

Anais Vacherot on her work during corona, French penitentiary director

Work during Corona

On October 1st 2019 I started my work as penitentiary director of integration and probation. In the Hauts-de-Seine SPIP in Nanterre I am in charge of the management of several measures, in particular semi-liberty and electronic monitoring. This means that I supervise both penitentiary integration and probation counselors as well as prison guards.

Challenges in times of COVID-19

The first seven months were really hectic and the health crisis was an initiation to crisis management for which we could not have been prepared, despite lessons learned on the benches of ENAP (École Nationale d'Administration Pénitentiaire, red.). Especially Covid-19 quickly became an urgent issue as so many negative diagnoses came up so quickly. All in all my first weeks of work in this particular and new context could simply be described as "2 days of fire, then 5 days of fever". We had to react as soon as the President announced the containment measures. The entire SPIP had to go into adaptive modes to guarantee the continuity of public service, compensate for staff shortages and change daily practices in order to be as resilient and efficient as possible. An adjusted and functional permanence schedule with a daily calculated number of CPIP, DPIP, PA and PS was implemented; and also we had to organize the postponement of the connection of electronic bracelets to clients.

High speed train

When I returned from my sick leave, it felt like taking a high speed train back on the road: a tremendous lot of work had been accomplished by all the staff available during the first two weeks of the crisis. My resumption of my post coincided with the coming into force of the order of March 25 and the circular of March 27, which obliged us to daily carry out a complete analysis of the district's parole files in order to identify which ones were eligible for house arrest or a reduced sentence. Clearing up places of detention was of paramount importance in the fight against the pandemic. However, a balance had to be found between the health issue and the individualization of the sentence, something that is still the very basis of SPIP's missions. In a second step, in mid-April, when the activity of the PSE pole was reduced to the essential, we started the recovery of materials to anticipate the post-containment, or more modestly "the months to come".

Re-focus

From a professional point of view, this health crisis has upset management certainties, from personal management to decision-making mechanisms. In a context where certain benchmarks no longer exist, it is advisable to re-focus on specific problems to be (re)solved and to try and find as many opportunities to improve the functioning of the service as possible. Concretely, during my weekly visits to the service, I sometimes found myself with only one member of the team, the link with some of my agents being therefore only remotely. While interpersonal relations and the reception of

persons placed under the care of justice are normally inherent in the action of SPIPs, the confinement situation has led to constant adaptations. As a DPIIP, managing remote teams is a challenge, which requires a lot of clarity and strength to overcome the difficulties of digital and/or telephone exchanges.

From a personal point of view, home confinement also requires adapting one's apartment to the workplace. In the context of small Parisian apartments, it is sometimes hard to define a clear border between work and private space in only a few square meters! However, some things did not change, the long queues at the supermarket seemed like those of people trying to connect to VPN.

Exceptional situation

In the end, I think that this exceptional situation collectively makes us grow and learn. It calls into question our achievements and encourages us to listen to each other more carefully and to keep the dialogue open on how to find quick, effective and understandable solutions for everyone, most often by digital means. There is no doubt that the post-crisis period will be just as rich in lessons. But above all, it reveals that the key to success lies in our ability to count on one another, in our ability to communicate, and in our belief in the usefulness of our public service.