

More prisoners face old age behind bars

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Retirement homes planned for junkies

Junkies are living longer in Switzerland thanks to the government's drugs policy, leading to a demand for residential care for elderly drug users.

Emergency shelters have identified a need for such long-term accommodation and the Obdach shelter in Lucerne has taken on the task of providing a new home for drug-dependent clients. Similar projects already exist in Zurich and Basel.

Rooms in the Lucerne night shelter are functional and sparsely furnished, intended for people in need who are just passing through.

However, the average stay per person has increased sharply, from 10 nights on average in 2004 to 15.5 nights on average last year.

One significant change in the profile of clients in recent years is an increase in older drug addicts in need of care. The years weigh more heavily on drug addicts. The physical and mental condition of a 50-year-old drugs consumer is comparable to a 70 year old in the general population.

However, housing long-term drug addicts in regular retirement homes has led to massive problems, in particular in preventing the residents from having unauthorised access to medication.

These problems led the association that runs Obdach to take action. The Jobdach Association is currently drawing up a living concept for drug, alcohol and medication dependent individuals. Social services in Lucerne estimate there are 80 affected people living locally.

Zurich has had a residence, with in-house doctor, catering for long-term drug users since 2007. Many of the residents were previously homeless and most are being treated with methadone or similar heroin substitutes.

This is no ordinary home – the consumption of illegal drugs is allowed on the premises.

A similar residential pilot project for elderly addicts began in Basel earlier this month, an initiative of Sternenhof, an association that provides sheltered housing for the elderly.

Establishing old folks homes for drug addicts which perpetuate their addiction could seem at odds with the stated goal of the national drugs policy, which is abstinence.

But drug addiction is, according to the most recent brain research, a chronic illness. It cannot be expected of every addicted person to become clean.

Substitution programmes may therefore carry on into advanced age and even until death.

from swissinfo

More prisoners face old age behind bars

Switzerland's over-60s jail population is growing – a trend that is posing problems for the country's prisons. Not all are equipped for aged inmates' particular needs, and building a specialised detention centre for the elderly may not be viable.

There are currently around 100 prisoners aged 60 or more in Switzerland, a fraction of the total prison population of almost 6,000. But their numbers are on the rise – in 1985 there were only 55.

Under Switzerland's preventive detention system, an offender can be sentenced to unlimited incarceration for as long as he is deemed a risk to the public. This measure is imposed in addition to the sentence for the crime. It normally applies to serious sexual or violent offences and is subject to a yearly review. It differs from a life sentence, which in Switzerland covers a small number of crimes, such as murder.

The challenges posed by older inmates are manifold. Prison programmes normally aim to integrate people back into the labour market, but this makes no sense for the old. They have to be prepared to deal with the social security and health system upon release. Older people often withdraw from the younger ones. They don't want to spend their free time with the younger inmates and they often suffer health problems, so they can't carry out the whole prison work programme.

Lenzburg currently has six inmates aged over 60, and 12 that are 55-60 years old. They are allowed to do less physically taxing work and there is a special exercise class. The jail also works with the Spitex organisation, which provides home care for the ill or frail.

Geriatric health is a big issue. Lenzburg is building a specialised older persons' wing with 12 places to open in 2011. It will have a hospital section with five beds, with facilities for dementia patients.

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