

Petra Saari:

Employee's view on working on both sides of a combined unit (open prison - community sanctions office)

A combined unit that consists of Vilppula Open Prison and Tampere Community Sanctions Office. The prison has 73 prisoner places in total and approximately 15-20 prisoners are in probationary liberty under supervision daily. Tampere Community Sanctions Office has about 350 community sanction clients (120 community service clients, 130 conditionally released prisoners ordered to supervision, 100 conditionally sentenced young offenders, 0-2 monitoring sentence clients, and 1 sentenced to juvenile punishment).

The prison has about 30 staff members and the community sanctions office 25. The distance between the units is 90 kilometres.

Personal history

I have worked in community sanctions since 2003 throughout my whole career. For the most part, I worked as a supervisor of conditionally released prisoners in different cities around Finland (Porvoo, Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere) but also as senior coordinator in an assessment centre where my main task was to draw up pre-sentence reports (regarding community service, monitoring sentence, or young offenders) for court proceedings. At the beginning of 2018, I was offered a possibility to take part in job rotation and work as a senior instructor in Vilppula Prison, which is part of our combined unit. I worked there for just over two months. To my benefit, the long distance between Tampere Community Sanctions Office and Vilppula Prison did not really matter because I live roughly in the midpoint between the units and, thus, the distance to work stayed the same.

Main differences in working in the open prison and in the community sanctions office

In the open prison, the work of a senior instructor means mostly living in the moment, helping the prisoners with everyday matters, and solving things. As a senior instructor, I held discussions on substance abuse problems with the prisoners, made preparations for probationary liberty under supervision, and helped with acute matters concerning the prisoners' life outside the prison. In the community sanctions office, the work is done based on predetermined appointments and, thus, the content of the day is better known beforehand. Moreover, the work with community sanctions clients in itself is more about checking matters and situations, whereas in prison, it is concrete management of issues as the prisoners have limited opportunities to take care of their affairs by themselves.

A major benefit of this opportunity to work in both units was that some of the prisoners, who I met in the prison and helped take care of their matters and prepare for their probationary liberty under supervision, came under my supervision in the community sanctions office. Even though the roles got mixed up sometimes, working as a comprehensive case manager was a great benefit as I knew the clients' overall situation and their networks.

What could an open prison learn from a community sanctions office and vice versa?

The prison work culture includes many things that have been done in the same way for years and there are many unwritten rules and regulations, which you learn little by little as you work there. In addition, digitalisation and information technology have not been utilised the same way in the prison as they have been in the community sanctions office. In prison, a lot of information is passed on by word of mouth, that is as spoken communication, and even highly important things may easily remain unrecorded and undocumented.

The open prison could teach the community sanctions office a more open and spontaneous approach to, for instance, the arrangement of courses or events for the clients.