

“We cannot distance ourselves from the prisoners”

EuroPris spoke with Athena Demetriou, who has been a senior prison manager at the only prison in Cyprus since 2013. Because Cyprus is such a small country, Athena’s job has been very diverse, ranging from working with the front-line prison officers, to representing the country at the United Nations and other international forums.

“When Cyprus had the first confirmed case of Corona, we immediately took action in our prison. The director and I designed the measures ourselves and they were in place six days before the national government’s action plan. It was hard work, until deep in the night, but I am convinced this is how we managed to keep the virus out of our prison. From the beginning, when we started to take preventative measures, we had a human rights-based approach and we made an effort to find a balance and to provide compensating measures as much as possible.

For example, for prisoners who have children, we did everything we could to make sure that they could stay in contact. All prisoners had almost unlimited access to phones, 12 hours per day, and we introduced access to Skype for all prisoners. We also offered mental health services and our personal support. That was important. Now we are trying to open visits, but of course, it is not the same as before. We are opening for two visits per month for all the prisoners, but with a screen and no physical contact. For the children, we have several playgrounds in our prison and we are opening them all up now with less toys and games so it is easier to disinfect before use.

Half of our prisoners are foreign nationals, so for this international population, we made sure that all communications were in Cypriot and English. But of course, some of the prisoners don’t speak any of those languages, so we also made flyers with pictograms from the beginning. It was important that everybody understood what was going on outside the prison. They needed to understand that we were taking the measures to keep them safe.

Most importantly, as prison managers, I strongly believe we cannot distance ourselves from the population. We are going through this together. So, the director and I spent a lot of time in the prison and walked around and spoke with the prisoners every day. Our work is not only administrative, it is about people.

When I think of the times to come, I am sometimes concerned about the stress amongst the staff. Their stress levels reflect those in society. What happens outside, happens to the prison staff and in the prison as well. So, I worry about the cases of domestic violence that are increasing in the country. But I also remain positive. Right now, the outdoor exercise and weather help to improve everybody's mood and I can see that people are doing better now – both inside the prison and outside.”