

Samaaria Pärnu - Estonia

Introduction

Samaaria Pärnu is a facility located in Pärnu, a city on the southwestern coast of Estonia, in the Sauga area, a place that used to be its own small borough but is now part of the city. The facility is run by the Samaritan Estonian Mission (Samaaria Eesti Misjon), a nonprofit organization that manages facilities, nursing homes, and charity shops. Founded in 1991 with help from Swedish Christians, the organization originally focused on providing humanitarian aid and support for people affected by the societal changes following Estonia's independence.



Samaaria Pärnu officially opened in 1995, but before that, it was in a different location. At first, it operated in a rented house, offering shelter to just 3–4 men in need. This work was started by Pentecostal church members, and later, through increased collaboration with the leadership of the Haapsalu facility (another unit of the Samaritan Estonian Mission), the Pärnu facility was relocated.

The facility provides support for individuals facing homelessness, poverty, addiction, and burnout, offering them a safe place to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society. The organization also runs a similar facility in Haapsalu, furthering its mission to help those in need.

Scale

Samaaria Pärnu is a small-scale facility with a maximum capacity of just fifteen people. Whenever needed, it is organized into two conversation groups based on language, Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking.

RESCALED-principles in practice:

- Small-scale
- Differentiated
- Community-integrated

Differentiation

Target group:

Samaaria Pärnu is a facility for adult men. Both the Samaritan facilities in Haapsalu and Pärnu help people struggling with drug addiction, alcoholism, homelessness and burnout. At these facilities, they work with people who have faced difficult life circumstances and want to change in order to become full members of society again.

The facility takes in people who have been released early from prison, are on probation or have been released with an electronic bracelet and need a permanent address. The facility is designed to help these people reintegrate into society. The criteria for placement require people to be motivated to change their lifestyle. People who are not genuinely motivated to change will not be accepted.

A Christian volunteer who used to be in the program now helps out, volunteers and also lives in the facility. In most cases, an incarcerated person calls from prison and after an initial phone conversation with the manager of the facility, the applicant must write a cover letter and then complete the MTÜ Samaritan Estonian Mission Pärnu Shelter questionnaire. The average stay in the facility ranges from six to twelve months, and in some cases as long as two years.

Forms of security:

Security at Samaaria Pärnu is maintained through a mix of trust, discipline, and formal measures. Because the facility is located in the city center, maintaining security can be challenging. At Samaaria Pärnu, a warm, individual approach forms the foundation of relational security. The manager works to create an atmosphere where residents are respected while also being expected to follow the rules. With only two staff members and a volunteer living in the facility, its small scale means it operates like a family. However, due to the facility's crowded city location and the limited number of staff, there are many security breaches and backlashes.

Static security measures are implemented mainly through camera surveillance. Cameras and alarms are installed throughout the building, and the manager can monitor them at any time. However, the building cannot be locked from the inside because of fire safety reasons.

Procedural security is also a key element. Many residents are surprised to learn that there is strong discipline and clear rules to follow, as they often expect more freedom after leaving prison. These rules are designed to prevent misuse of the facility and to maintain order. Visits are allowed only from family members to avoid situations where the facility could be used to create a criminal network or engage in illegal activities. For the first two months, residents are quarantined (with some exceptions when required by probation terms) and are not allowed to have mobile phones or any electronic devices. Additionally, no one may leave the facility without the consent of the staff or counselors. All residents are responsible for

keeping the premises and surrounding area tidy. It is forbidden to be on the premises while intoxicated or under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or toxic substances. In case of doubt, residents are required to undergo checks. From Monday to Sunday, everyone must be at home by 22:00, and although residents can have a mobile phone, its use is controlled.

Activities:

Daily life at Samaaria Pärnu follows a structured week schedule designed to provide stability and support personal growth. While residents have some say in how they spend their free time or which courses they attend, most daily decisions must be made in consultation with staff. Probation officers also influence their schedules, leaving little room for flexibility. The day begins with a common breakfast at 07:00, followed by a mandatory Bible study class from 07:30 to 08:30. After that, residents follow individual schedules based on their work assignments and probation terms.

Work plays a key role in the facility, helping residents develop skills they can use later in life. Some work within the facility, while others have external job placements. There are opportunities to gain experience in metalworking, woodworking, and car repair. Additionally, the manager teaches computer programs and basic office work, and a debt counseling service is available to help residents manage their finances. Inside the facility, daily tasks include kitchen work, cooking, utility work, snow clearing, and stacking wood.

Education is also encouraged, and residents can take courses funded by the unemployment insurance fund, such as Excel training. While participation in external courses is supported, free-time options inside the facility are limited due to financial constraints. Residents can read books, watch TV, or study the Bible. Bible lessons, which take place once or twice a day, cover topics such as money, relationships, and social morals.

During the first two months, residents are not allowed to make phone calls, leave the facility, or visit family members. After this period, they gradually receive more freedom. Visits are only allowed from relatives and must be coordinated with the manager. These visits take place in the Bible study/common room.

Community-integration

Location and architecture:

Samaaria Pärnu is located in Pärnu, a city on the southwestern coast of Estonia with a population of around 40,228 inhabitants (2021).¹ The facility is situated in the Sauga area and has a central location near the city center, in a residential area by the riverside. The site was chosen by Samaritan leaders as the most suitable at the time. The area features plenty of greenery, recreational spaces, and a marina. Nearby, there are private houses, a large bridge, and a central shopping center across the river. The facility is easily accessible by public transport.

Samaaria Pärnu is housed in a single building with a somewhat homely architecture. The structure is in need of renovation, and the furniture is quite old. The space is small, and there is limited natural light throughout the building.

Residents have private bedrooms but share the bathroom, toilet, dining room, kitchen, and outdoor spaces. The facility also includes a multi-purpose common room. The dining room stands out as a more inviting space, with a large dining table to accommodate everyone, plenty of light, white walls, and several house plants. In contrast, the hallways are not decorated and feel less inviting.

The property is also equipped with a cellar, storage room, small wood storage, a metal workshop, a garage, and a woodworking shop. The courtyard around the house has flower beds and small compost areas for onions and tomatoes.

Interaction with the community:

A lot of interaction is taking place between the residents of the facility and the community. Samaaria Pärnu has strong ties with local organizations, including the municipality, probation services, the Unemployment Office, hospitals, and other rehabilitation facilities. Additionally, the proceeds from Samaritan Second-hand charity stores go to support the facility, and Toidupank (Food Bank) provides free food.

The facility works closely with the municipality, especially when it comes to social benefits. The facility is also integrated into the community through various work projects and volunteer opportunities. Samaaria Pärnu offers services to the local community, such as transport, removal services, accommodation and consultancy, construction services, and firewood sales.

In the beginning, there was some resistance from local residents, particularly those living in the nearby single-family houses, who were not comfortable

Samaaria Pärnu

Founded: 1995

Capacity: 15

Security level: Medium

Nearest city/town: Pärnu
(Estonia)

Nature of interaction:

Visited by Village of Hope
(19-11-2024)

¹CityPopulation.de. (n.d.). Pärnu: Pärnu Linn (Estonia). Retrieved Feb 2024 from https://www.citypopulation.de/en/estonia/parnu/p%C3%A4rnu_linn/6619__p%C3%A4rnu/

with people with criminal backgrounds living in the area. However, this issue has become less of a problem over time.

Publicity/ read more

- About Samaaria Pärnu at the official website of the NGO Samaritan Estonian Mission:

Samaaria. (n.d.). *Turvakodud*. Retrieved February 10, 2025, from <https://samaaria.ee/turvakodud/>