

## “Learning from this crisis”

*EuroPris spoke with Femke Hofstee-van der Meulen. She is deputy director of the largest prison of the Netherlands in Alphen aan den Rijn, which has the capacity to house more than 1.000 prisoners. Before she joined the Dutch prison service, Femke worked as prison inspector and on the topic of foreign national prisoners, as a researcher and as founder of the NGO Prison Watch.*

“For me, the current crisis started on March 13. Early that morning, I had left as planned for my scheduled vacation to Costa Rica. But when I reached my destination, and realized what was happening, I immediately returned and went back to work. This is not the time for prison management to take a vacation.



Right away, we created a separate department for new arrivals. On average, we have 8.000 new arrivals each year. As prison managers, we obviously want this number to go down during the crisis, but we also realize that new arrivals will continue to come. New arrivals stay in this department for two weeks to monitor whether they develop signs of corona, before they join the other prisoners. Besides the department for new arrivals, we also created a wing in a separate building where prisoners can be quarantined. We used that for prisoners who had recently traveled to highly affected regions, for those who had contact with someone with confirmed corona, or if they had symptoms. In this quarantine building we also created a special section for ill prisoners from the prison hospital in order to free spaces in the prison hospital for corona-patients. And then finally, we created a third wing for prisoners that were not manageable in other institutions, because of several behavioral problems, especially for those who refused to follow the corona rules. All of these changes, in addition to all the social distancing rules, led to extra strain on our staff.

Now, two months later, I can see that these have been my most important tasks as prison manager: preventing the virus to spread in the prison, while maintaining peace among the prisoners and keeping staff motivated. This has been a fine balance and one in which our management team had to take decisions on its own. The head office is also doing what it can in the crisis, but we as prison managers are the ones facing the prisoners and staff on a daily basis, so it first comes down to our responses and our creativity.

We now also have the opportunity to start looking ahead. There are definitely things that I would like to keep, things that we have learned from going through this crisis. For example, we installed 50 devices for skype videocalls in our visitor area, that prisoners can use during their regular visiting times. We should keep those available after the crisis. Similarly, the courts are now using teleconferencing for hearing our prisoners. It may not be suitable for all court cases, but I hope we will keep that as an option. As for staff, working from home as much as possible has also worked well. Not for prison guards of course, but for all others it has worked and it has contributed to our sick absence level currently being at its lowest point ever. We don't have to be stuck in traffic on a daily basis anymore and we get to spend some time with our families.

Of course, there are also things that could be improved, that is only to be expected in a crisis situation. For example, we currently do not have any personal protective equipment, not even face masks for our staff. Another example is the posters we received, with instructions for prisoners to wash their hands with liquid soap and to use paper towels: prisoners don't have those available in their cells and there is no way that we can get 1000 dispensers for soap and paper towels on short notice, so these posters only caused additional anxiety. Finally, it is frustrating for prison staff and prisoners that new prisoners arrive, in order to serve a 2-day sentence for failing to pay a fine for a traffic violation. From our perspective, with everything that we are doing to keep people safe and with all the stress that it is causing, executing such a sentence is not worth the risk.

We are getting ready for the new normal. We are expecting the corona threat to last for at least another year. So, for example, we have made changes to our visitor area so that as soon as visits will be allowed again, we will be ready. Communication with both prisoners and staff will continue to be key for us. We highly appreciate the heartfelt involvement from both prisoners and staff to overcome this difficult period."