

The Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency: probation work during Covid-19

This article is written by Annina Vilkas, probation officer in Tampere Community Sanctions Office in Finland

I have been working as a probation officer for over 13 years now. I work mainly with conditionally sentenced young offenders and young people sentenced to community service (of an offence they have committed when under 21 years of age). My job is to promote social adaptation, prevent social exclusion and co-operate with other authorities and third sector operators in order to try and minimize re-offending.

It is said that Finland is one of the leading countries in the world in public electronic services. The Criminal Sanctions Agency aims to increase and develop usage of digital services for criminal sanction clients in all units (2020–2023). However, the only official client communication channels in the beginning of year 2020 were SMS, encrypted email and Skype.

Covid-19

Then came Covid-19. It was March 12th, when the measures to slow down and prevent the spread of the coronavirus started here in Finland.

In March 2020 Criminal Sanctions Agency of Finland made changes to its operational practice and working arrangements. Our Central Administration directed temporary precautionary measures in order to flatten the curve and restrain the spread of coronavirus in the enforcement of community sanctions. It was highlighted that the most important thing was to stay in contact with clients via telemeetings and to ensure that they were given the support they needed in these times of uncertainty.

Face-to-face office meetings were suspended and replaced by phone and Skype video calls. In many cases also community services were called off as often these workplaces were under a lockdown in order to apply social distancing guidance. The enforcement of supervision and community service was carried out mostly by programmes, online self-help courses, assignments/exercises and discussions about specific themes (usually related to substance use or crime) with the supervisor over phone or Skype.

In order to comply with the government's measures in relation to social distancing, probation officers were granted to work remotely when possible. At the moment we are working 4 days from home and 1 day at the office, on a rotation basis in order to avoid unnecessary travel and inadvertent spread of the coronavirus. We have office meetings once a week, team meetings once a week and remote coffee breaks once a week via Skype.

From office meetings to telemeetings

Currently we are allowed to use phone, SMS, email and Skype to communicate with our clients, while using WhatsApp, FaceTime and Zoom is prohibited because our data protection experts consider that these applications do not meet the data protection and data security requirements. Thus the majority of our clients is reached via phone, due to different kind of problems related to using Skype (e.g. dropped calls, blocky video, unreliable audio,

lost connections; difficulties to download Lync Web App plugin or Skype for Business App; skills gap or unwillingness to use an application that would not otherwise be used).

However, the fact is: the more different channels for communicating we are able to use, the more likely we are going to reach our clients and having a chance to provide them with the services that they need. This is why I am a bit jealous of my Dutch and UK colleagues having a chance to use WhatsApp, of Northern Ireland colleagues having an opportunity to use Zoom, FaceTime or Changing Lives App and of Jersey colleagues having an option to use Starleaf for communicating with clients in these extraordinary times.

I think we should question the existing methods and practices and make them more effective and flexible. A key to applying this knowledge is in understanding the potential of technology. Clients must not only be able to use the device but also have the skills and understanding to do so, whereas authorities must be ready to make use of existing public and private electronic services. The last few months have highlighted the importance of digital services being accessible to everyone and I would like to state that also probation officers should be present in these (digital) environments that their clients already use.

Same content of probation work

While operational practice, working arrangements and communication mediums changed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the content of our probation work remained the same: agenda mapping, values exercises, decisional balance, goal setting, action planning, assessing beliefs, focusing on good things in life, focusing on past successes as well as promoting self-kindness and acceptance – all of these put into practice over phone and video calls. During the past seven weeks I have had dialogues with my clients related to e.g. everyday life skills, studies, work, relationships, health, well-being, society, substance use, addictions – and of course: coping with the coronavirus.



I agree with Mr. Fergus McNeill, who wrote on the SCCJR blog that “the nature and experience of phone-based supervision often depends on the quality of the pre-existing relationship”. In some cases phone-based supervision may be defaulting to basic surveillance with limited and superficial conversations. On the other hand however, I have

noticed that when the office surroundings may restrict willingness to speak openly, video calls taking place at home can provide a safer setting to talk about what is really going on. Additionally, a phone call without video picture may offer a certain sense of anonymity which can lower the threshold of receiving help and support.

Variety in remote client work

Working during the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that some clients could rather benefit from office meetings, while others benefit more from phone and video calls in particular. Keeping in touch with clients only via phone and video calls may result in losing some nuance and personal connection when we no longer see them at the office nor visit them in workplaces, but on the other hand telecommunicating can be seen as a more casual and equal interaction in comparison to face-to-face meetings that take place at the office environment.

One client may benefit from thematic discussions via phone or video call. A second one may benefit from home assignments sent via email and discussed later via phone or video call. A third one could prefer having individual treatment programme or semi-structured conversation via phone or video call while number four would be mostly helped by support/coaching via phone or video call when participating in self-help programmes provided by AddictionLink and MentalHub (which is a part of the Action Programme on eServices and eDemocracy of the Ministry of Finance aimed to develop and introduce new well-being and health promoting practices and electronic services and make them available to citizens and authorities). A fifth then could benefit from watching a tv-program (for example an award-winning TV show based on the stories and experiences of young mental health rehabilitees, a documentary about restorative justice program or relevant TED Talk – videos selected by the supervisor) combined with self-reflective written home assignments followed by thematic discussions via phone or video call.

Looking forward to returning to a new normal

If something great follows from all of this, it is that some of these new ways of working could remain also in “normal” times when this crisis is over, for example that in some cases telemeetings are organized instead of office meetings.

We expect that clients would be active in their own affairs but we just haven’t given them all necessary tools yet. Using Skype is a fair start – but in my opinion, the actual creative digital leap in probation work in Finland is yet to come. The sooner the better.

I wish that some day we would be able to use the existing electronic services that our clients already use. I also hope that we would have Probation e-Services or the ProbationApp (although the procurement of the application is suspended due to financial reasons) for sending direct messages, having video calls and keeping each other up-to-date regarding scheduled office/online meetings, as well as the Probation e-Learning platform for sending, receiving and returning assignments related to individual treatment programmes.

Despite my “pro-digital defense-speech” above, I would like to state that technology-based services can never fully replace face-to-face meetings. In fact after seven weeks of working during the Covid-19 pandemic, I must say that I miss the face-to-face meetings with my clients and my colleagues.