

Is the day of a probation officer in Germany similar to the one of someone working in Romania? In the series 'A day in the life of a probation officer', we publish articles written by probation officers from different countries in Europe to see if their days look a like or are very different from each other. This article is written by Ligia Birdici, probation officer of the Arges Probation Service, Romania.



My name is Ligia Birdici. I was born and raised in a small town in Romania. In 2003, I graduated from Bucharest University, with a Social Work Diploma. In 2002, thanks to Ian Tilling, my first manager and my forever best friend, I got my first job as a social worker within a non-profit organisation for homeless people, called "Casa Ioana" or "Ioana's House".

As nothing lasts forever, in early 2006, I was offered the chance to live and work in the UK. I was employed by Thurrock Council and worked there for about seven years. My manager was Romanian, Adriana Cimpean. I would not be here without her.

In 2013, I became an agency social worker, working for different local authorities in London. I loved it. However, in 2016, I dared to have a good look at myself and said: "you have done it all: loved your children, cried on your desk, laughed in court, drunk coffee from the tap on Mondays and beers on Fridays. It is now time for you to return home."

And here I am, a probation officer in Arges Probation Service, Romania. Our manager is Octavian Pana. I feel very lucky to have him. For short, we try to change society's perceptions of offenders and the offenders' perception of society. I will now tell you what an ordinary Tuesday is like in our office.

The morning, when everything happens and it happens fast.

We work in the office from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.. Theoretically, we meet our clients from 8.30 a.m. until 12.30 p.m., then focus on completing the court reports/ initial assessments and final assessments. But this is just in theory. The reality looks like this: At 7.50 a.m. there are already some people waiting in front of the office for their designated probation officer. Our offices are overcrowded, that is why we divide the work. Some of us are dealing with the clients, some are concentrating on the paperwork. All our e-mails are read after 2 p.m.. All the urgent matters are dealt with over the phone. We need to help each other and we need to help the clients.

All the daily tasks and duties are delegated by my manager (according to the skills of the workers). For instance, Simona Calota attends the multidisciplinary meetings/conditional release committees at Mioveni Penitentiary, on Tuesdays at 10 a.m. I am the one receiving many Initial Assessments or Social Enquiry Reports requested by the judge. Anda Mustata is very good at one to one social reintegration programmes. We, for example, also have an expert in group programmes and one in working with the Roma community.

The rest of the morning is dedicated to our clients. They all come in to report according to their schedule. They often share their problems with us, because they choose to and we listen. We need to help them, if our aim is to prevent re-offending in the long term. We also need to make sure that they respect the court orders. Normally, there should be three probation officers and three clients,

but very often it is more than that. We have about 200 clients each. We laugh a lot and this is how we deal with the stress and strain.

The afternoon or lunch time

At 12.30 p.m. it is time for lunch, no matter what. We have a variety of choices, which makes our lunch decisions always difficult. From around 12.30 – 1.30 p.m. it is the time when we start to relax, as we have less clients. Those who turn up attend their rehabilitation programmes, individual and group ones. We are trained in a variety of programmes, such as 'One to One', which is obviously an individual programme based on individual needs and goals, a group programme called 'Stop, Think and Change', which is designated to offenders who struggle with an alcohol addiction (mostly in our neighbourhood), Anger Management and Developing Social Skills, made for people who were less fortunate than us: poor youth, domestic violence, no education, Roma communities etc.

Before the end of the day

Before the end of a busy day, which in theory finishes at 4p.m., I check my e-mails, caseload files, deadlines and I make some phone calls to the clients who have not showed up in time. Then it is time to call it a day after finishing my 'to do list'. The reality is that, deep down in my professional heart, I love to do lists, they are the best! The time I leave the office is not always the same, it could be 4 p.m., it could be 6 p.m. or never, like on Sunday afternoon at home finishing an assessment. It does not really matter in the big scheme of things, as we all need to work hard, we all need to make a positive change so we could justify our existence. And so the week goes by.

Conclusion

I was a children's social worker from 2002 to 2016, but I have never ever heard one single child saying that, when they grow up, they would like to become a villain, an offender, an addict. They all want to be doctors, police officers, firemen, teachers, all noble professions. So, there is hope in probation too, since once upon a time, everyone was a child.