

SUMMARY: EPTA ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025

"HOW TO USE TRAINING TO IMPROVE PRISON STAFF
WELLBEING? BUILDING A STABLE WORKFORCE WITH
EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR A SAFER TOMORROW"

SAMORANOVO, BULGARIA 18-19 JUNE 2025



INTRODUCTION

On 18 and 19 June 2025, the Bulgarian Prison Service Training School in Samorano hosted the annual conference of the European Penitentiary Training Academies (EPTA) network. This event brought together 70 participants representing 24 countries and focused on the theme: "How to use training to improve prison staff wellbeing? Building a stable workforce and effective leadership for a safer tomorrow."



OPENING REMARKS

The conference commenced with a warm welcome from Justina Dzienko, Deputy Director of EuroPris, followed by opening addresses from Mrs. Spaska Kincheva, Deputy Minister of Justice of Bulgaria, and Chief Commissioner Ivaylo Yordanov, Director General of the General Directorate "Execution of Sentences" (GDEP), Bulgaria. The event continued with the formal introduction of the newly appointed members of the EPTA Coordination Committee.



ROUNDTABLE ON TRAINING MODELS AND DEVELOPMENT ON WELLBEING

Moderated by EPTA Coordinator Cédric Le Bossé, the session focused on the challenges and benefits of training for prison staff wellbeing. Discussions covered training content, pedagogical formats, the role of research, and impact evaluation, aiming to better understand the needs of staff, trainees, and trainers in a constantly evolving context. Wellbeing was described as a balance between mental and physical health, and professional and personal life. It was linked to organisational culture, recognition of individual needs (Maslow's hierarchy), and the prevention of psychosocial risk.

- **Estonia** implemented a hybrid pedagogical model centred on real-life learning, combining in-person classes, mentoring, online teaching, and self-study, while ensuring a healthy work-life balance.
- **Scotland** designed evidence-based training focused on reducing the use of force and promoting a trauma-informed and relational approach.
- **France** explored national prison training on wellbeing and introduced tools for stakeholder response. It highlighted a new training for managers on supporting staff facing work-related mental health issues.
- **Poland** developed programmes focused on personal development and emotional intelligence, using active methods and digital tools.
- **Norway** prioritised managerial training based on trust, communication, and emotional intelligence to foster a safe and respectful environment.
- **Sweden** established mentoring and psychological support systems from the very beginning of officers' careers, creating a compassionate and secure learning environment.

WORKSHOP 1: TRAINING STANDARDS IN WELLBEING

This workshop reflected on training content and pedagogical approaches that promote wellbeing. Key directions included:

- An integrated pedagogical approach, combining realistic practical scenarios with specific theoretical input to normalise wellbeing and address stigma around mental health.
- Physical and psychological safety during both training and work.
- Development of emotional intelligence to manage stress and workplace relationships.
- Support resources (human and financial) available across all organisational levels.
- Trust-based mentoring to support professional development.
- A work-life balance, championed by team leaders.
- Fighting subcultures that minimise or stigmatise wellbeing issues



WORKSHOP 2: VALUES AND SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Participants first reflected on what effective leadership means and how it supports wellbeing. Essential qualities identified included active listening, empathy, the ability to inspire trust, conflict management, clear communication, emotional intelligence, and balancing closeness with professional distance. Leaders should model positive behaviour, assign responsibility based on capabilities, and lead with sincerity. They are expected to be role models, mediators, unifiers, and protectors of staff while maintaining a healthy work-life balance. A lively debate followed around the question: **“Does increased support for prison staff risk undermining the proper functioning of the prison?”** While some expressed concern that excessive support could lower standards or burden others, most participants argued that well-supported staff are more productive, resilient, and contribute to a healthier work environment.

The session continued with participants dividing into two sub-groups to explore the skills and values needed for wellbeing-focused leadership. The "skills" group highlighted the importance of coaching, adaptability, relationship-building, and proximity management, while also noting the tension between institutional rules and human-centred approaches. The "values" group prioritised empathy, communication, and integrity, alongside ethics, active listening, and creating a safe workplace culture. Both groups discussed how these skills and values could be embedded into training through peer learning, mentoring, international exchange, and reflective supervision.



WORKSHOP 3: TRAINING INNOVATION PERSPECTIVES

Participants discussed various training innovations, both digital and in-person, including mentoring, experience-sharing, and outdoor training. Strategies varied depending on the scenario:

- With unlimited budget: investments would go into staff infrastructure (housing, childcare), recruitment of top trainers, international academic exchanges, mental health initiatives, and financial/promotional incentives to attract and retain talent.
- Without extra funds: the focus would be on human-centred engagement, kindness-driven motivation (flexibility and trust), mentoring, social activities, and raising awareness on wellbeing.
- To re-engage unmotivated groups (new or experienced staff): cross-generational mentoring, clarifying expectations and reasons for disengagement.

The core idea: training should meet expectations, and all staff—regardless of experience—can contribute to collective momentum.

WORKSHOP 4: WORKSHOP ON PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES AND TOOLS

Two sub-groups explored tools and practices for improving wellbeing in prisons.

Human and managerial practices:

- Know your staff (individualised, flexible approach)
- Trust as a key foundation
- Team-building activities, letters of recognition, national awards
- Annual psychological safety surveys
- Compassionate leadership (showing vulnerability and owning mistakes)
- Relaxation activities (yoga, sports, culture)

Organisational tools and systems:

- Digital tools: monitoring platforms, digital calendars, self-managed continuous training
- Awareness methods: case studies, VR, simulations
- Quality of Work Life Week, onboarding programmes, regular team meetings
- Interprofessional meetings, group coaching, reinforced supervision, expert access, confidential psychological assessments, harassment detection protocols, trauma-informed interventions
- Celebrations, peer recognition messages, kind breaks, team-building activities

Effectiveness principles:

- Tools should be based on needs analysis (surveys, feedback) and available resources
- Interactive tools are more effective than static ones
- Informal communication, on-the-ground supervision, and holistic training are preferred
- There is a clear link between training and wellbeing: it fosters trust, safety, retention, skills development—and ultimately wellbeing

PLENARY: THE IMPACT OF COACHING AND CREATIVE WRITING ON WELLBEING

The Universities of Lincoln and Hull studied how coaching and creative writing foster wellbeing and resilience among prison staff. Non-directive coaching created a supportive space where participants reported positive personal development, improved coping mechanisms, and new perspectives on work culture and traumatic experiences. For some, coaching played a decisive role in their decision to remain in the profession. Creative writing programmes, supported by scientific evidence, boosted self-esteem and helped manage stress, emotions, and trauma. These practices encourage emotional regulation and perspective-taking, aiding staff under pressure.



PLENARY: TOOLS TO IMPROVE PRISON STAFF WELLBEING AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

EuroPris's expert group on prison staff wellbeing is currently developing tools to support mental health and workplace quality of life. Expected by the end of 2025, these will include:

- Strategic assessment tools (individual and collective)
- Awareness-raising modules on key risk management issues
- Online support solutions

These resources will be adaptable to national contexts, translated into multiple languages, and particularly tailored for team leaders. The group highlighted the importance of adapting interventions to specific profiles and combining proactive and reactive risk management strategies.



CONCLUSION

The conference came to a close with a visit to the newly built Samoranovo Prison. This €21 million project, funded by Norway through the Norway Grants scheme, features both a pilot prison and a modern training centre for prison staff. Designed to accommodate 400 inmates and 100 staff members, the facility follows Norwegian architectural principles and notably does not include bars on the windows. It also houses a school, library, chapel, workshops, and a transition unit to support reintegration. Bulgaria currently has around 5,000 people in prison, from a population of 7 million.

