

Interview with Pascale Preud'homme, officer in charge of victim support in Brussels, Belgium

How did you experience your work during the Covid-19 pandemic?

One of the first difficulties was determining the time spent in the office. Indeed, requests for intervention arrive daily at the service whether it is by the internal post office of the public prosecutor's office, by external mail, by telephone calls, by e-mail, etc. As soon as the time of presence at the office was determined, i.e. one day on duty + one additional day for the management of the files, a shared calendar was created so that officers could best manage their working time at home or at the office while respecting the sanitary measures inherent to working in offices and in the building.

Tools to work from home

Another difficulty has been to obtain the necessary tools to work from home such as access to the different software's/programmes used in the internal network, the possibility to use a telephone diversion from the office to the home, the possibility to call people through a VoIP solution, etc. After a few "hesitant" weeks, all the probation officers were able to work from home with access to all the information necessary to carry out their tasks, except the "support" tasks, such as assisting a person at a judicial hearing, in reading a file or in returning seized belongings. These different tasks had to be postponed since during the first confinement, even though the officer was in the office, and face-to-face meetings were not allowed. The number of these "suspended" assistance sessions increased and the return of face-to-face appointments was feared, as it would be necessary to make up for this delay. Being able to come to the office two days a week allowed all the probation officers not to "lock themselves up" in teleworking and to continue to benefit from exchanges between colleagues concerning work methodology, the way to manage a difficult situation, etc. Indeed, online meeting tools (Zoom, WebEx, etc.) are practical, necessary and interesting, but the exchanges are less spontaneous and less extensive.

Intervene adequately

The presence in the office also made it simply possible to continue to have social exchanges. It should be noted that coming to the office was not stressful because all the staff enforced the different sanitary measures against the [COVID-19](#) propagation (equipment and sanitary products made available, adequate work space, etc.). Moreover, coming to the office may have helped to avoid "over-dramatizing" the situation. The probation officers learned to work at home, they found that it was possible to intervene adequately without having to be present in the office. Working at home was relatively well experienced by the probation officers even though some had to juggle with family life (children, spouse, parent to be taken care of, etc.) which led to delicate situations. It is important to divide the pandemic period according to the containment phases. With hindsight, it appears that the lock-down (March 2020) was better lived than the "semi-lock-down" we are currently experiencing. Indeed, the length of the situation and the change in national measures generate a certain demotivation and a climate of uncertainty. For a service that has to "explain/simplify the procedure" and which aims in particular to "avoid secondary victimisation", it is uncomfortable not being able to respond to people because the new measures are not yet known, not yet implemented! Even when face-to-face interviews were once again possible, the probation officers had to make a choice between the meetings that could be held by phone, chat, Zoom, etc.

when it was simply possible to hold a meeting! The probation officers had to be creative... Indeed, how can a person be assisted when reading a case file behind a Plexiglas screen? How can a person be correctly assisted during a hearing when one has to respect social distancing?

I will end by talking about the victims or their relatives with whom the probation officers have been in contact during this health crisis. With a few exceptions (they are unavoidable), people showed understanding when the probation officers could not answer their questions directly/correctly/completely. Telephone interviews took more time. At the risk of being "melodramatic": The exchanges with the people were also enriched because they integrated the common "difficulty" and the fact that health, both mental and physical, was more at the centre of the debates.

Enough space at home

In a very personal way, I am lucky to have enough space at home (I have been able to create an office space apart from my living room), I am lucky to have grown-up children (14 and 17), I am lucky to have a garden and to be able to get some fresh air. At the beginning I was worried about setting up "structural" home-based work over a long period but I have learnt to work in this way and I now appreciate the advantages, particularly in terms of availability and concentration for work. I am also in favour of a presence at the office because it is synonymous with a common professional identity, team spirit, richness and, of course, social exchanges! At first, I felt lost because I had to work with new tools or existing tools that I had never used before. Today, everything is fine although I sometimes grumble about the slow internet connection.

What would you have done differently?

I don't know!

What are the challenges you face today?

There are many challenges, the most important are:

- Keeping the motivation even though the situation is still uncertain and the duration of the health crisis remains unknown;
- Finding / keeping a work rhythm that integrates more home-based work (2 days) while offering the same service to people;
- Now that we have managed to find a balance between teleworking and office presence, I hope that in the future we will be able to do more teleworking;
- Stay positive

How are the probation procedures during this period?

As I am in charge of the victim support, I do not intervene in the probation procedure.

Note: The answers to the following questions are given by a probation officer in charge of the victim support. The victim support services do not intervene in the probation procedure.