact and influence every day through their engagement, language, listening skills, attitudes and behaviours.

**What is your opinion on the role of women in the European correctional field?**

Gender is not an issue when it comes to performing a role, it is an individual's attributes and experience which is important. As the first female Director General of the Irish Prison Service I would like to encourage/support more women to reach their career goals. Representation is key to success – you need to be able to see yourself in those roles you are aspiring towards.

**What is the biggest concern with regards to security in prisons in your country?**

Ensuring the safety and security of our staff and prisoners is a key priority for me. My greatest concern for the Irish Prison Service is drugs and other contraband getting into our prisons. Keeping abreast of technology in order to infiltrate access is essential, we are currently considering a number of options to counteract the use of drones in smuggling drugs into our Prisons. It is essential that we sustain our focus on keeping drugs out of prisons and assisting prisoners to address their addictions while in custody.

**What are the challenges for your service for the coming years?**

One of the biggest potential challenges facing the Irish Prison Service in the coming years maybe an increasing prison population. 2019 seen an increase in the prison population of 10% in the 16 month period from 1/1/18 to 15/05/19. If this is sustained through 2020 we are on course to exceed the highest level of prisoners in custody recorded in the Irish State since 2011.

Enhancing governance throughout the organisation and the provision of a mental health service that meets the needs of our prisoners are challenges that the Irish Prison Service will continue to address in the coming years.

**In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for the European prison and correctional services at the moment?**

The challenges facing Ireland of a rising prison population, mental health and addiction are the same challenges facing many Services across Europe. Radicalisation is also a challenge facing European prisons and correctional services. Research has identified the prison environment as a potential breeding ground for this cohort of prisoner. The sharing of information is necessary across the wider prison system to assist in the gathering of knowledge into this particular cohort of prisoner.

**What benefits do you see being linked to an organisation such as EuroPris?**

There are many benefits to being a member of EuroPris. Europris has given Irish Prison Service staff access to the support and expertise of prison practitioners across Europe. Personally, it has provided me with a platform to share ideas, experiences and lessons learned with experts in their fields. It has enabled me to build relationships that will assist me and my Organisation in the coming years.

**Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?**

The Irish Prison Service engages with a diverse range of NGOs/Charities to provide support to prisoners and for contracted in-reach services.

**What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in the correctional field?**

Firstly I wish to say that I am extremely privileged to be in a job that I love and enjoy. The part of my job that I find most satisfying is knowing that I make a real difference to people in our custody, which can ultimately lead to safer communities.

The most challenging is the public expectation that as a Service, the prison authorities are the “antidote” for societal issues, with the ability to solve the root causes for individuals who offend when in actuality the majority of people whom are sentenced into custody come from a range of often social and economic disadvantaged backgrounds, regularly in tandem with chaotic and unstructured childhoods, which has lead them on their path of offending behaviour.

The Prison Service invests heavily in the rehabilitation of prisoners. However, we are but one link in the Criminal Justice chain. It is only through a proactive approach of working with our colleagues in the Justice family and across the whole of government that we can hope to effect positive outcomes for our prisoners and for society as a whole.

I am a people person and therefore am thankful that my role affords me opportunities to network with a wide range of organisations. Meeting, engaging and building relationships is so important, the support and knowledge to be gained is invaluable. Lastly and most importantly making positive changes to better the services we provide to our prisoners.

**If you could be remembered for one thing whilst being in charge what would it be?**

I would hope that during my time as Director General to make significant progress in a number of areas

1. Enhance the delivery of mental health services to our prisoners. It is my view that this can only be achieved through multi agency cooperation across Government, working together to address the shortcoming of the current system and ultimately deliver the mental health service that will address our prisoners needs.
2. Strengthening governance, accountability and transparency in the service
3. Contributing to the development of a whole of government approach to reducing offending and in turn making our communities safer
4. Ensuring that our staff are fully supported and engaged in working in what can be a very difficult, yet very rewarding, environment