

# THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF A PRISON OFFICER

**“Creating good relationships with inmates is an important part of being a contact officer. Good conversations are our best weapon,” says Maria Frøvik.**

Maria is based in department C 5/6, which houses 20 inmates, of which the majority are in the final stage of their sentence at Halden. C-Block contains a total of 8 units with 84 inmates overall.

## **The All-Important Link**

Maria is a contact officer for three inmates, which involves acting as both a guard and a helper.

This means that she not only maintains security and control, but that she also keeps a close eye on them and motivates them to change through conversation. Additionally, she helps with practical issues like applications, difficult phone calls and networking.

“I’m a link between the person and society beyond these walls as part of the release process, in partnership with social workers, release coordinators and NAV employee in the service centre,” she explains.

## **Work is its own Reward**

It is precisely these interactions with the inmates that she derives the most motivation from as part of her job. The small victories that can lead to big changes in the long run. That can be the difference between relapse and a life without drugs and crime.



*“I wasn’t sure whether there would be room for my personality working as a prison officer. I quickly found out there was. Here, it’s a plus point that employees are different,”*  
says Maria Frøvik.

“It might be things we’ve worked on for many months or even a year. When we succeed, it’s a real joy.”

“Do you ever feel unsafe in your work?”

“Although there have been tense situations, I’ve never been afraid. I am confident in our security procedures. If I were to experience a situation so threatening that I had to trigger the alarm, my colleagues would be with me within seconds.”

“And I am certain that many of the inmates would also help me. This is because we are always building trust and relationships between employees and inmates, which is also an important element of our security procedures.”

#### Caring about the Inmates

“As a contact officer, can you get too close to an inmate?”

“We have to strike a fine balance. If we are to understand and support them, it is important that they open up and let us into their lives. Many are carrying heavy emotional burdens, and it can be hard not to be affected. It shows that we care.”

“At the same time, we need to be professional and not allow ourselves to be manipulated. There’s always someone trying to get extra perks.”

Maria has received good training, and also benefits from a strong team around her from whom she can seek advice and guidance when necessary.

“How we behave and what we say in encounters with inmates is incredibly important in terms of our relationship with them. If we are good role models in relation to how we respond to their behaviour, they often learn from it.”

#### Quite the All-Rounder

As a prison officer, the fixed tasks are regulated and comprise many routines. But within these frameworks, no two days are alike. There are many decisions that must be taken in different situations. This adds excitement to the day.

Her working day starts in the section at 07:00, when two inmates are selected to provide urine samples.

At 07:30, everyone is released from their cells for a shared breakfast, while the officers review the list of tasks and distribute these amongst the inmates.

At 08:15, the inmates leave for work and school. One officer remains on duty throughout the day, while the others visit and check one or two cells, attend presentations, health checks and other tasks that are related to the role of contact officer. At 15:00, they eat dinner together with the inmates.

“In addition, we write reports and documentation, which is another important part of the job. All in all, it makes for very varied and meaningful working days,” concludes

Maria Frøvik.



## Really Loves her Job

**Maria Frøvik didn’t know what working in a prison involved until she took on a summer job here. After a while, she came to realise it was going to be her future profession.**

“Previously, I had worked with children and young people, but I was missing a little more excitement and variety as part of my working day. That’s why I applied for a summer job here at the prison to see whether it might be for me.”

“I was far from certain because I had some preconceived notions of how female prison guards were supposed to behave and look. This picture was far from what I stood for,” she says with a smile.

#### Making a Difference

Maria got her summer job in 2011 and quickly discovered that her working days were completely different to what she had expected. They involved not just the role of guard, but also providing motivation and assistance to inmate making changes to their lives. She has always been good at forming good relationships.

“But it was after an incident that I made the final decision. There was an inmate who I had formed a strong connection with who had cut himself through self-harming, and who wanted to talk to

me afterwards. I mastered the situation and made a difference to him by giving him hope. This was an experience that made me understand that this is not just a job, but that I am also an important supporter for people in difficult situations.”

“I also realised that the role of prison officer requires different people and personalities, and that there was space for me. The inmates are different, and so are the employees. That’s how it has to be,” she says.

#### Qualified for the Job

The year after she went back to school and completed a two-year college education, including a placement right here at Halden Prison. Since then she has held a permanent position, and loves her duties and colleagues.

She strongly recommends that others apply for jobs in the Norwegian Correctional Service. Maria also boasts about the great working environment in the prison. There are good colleagues and it is lots of fun, with everyone working towards the same overarching goal to help inmates achieve lasting change.

Around 40 per cent of prison officers at Halden Prison are female. Maria thinks this is positive.

**“It softens the experience of serving a sentence a little. No one has to act tough for our sake,”** she says.

## Contact Officer’s Main Tasks

The Contact Officer role is an important tool in providing a more targeted and systematic implementation of prison sentences. A Contact Officer’s main tasks are to:



- Be responsible for ensuring that the inmate receives information about the prison and his or her rights and obligations
- Provide the inmate with an introduction to the contact officer’s duties and the limits to these
- Identify problems, requirements and resources as soon as possible after the inmate arrives
- Support and motivate the inmate to work constructively during their prison sentence
- Be the connection between the inmate and the prison as a whole
- Contribute to the process of planning for the future
- Assist in external inquiries, for example to social services, employment offices and school authorities