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Child helplines during COVID-19

METAdrasi - Action for Migration and Development, Greece

Introduction

Established in 2009, METAdrasi supports the reception and integration of refugees and migrants in Greece by providing interpretation services, education programmes and essential protection activities for unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups.

One of the services it provides is a day centre for homeless unaccompanied minors in Athens. Some may be living on the streets, while others could be in informal and often unsafe conditions with other people from their home country who are usually non-family members. At the day centre they can access legal advice, psycho-social support and essential information on accessing services in Greece. The centre is open every day for 10 hours and welcomes between 45 and 50 young people every day. It also includes an outreach team who work in mobile units, visiting different locations in the city to inform unaccompanied minors of the support METAdrasi makes available.

When lockdown restrictions came into force in Greece in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, unaccompanied minors could not access the centre while METAdrasi worked out how it could operate in line with new physical distancing protocols. Staff at the centre were able to offer one-to-one meetings by appointment only, which greatly affected the number of young people in difficulty they were able to support. As a result, METAdrasi decided to set up a telephone helpline to maintain contact with young people and keep offering support to newly arrived unaccompanied minors.

The programme

Established on 1 April 2020, the helpline runs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In addition to a landline number, it is also accessible via a mobile number, SMS and the mobile apps, WhatsApp, Viber and IMO. This range of options makes the helpline more accessible to young people as some may only have certain mobile apps and often they will prefer to use wifi or spend money on data for smartphones, rather than make regular calls.





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**How
we
care**

By practitioners,
for practitioners.

Implementation

Five staff operate the helpline at any one time and work shifts of eight hours. Normally young people will send an SMS or leave a voice note and staff will call them back. In this initial message young people will generally communicate in English using the help of machine translation if necessary. METAdrasi staff will send a message back to clarify the preferred language of the young person and then arrange for an interpreter from their interpreting department to join them on the telephone when they call back.

During this first conversation, the trained staff member will identify what the young person would like help with. They may then provide advice relating to housing; refer them to a psychologist or lawyer; or if their issue is health-related, to the mobile unit, which will try to find the minor wherever they are and take them to access medical care. Sometimes the young person may just need to talk and the exchange with the staff member could take place simply via text message. The unaccompanied minors that METAdrasi works with are generally aged between 11 and 17 and almost 90 per cent are boys.

METAdrasi staff are trained in Psychological First Aid, in order to be able to provide emergency advice and support. They have also been trained in responding in emergencies and use a checklist of questions relating to social history to gather information on the individual and their immediate needs in the first telephone conversation.

Outcomes

- The helpline receives around 50 calls every day and over 500 minors have contacted the helpline since it was set up.
- The helpline has changed the way METAdrasi uses telephones to support its work: they are no longer seen as just a tool, but as having the potential to be used in a very child-friendly way to support minors quickly and efficiently. Although this is a less traditional means of providing humanitarian aid it can still be effective.
- Minors are still able to feel supported and protected rather than being on the street during lockdown.
- Since lockdown restrictions have eased, as of October 2020 a maximum of 20 people (including staff) are allowed at the day centre. The helpline is still used to confirm who is coming each day in order to plan for food provision and for young people to book appointments. Some young people also use it to update staff on how they are doing.
- The helpline has become an integral part of the support METAdrasi provides and it plans to continue with it, which means it will be better prepared if Greece goes back into lockdown.

Challenges faced

- Supporting the mental health of staff, particularly during a lockdown situation.
- Not being able to act quickly in lockdown; having a clear picture of what other services are doing and where we can refer to.
- Hiring staff with language skills – will they cover all of the languages of the children who need our support?

Resources required

- Smart phones.
- Communication resources.
- Interpreters.

Top tips

1

Know your limits in terms of responding to a request for support.

2

Protect staff by sticking to time limits for the working day and ensuring that they go home when their shift finishes.

3

Remember a helpline is not just a phone number; it requires a whole package of support services including referrals, a mobile unit to back up, office space to meet physically, legal and psychological support expertise.

4

Establish a strong promotional plan with materials and outreach teams.

CONTACT DETAILS

Find out more about METAdrasi at www.familyforeverychild.org/metadrasi or contact Evdokia Grillaki egrillaki@metadrasi.org

