

“This is crisis management”

EuroPris spoke with Kathleen Van De Vijver. She is the spokesperson for the Belgian Prison Service and she also coordinates its international projects and prison labor. Before taking on these roles, she served as prison governor for 15 years.



These days, my working day starts at 6 am. I start with reading all the newspapers. I need to know what has appeared in the press about prisons, especially in relation to Covid-19. From 7 am onwards, I answer questions from the press about the number of prisoners and prison staff who are sick and about incidents in prisons.

There have been some incidents because prisoners are concerned about Covid-19. “Will we be protected? Will we be cared for when we get sick?” Those are the questions they struggle with. Many of our prisoners already have mental health problems and this crisis adds to their anxiety. The most important thing we can do is to provide information. We have to communicate as much as we can, to prisoners as well as staff.

In Belgium we are lucky that our prisoners can still go to work. The prisoners are happy that they can leave their cells, have a daily structure and an income. We changed almost our entire production in our sewing workshops: we switched to producing face masks. So far, we have produced 17.000 masks, to be used in prisons. From next week on, we can also provide face masks to hospitals and other healthcare institutions that need them.

My colleagues and I remain optimistic in spite of the difficult circumstances. We all feel that it is crisis management. Most of us already worked hard, but we have to work even harder now. And we all work from home as much as possible. One of the benefits is that we have now finally discovered technology. For the first time, we had a management meeting via video conferencing, and we found out that it actually works quite well.

However, working from home also comes with difficulties. In Belgium, the schools are closed, so my teenage daughter is home from school. They expect the parents to take over the teaching, but that is impossible to combine with crisis management. I wish my daughter would feel supported in this difficult time, but I hardly even have a chance to see her. Questions from the press continue until late in the evenings. This is a time with lots of insecurities for everyone.

