

Written by Mrs. Orsolya Szathmáry-Király probation officer (Hungary):

WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER

(A Hungarian probation officer's experiences during the pandemic)

In Hungary during the first wave of COVID-19 (April-May 2020) personal meetings with clients were fully cancelled. We did not work from home (this was only allowed for employees over 60 or struggling with a chronic disease), we had to go to the office every workday but the work mainly included making phone calls and doing the paperwork. We were in contact with our clients by phone. I always give my own private mobile number to my clients (work mobile phones are not provided for probation officers in our country) so they can get in touch with me easily. None of my clients have ever misused it. It was a pleasant surprise for me during the lockdown many of my clients recurrently called me and informed me about what was going on in their lives. They often asked how I was. Not only did I take care of them - they also took care of me.

In Hungary probation officers prepare social inquiry reports on juvenile offenders as a part of the criminal procedure. We visit the juveniles at their homes, interview them and their parents in order to get information about their personalities and life circumstances. During the first wave of COVID-19 most of the social inquiry reports were prepared over the phone. I tried to be thorough but there was a lot of information that was impossible to pick up, like the behaviour of the juveniles in his or her home environment, their attitude to their parents and their non-verbal communication (eye contact, body language).

Then in summer we could get back into the swing of things and we hoped to have left the situation behind us. Unfortunately however in October 2020 the number of cases began to increase and restrictions were needed again.

During the second wave of the pandemic personal meetings with the clients were not cancelled. We met the clients at the office while observing the necessary safety measures (wearing a mask and keeping distance). Even though the clients are required to appear, I try to be flexible when they are not able to. For example, if clients working abroad call me that they cannot come home for several months, obviously I agree that we keep in contact via phone or e-mail.

Gathering information about the clients brought several difficulties during the pandemic. We could not visit them at their habitations, we could not talk to the members of their families and could only rely on what they told us.

Our clients faced various problems (online education, losing their jobs) during this period and as a probation officer I had to react to these problems. I did my best to check if all of my clients could adapt to the new circumstances and had to make sure that my juvenile clients had access to the online education. I frequently contacted the clients struggling with mental disorders (anxiety, depression, panic disorder) or addiction problems to find out whether their mental health condition had aggravated, whether they had relapsed and whether they had access to medical treatment. I often got in touch with

social workers whether they have experienced any crisis in the life of my clients and if an immediate intervention is needed.

My clients ask me questions about the pandemic a lot of times, they share their fears with me, they need me to ease their minds. On the one hand, I have to be well-informed to give them reliable and actual information, but on the other hand I have to be able to put an end to their fears as also I myself am stressed out and worried. I have never felt to have to hide my emotions from my clients. I believe that I have to show who I am, how I struggle with issues because that makes me authentic, and in this way I can create an atmosphere of trust where my clients feel free to share their feelings too, and are willing to take my advice.

They have to know that we are all in this together and we will get through it together. When they leave the office, I tell them this and they also say to me: "Take care of yourself!".

It is hard for me to get used to seeing faces covered with masks, seeing only eyes. It is so strange not to see the facial expressions of my clients, not to be able to read their faces.

Not only do I take care of my clients, I am also trying to care of myself. Being a probation officer is mentally demanding (not only during a pandemic). We sometimes confront tragic life stories or shocking situations that touch us, or we have to make decisions that are so hard to make. If we neglect our mental health, it can cause burnout. I have been working as a probation officer for almost 15 years and I am as enthusiastic about my job as I was in the beginning.

I always ease stress with some physical activity. Before the lockdown I went to do aerobics 4 or 5 times a week. The gyms are closed now due to COVID-19 so these days I go running and do workouts at home. Mental tiredness can be counterbalanced by physical tiredness. Sport helps me to take my mind off if need be and to stay focused, to be present every day. It gives me strength ...mentally and physically and it is more important in these days than ever before.

I try to be as normal as I can be in this chaos caused by the pandemic and the lockdown. I do my best to keep on working as I have always done and I try to adjust to the new conditions. Challenges are not meant to paralyze us but to help us grow.

*"You say what if things start changing
I say we'll be changing with them. "*

(Ben Platt – So Will I)

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