

Joint letter to:

The Minister of Migration and Asylum, Notis Mitarachis

The European Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson

The European Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life, Margaritis Schinas

The undersigned organisations express their grave concern about the upcoming exits of at least 8,300 recognised refugees from accommodation and cash assistance schemes in Greece by the end of May 2020. A considerable number of these people, of which a large proportion are families with children, are facing an increased risk of homelessness amidst a global pandemic.

Refugees who have received international protection are being forced to leave apartments for vulnerable people in the Emergency Support to Integration & Accommodation programme (ESTIA), hotels under the Temporary Shelter and Protection programme (FILOXENIA), Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) and refugee camps. Almost simultaneously, financial assistance in the form of EU implemented and supported cash cards will stop. These upcoming measures will affect the livelihood of at least 4,800 people who need to leave ESTIA accommodation, 3,500 people who need to leave RICs and hosting facilities, as well as 1,200 refugees who are self-accommodated and receive cash assistance.

The Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection programme (HELIOS) provides integration courses and contribute towards rental costs up to a maximum of twelve months for those that have to leave accommodation. In practice, out of 8,752 people enrolled in the HELIOS programme, only 1,590 people receive rental subsidies.¹ 82 percent of people who enrolled in HELIOS since 2019 do not yet receive rental subsidies. To benefit from the HELIOS programme beneficiaries need to have a high level of independence and self-sufficiency. Beneficiaries need to provide a tax number, a bank account and procure a rental agreement to receive HELIOS support. As the Greek bureaucratic system is difficult to navigate, doubly so for non-Greek speakers, people face enormous challenges in finding accommodation, paying deposits, and enrolling in HELIOS. Other than the HELIOS programme which is only available to recognised refugees, apart from a few fragmented municipal and NGO initiatives there is no alternative social support, especially at the reception stage, which in Greece can last up to three years.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone in Greece but restrictions on movement and measures to halt the spread of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected the population that now needs to leave accommodation. Lockdown has also meant that people have had no possibility to search for alternative housing, find employment or arrange the necessary requirements to enter the HELIOS programme. Even now that restrictions are slowly being lifted throughout the whole of Greece, life is far from returning to normal, especially for those in Reception and Identification Centres on the Aegean islands and the hosting facilities Ritsona, Malakasa and Koutsohero where restrictions on movement are extended until 7 June 2020.

At least 8,300 people need to leave their accommodation by the end of May and only a small percentage are provided with integration support (including rental subsidies) through the

¹ IOM, 'HELIOS Factsheet 16/7/2019 - 22/05/2020'

HELIOS programme. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that people are almost simultaneously losing cash assistance from the cash card assistance programme. Although both ESTIA and HELIOS programmes are funded by DG HOME and implemented by the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, there is no linkage between them to ease the transition from one to the other. As a result, a considerable number of vulnerable people will be left without any support or prospect of integration and will have to face a severely increased risk of becoming homeless. Bureaucratic obstacles have meant that many of these people do not have a tax number or a bank account, both necessary to get a job or rent an apartment. Indeed, according to UNHCR, only 7 percent of recognised refugees in the ESTIA programme have a bank account and 75 percent have a tax number.² To make matters worse, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it impossible for people to find employment, alternative housing or arrange documentation for the HELIOS integration programme.

Therefore, we urgently request you to ensure that:

- The deadline of exits from ESTIA, FILOXENIA, RICs and refugee camps are extended beyond the end of May so that people have adequate time to find alternative accommodation, search for employment and fully enrol in the HELIOS integration programme after being under restrictive measures since 13 March 2020. No one should face the risk of homelessness amid an ongoing global pandemic.
- The monthly financial support under the EU implemented (and supported) cash card assistance programme is extended for those who need to exit accommodation and face the risk of homelessness.
- Elderly people, people with serious medical problems and single parents, are included in the extension of exits from accommodation in addition to those already deemed extremely vulnerable such as women in the last terms of their pregnancy and women with high-risk pregnancies.
- A bridge is created between ESTIA and other reception accommodation to the HELIOS program which also includes self-accommodated people. Currently self-accommodated people cannot enrol in the HELIOS programme but still need integration support and financial assistance after receiving international protective status.
- Bureaucratic barriers are removed so that asylum seekers have access to all the legal documents they are entitled to, such as a social security number, a tax number, and a bank account, so that people are able to seek employment and accommodation, to guarantee the right to housing.³
- A coherent and long term strategy on integration and housing is created as recent legislation requires newly recognised refugees to leave accommodation within 30 days instead of six months, significantly reducing the time for people to prepare themselves.

We remain at your disposal for more information.

Signed by,

² UNHCR, 'Greece Fact Sheet 1-31 March 2020' - [source](#)

³ Human Rights Council, 'Guidelines for the Implementation of the Right to Adequate Housing' (26 December 2019) UN Doc A/HRC/43/43 - [source](#)

A Drop in the Ocean
Action for Education
ANTIGONE - Information and Documentation Centre on Racism, Ecology, Peace and Non
Violence
ARSIS – Association for the Social Support of Youth
Bridge2
CHEERing: Center for Health Equity, Education and Research International Group
Cribs International
Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
DIOTIMA Centre
ECHO100PLUS
Ecological Movement of Thessaloniki
Equal Rights Beyond Borders
Fair Planet
FENIX Humanitarian Legal Aid
foodKIND
Free Movement Skateboarding UK
Glocal Roots
Greek Helsinki Monitor
Greek Housing Network
Hellenic League for Human Rights
Help Refugees / Choose Love
HIAS Greece - HIAS Ελλάδας
Higher Incubator Giving Growth and Sustainability-HIGGS
Humanity Now / Direct Refugee Relief USA
HumanRights360
Humans for Humans
I AM YOU
Intereuropean Human Aid Association
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
INTERSOS Hellas
INTERSOS Organizzazione Umanitaria
InterVolve
Jesuit Refugee Service Greece (JRS Greece)
Legal Centre Lesbos
Lighthouse Relief (LHR)
Melissa: Network of Migrant Women in Greece
MIGREUROP
Migreurop
Mobile Info Team
Network for Children's Rights - Δίκτυο για τα Δικαιώματα του Παιδιού
Northern Lights Aid
Omnes
One Happy Family
Pampiraiki Support Initiative for Refugees & Migrants
Project Armonia
Project Elea

ReFOCUS Media Labs
Refugee Legal Support (RLS)
Refugee Trauma Initiative
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