

# **Working at the French Bourg-en-Bresse penitentiary center during Covid-19**

**An interview with Mrs. Edwige Gbadamassi, penitentiary counselor for integration and probation at the center in Ain, France**

## **How do you ensure the continuity of your missions under these exceptional conditions?**

Since the beginning of the health crisis, the days have been more intense: we had to think of many things at the same time and to carry out quality professional acts despite the emergency. We are working at a penitentiary center which makes it necessary to adapt even more than usual and deal with requests from both the arrest centers as from the detention center itself. For my daily work it is extremely important to keep control of myself and my emotions. With the crisis, special care must be taken to ensure that stress does not influence our relationships with others – something that is not always easy.

We also have to be more creative. The basis of our job is maintenance and at the moment only a few colleagues are present. This can be frustrating but I do my best to explain everything simply and precisely and translate the letters for foreigners in order to answer questions and advise them. Support is provided remotely, but happily this is generally well received as everyone adopts a benevolent and friendly attitude towards others. I can see this in correspondence exchanges as well as in the contact with families.

The priority is therefore, in times of crisis, to respond as quickly as possible to letters, to maintain contact with loved ones of the inmates and to write professional documents in order to try and organize the planning of the sentences. While we usually work with a focus on the future, we must now (during this health crisis) help the magistrates to make the best decision in the actual period. Besides that we take care of the longer sentences (which are not eligible for the measures provided in the order of the 25th March), and of the measures for sentence adjustments that have not been properly examined.

## **What does a typical day look like in your professional life right now?**

I am in charge of the interviews with 'to-be-released' offenders and with vulnerable people, or with others in the context of death announcements. However, we limit interviews as much as possible to avoid the possible spread of the virus. Besides that it is necessary to manage the mail and the calls from other penitentiary counsellors, to react to possible emergencies and to do our other professional tasks.

In fact, the priority activity is now to respond to all letters from detained persons addressed to us. This allows us, without being physically present in detention, to provide them with answers as concrete as possible, to ease tensions and to tell them news from their loved ones. We also receive quite a lot of requests from families who contact us out of concern, to prepare for the inmate coming home, or in general just to have information.

We continue to write a lot of documents: sentence adjustments, several kinds of reports, house arrest files at the end of one's sentence, RSP opinions and many more.

For the rest, we are in regular contact with the prison facilities, the register and certain partners to facilitate everyone's work and exchange the information necessary for the proper functioning of our establishment. We are attending the few commissions that are still being held: incoming CPUs, specific monitoring.

**What does this represent for you to ensure the continuity of public service missions?**

I have always been driven by wanting to give the best possible service while performing my duties, and during this period I feel this more than ever. From the start of the health crisis, it seemed fundamental to me to continue ensuring the continuity of support to our clients.

Despite the personal situation of each of the penitentiary counsellors, the possible fear of being affected by the Covid-19 made it necessary for us to organize ourselves as quickly as possible in order to allow the continuity of our services. This seemed even more important when we heard that Italy, struck by the epidemic before France, experienced strong tensions in its penitentiary establishments. Ensuring the continuity of our activities means therefore staying in touch, continuing to prepare reports, reassuring and doing prevention.