



*Online meeting for Directors General and senior managers in probation:  
sharing experiences regarding community (unpaid) work during Covid-19*

**Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> April, 15.00-16.30h CET**

*Report*

CEP President Gerry McNally opened the session by welcoming the participants and by saying that the topic of today's meeting would be probation supervision measures in the broadest sense, and the influence that Covid-19 had on them. He indicated that for quite some time now society was trying to get back to (a new) normal, but that unfortunately the corona crisis took longer than expected and that therefore situations remained difficult and challenging.

After his opening words CEP Secretary General Willem van der Brugge took the floor and introduced the first speaker – Mr. Hans Dominicus from the *Justitiehuizen* (Houses of Justice) in Belgium, Flanders.

-----  
**Community Service and COVID-19 : sharing experiences from the Flemish Probation Service**

Hans Dominicus thanked CEP for the opportunity to speak and said that it was his pleasure to share his “humble” experiences on the community work in Belgium during Covid-19.

He distinguished three phases that his organization had been going through during 2020:

- Phase 1 (*March-May 2020 - lockdown*) : all community services were put on hold and the backlog/waiting list increased by 115 % (!)
- Phase 2 (*June-October 2020 – eased restrictions*) : most organizations re-opened so a decrease of 82% of backlog cases could be achieved
- Phase 3 (*November 2020-April 2021 – restrictions for non essential organizations*) : here the number of backlog cases went up again

The conclusion could be drawn that the pandemic had (and still has) a big impact on the situation of probation and community work. Hans however assured that all sentences would be executed, whether or not with a delay. Extending the official timeline of 12 months could be a solution.

In the meantime several initiatives had been taken up in which the Flemish Minister of Justice himself had taken an active role by searching for new collaboration with other agencies. A letter was sent to all municipalities to explore options for (new) locations for community sanctions work. The office of the Minister of Justice enabled the financing of temporary projects or already existing partnerships.

Besides this within the Houses of Justice a new staff member was recruited specifically for this issue, and the regular consults with judicial authorities in order to make use of the possibility for extending the execution time was very effective and successful.

Hans concluded by saying that his organization made continuous efforts to search new partnerships and think out of the box, and that the importance of monitoring and evaluating the actual processes were seen and recognized.





Willem thanked Hans for his presentation and said that indeed all many of the topics he had mentioned were very innovative. He asked if the participants had any questions?

Johan Bac (Dutch Probation Service) took the floor and wanted to know more about this “thinking out of the box” – in which direction would this thinking be? Hans answered that this depended on the size of the original box, and on how strongly you felt that things needed to be done. He said that in his organization he noticed many creative ideas coming up, and every local probation office was stimulated to think about (new) future work options.

Via de chat Marta Ferrer (Spain Catalonia) said that in her jurisdictions some cases for community sanctions had been closed after talking to the judge – was this also possible in Belgium? Hans answered that this was not so – all sentences remained, also from a political point of view, and there have never been options to close some of them.

-----

### **The impact of COVID-19 on the Dutch Community Service**

The second presentation was delivered by Erik Corten from the Dutch Probation Service, who started by mentioning some figures. He said that in the Netherlands community services were independent sentences with a maximum duration of 240 hours. In 2019 there were 30.000 people on community service and with an average of 75 hours each this meant 2.200.000 hours of unpaid work for the community.

Erik distinguished 5 phases in the Covid-19 process:

1. *System crash (March-June 2020)* – people were in shock, schools and courts closed. At the head office of the probation service a crisis team was set up to develop guidelines for the new ways of working keeping in mind the “1,5 meter distance society”.
2. *Starting up (June 2020)* – this sounded easier than it was. Only 42% of the projects opened up and the number of people to do a community sanction was much lower due to the need of social distancing. Other institutions were used, like hospitals.
3. *Slow recovery and hope (July-October 2020)* – several extra projects were opened and the time schedule was widened to evenings and weekends as well. The Dutch Probation Service actively looked for more external projects, like in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence, and hired 60 new temporary professionals.
4. *Tempering expectations (November 2020-today)* – the productivity rose, but the virus remained and continued to have its influence. The good news is that by the end of 2021 the stock level should be reached.
5. *Stage X ; community service future proof.* The Probation Service is working on an online offender orientated process in which the client would be able to digitally sign up at the court and monitor the progress of his/her sentence via an online portal.

Willem thanked Erik for his presentation and wanted to know if there had been a decrease of community sentences in the Netherlands because of Covid-19? Erik answered that in the beginning this was so, but that now the situation was almost on the level of before Covid-19. There had also been no changes in the number of hours that community sentences needed to be fulfilled.

As learning experience he mentioned the depending on external projects only – this was very risky and it would be good to make sure that there are enough good internal projects.

Gerry McNally wanted to know if there had been corona outbreaks in some of the working places? Erik answered that fortunately this had not been the case as the rule of 1,5 meter social distancing was strictly kept and controlled.





Erik Bezem (Dutch Ministry of Justice) asked if community sentences could also be done in commercial places or companies? Erik answered that in Belgium this was indeed an option, but not in the Netherlands. Also community workers could never replace paid employees – they always needed to be ‘extra’.

Daniel Danglades (France) wanted to know if it would be possible to convert a community sentence into a fine or Electronic Monitoring? Erik indicated that they were exploring this at the moment.

-----

### **Management and creativity during a pandemic situation: how the Romanian probation service reacted to a pandemic crisis**

The third presentation was delivered by Mrs. Anca Nicoara from the Suceava district in Romania, one of the 42 local probation services in that country.

Anca started by saying that her office and team were completely shocked and overruled by the Covid-19 situation and that they were forced to adapt quickly to the new situation. All scheduled face-to-face meetings were replaced by online ones, and the execution of non-custodial measures for minor offenders as well as the planning for those of adult offenders were either postponed or put on hold. The public institutions and therapists involved in these activities were updated on the new situation and state of play.

The main issue now became: how to react to these new challenges? Staff members started to work from home or in shifts at the office, keeping in contact with each other via a whatsapp group. Lists were made of not yet executed sentences in order to have a database for when the face-to-face work with offenders could start up again.

When on 18<sup>th</sup> May the quarantine came to an end, the probation workers returned to the office and started working on the outstanding cases. Priority was given to juveniles, violent offenders and offenders with mental health issues. To avoid risks of infections each probation officer had only 4 meetings a day, and the house visits were preferably held outside. Locations where community work could be done were asked to open up and create outside work possibilities.

Anca ended her presentation by mentioning the expectations and situation for 2021: most of the staff was now vaccinated, new colleagues would be joining in August and they now had their own building in which they could return to normality.

Willem thanked Anca for her interesting speech and wanted to know if there were any questions? Yvonne Morick (Germany) asked how the probation officers communicated with their clients when working from home? Anca said that this was mostly done by phone – all staff members had received a mobile phone.

Yveline Chard-Henry (France) wondered if the level of recidivism had increased because of the fact that less community sentences could be done? Anca answered that this was fortunately not the case – the offenders had very well understood the situation. They had already received their judgement and probation officers did their best to tell them that they were working on solutions and constantly keeping in touch with the public institutions.

Willem asked what the main learning point had been? Anca was very clear about that: the fact that things can change quickly, but that you need to count on your team and your family. *“Never lose hope as everything can be solved”*, she said.

Then Willem handed over to Gerry for the closure of the meeting. Gerry said that all presentations had shown how important flexibility was in these times of a pandemic. In Ireland the community services had completely closed which was not a good situation as such sentences are not only punishments but also part of a rehabilitation process.





He indicated to have seen a lot of creativity – the use of media, the various options for good remote communication. A lot of interesting work had been done in many jurisdictions – how much of this could also be kept for the future? In fact community service could be an alternative for both custody and after custody – a lot of purposeful work could be done in the community.

A real challenge was however still there as the situation regarding the pandemic would surely continue for a while. Would it be good to further invest in online trainings and in ways to support community service online? He invited the participants to send in their ideas and questions – in that way the network could stay in touch, learn from each other and share experiences. *“If we don’t have a solution”, he said, “why not ask a question?”*. In this way new solutions could be found as surely many lessons could be learnt from a crisis situation.

He thanked everyone for his/her participation, encouraged everyone to stay in touch and closed the meeting.

