

# Senior Revolution in the Prison Service

By: Tom Pedersen

Oslo Prison has established a separate senior section with much success. A high degree of job satisfaction and a low absence rate are the results of this process. In addition, half the seniors want to stay on in their jobs beyond retirement age. A minor revolution is what those involved say about the arrangement.

At present a report is being prepared on senior policy within the prison service as a whole. At the same time the top prison management has provided access to the individual prisons to initiate local measures. Oslo Prison Division A immediately seized upon this opportunity, with deputy head Per Gjersøe as the driving force:

- We saw that many of our staff ended up with long-term sick leave. Not all the staff lasted until they reached the retirement age of 60 years. But the attitude of leaving a job in this way is not very dignified. We wish to create a place of work for seniors which they enjoy well enough to remain in their jobs beyond retirement age. It is important to have a “carrot” for those who have been in the system long enough. Gjersøe refers to the motive for establishing the senior section in Block 3 as a pilot project in 2001. It has now become a regular feature of the prison, and the youngest staff member is 48 years old.

## Retire with Head held high

- I want to retire from working life with my head held high, says prison officer Bitte Hepsøe, one of the 11 members of the staff at the senior section. When the question of the section first came up and everybody over the age of 45 was called in for a meeting, she at first believed it would only be much talk and less action. But when the meeting was over and the employees themselves had chosen a fast-working group of 5-6 persons she realized it was serious. She feels the senior section provides far more peace and stability than was the case earlier.

- A large element of unskilled manpower and a constantly fresh recruitment from “the street” are among the most wearing things on the regular staff in Oslo Prison. I felt I had people in training all week, Hepsøe says about her earlier situation. She felt this affected her real job, which is to motivate prisoners to stop committing crimes.

The situation of the experienced prison officer she describes as follows:

- My colleagues are a stable and highly qualified group. They may shape their own working hours arrangements within certain limits according to personal circumstances. The section has a pleasant atmosphere and “talk the same language”. Senior prison officers retain their salaries when moving to the senior section.

In addition, the senior section consists of long-term prisoners who are prepared to start a new and better life. The criteria for being a prisoner in B 3 are strict and many prisoners wish to be transferred to the section. This generates a very different kind of calm among the prisoners than what is normal in other parts of the prison.

## Queuing up for Employment

Not only the staff and the prisoners in B 3 benefit from the special section, but also the prison as a whole. The older officers possess considerable skills which no longer disappear with early retirements or long term sick leaves.

- The section aims to be a leader in prison work. In the long view the idea is for B 3 to be linked up to the other sections and for the older staff to be mentors for younger officers,

Mr Gjersøe says. Absenteeism, and especially short-term absenteeism, among the 11 seniors has shown a downward trend since they were allocated their own section. For some months there has been no absence.

Today there is a queue for employment in the senior section of Division A. The ranking system is based exclusively on a combination of age and employment years in the prison service. Only staff in B 3 is eligible to apply. The purpose is to avoid appointments based on personal appearance or acquaintance.

Division B (Bayern) of Oslo Prison wants to start a similar arrangement – as in the senior section of the prison it may be several years before a vacancy occurs.