

QUARTERLY REPORT

JULY TO SEPTEMBER 2022



ASYLUM SEEKERS INFORMATION SERVICES TEAM

ASsIST

LEGAL AID
& ADVICE

CONTEXT UPDATE

CHIOS ISLAND

From July to September 2022, 484 people arrived by boat from Turkey to seek international protection and 330 AS/BIPs departed. Vial resident population was relatively stable at 300+ until a major transfer of 139 people from Vial RIC to the mainland occurred between 4-9 October 2022 leaving 279 residents as at 11 October 2022. Somali nationals were consistently in the majority in Vial RIC with Afghans, Palestinians, Sierra Leoneans and Yemenis the next most populous groups (10%+) at different times across the months. Men were consistently in the majority throughout the period, with women accounting for the next highest percentage then children.

Access to Services

Essential and recreational services are reported to have improved. New arrivals seeking legal services are referred by UNHCR to all legal actors (A.Ss.I.S.T., ERBB and Metadrasi) for interview preparation. A service to take people to hospital is in place. UNHCR is running sessions for women in non-formal education and other activities, Movement on the Ground is running recreational services and RB&B and Offene Arme continue to distribute essential items.

The Municipality of Chios should, in the near future, receive a grant from the State, permitting them to improve transport access from Vial RIC to Chios Town... to be seen.

Adherence to application procedure

For many months now, procedure has not been adhered to in accordance with the law. Due to the absence of a government-approved doctor at Vial RIC, many applicants have undergone the full procedure without having a medical registration. It is difficult therefore to know if and how many cases may have not been given due consideration without a medical registration being taken into account.

CONTEXT UPDATE

Loss of life

Sadly, both near the coast and inland, there has been unacceptable and preventable loss of life amongst people seeking international protection when coming to Chios via boat from Turkey.

It is noteworthy that throughout Greece, that in 2022 compared to all those lost in the previous years from 2016 forward the percentage of lives lost in relation to the number of arrivals has more than doubled.

No closed camp... as yet.

The Chios Municipality won the case against the Greek state requiring the Greek state to return to the Municipality the current site of Vial Camp. The Vial property is due to be handed over in December 2022. The Municipality filed a court case against the Greek state claiming ownership of the land upon which the new proposed RIC at the Tholos site on the coast north of Chios town is to be built. While they lost this case, the Municipality is denying access to the site as they are owners of all surrounding land required to gain access to the new RIC site.

Recently, the Chios County Court rejected the Ministry of Migration's application for interim measures against the Chios Municipality requesting unimpeded access to Tholos in view of the plans to construct this facility. As of October 2022, it appears to be a stalemate.

What all this may mean for the future Vial RIC in 2023 remains to be seen. The opening of a detention facility as proposed so far from town (35 km to the north of Chios town on the coast) will be detrimental to the provision of not only all non-government services but will further limit access to government services. A.Ss.I.S.T. remote services may still be available depending on the internet and mobile phones with asylum seekers. At the very least, as long as we can retain the services of our Greek lawyers, they will retain the right to visit A.Ss.I.S.T. beneficiaries.

CONTEXT UPDATE

MAINLAND GREECE

The continued deterioration in the treatment and in the services available to applicants for, and beneficiaries of, international protection throughout Greece is widely reported in diverse media. It is a threat to all the people in and of Greece, to the Rule of Law and to democracy itself.

The closure of government-funded housing schemes and of Eleonas RIC causes increased hardship, particularly for the more vulnerable who were once provided with housing outside the RICs. Applicants have been threatened by the authorities with the closure of their case, if they refuse to be relocated. This is legal under the letter of the law as the authorities can close cases based on 'non-cooperation'- a very broad term open to interpretation and abuse.

The untenable situation of many people having failed in their application for international protection and, and indeed, for many who are now beneficiaries is very clearly stated and best understood in the following reports:

- RSA: <https://rsaegean.org/en/beneficiaries-of-international-protection-in-greece-report/>
- Fenix, March 2022 "Caught in a Loop"

Essential services are less accessible from RICS: cost of transport to urban centres, poor internet connections and other restrictions only increase the difficulties faced than in Athens or another urban centre. Noticeably more technical difficulties are encountered with clients at some sites on the mainland. Difficulties faced by clients to complete a Power of Attorney, to access support for the web-based electronic forms, completing required steps in accessing both legal aid and the relevant authorities. A.Ss.I.S.T. services to clients is now facilitated by Team members in Athens being able to provide more personal service and with the cooperation of agencies referring clients and local authorities for more distant clients to complete and forward relevant documents.

CONTEXT UPDATE

Revised procedures for making an initial claim for international protection on the mainland have changed. From six RICs where registration of a claim was once accepted this is now reduced to two centres. On the Islands with RICs, there is no changes. (See Section on Challenges below).

THROUGHOUT GREECE

On 10 June 2022 the new Law No. 4939/2022: “Ratification of the Code of Reception for the reception, the international protection of third country nationals and stateless persons and the temporary protection in case of mass influx of displaced foreigners” came into force. (See Section on Challenges below).

Pushbacks

We continue to learn of pushbacks through social media as well as from the testimonies of those now on Chios who have survived them and finally managed to arrive and seek international protection. On the mainland, information about the brutal treatment of attempted arrivals at the land border is well documented by ECRE, RSA and others.

No deportations ... as yet

The Greek authorities have confirmed that they are not sending readmission requests to the Turkey authorities. Media reports state also that the Turkish government is not accepting ‘returnees’ from Greece. There are many people in detention pending deportation.

INFORMATION SERVICES

The main challenge was and remains adapting our information services to the many changes that occur: Law 4939/June 2022, a change in registration procedures on the mainland and the introduction of e-services by the Ministry of Migration, to name the most recent. There are also directives issued by the Ministry to the Asylum Services of which A.Ss.I.S.T. lawyers remain unaware until the directives are implemented and, from experience, such directives are implemented either differently or begin implementation at different times and at different branches of the Asylum Services and police.

PROGRESS

The number of inquiries received on A.Ss.I.S.T. office phones from asylum seekers and BIPs decreased from 5002 (Apr-Jun 2022) with 4185 (July to September 2022). The initial increase in the first two quarters can be attributed to the addition of an additional phone line as of March with the creation of the Athens-Team: currently, one lawyer, one Client Services Coordinator and one volunteer Legal Advisor. Another VLA will join them in November.

Laura Parnell
Volunteer Legal Advisor based in Athens



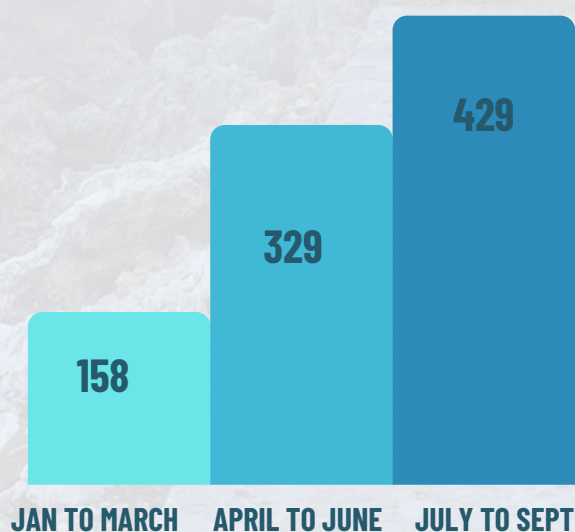
In July/August/September 2022, the Team lawyers and volunteer legal advisors revised the Information Session scripts to comply with Law 4939/June 2022 and in response to the many procedural changes that were made in July and August 2022. There were sufficient significant changes since June 2022 to require the retranslation of all scripts and information materials. Translations of revised scripts into Arabic, Dari/Farsi, French, Lingala and Somali are nearing completion and new voiceovers will be recorded as soon as translations completed.

Fact checking of all information received is of paramount importance to protect our clients and others within the AS & BIP communities. We are accountable for the accuracy of the information and for the relevance and quality of all our services, for our every action involving our clients as they may well base life-changing decisions on this.

LEGAL AID

From July to September 2022, A.Ss.I.S.T. provided free legal services to 429 people of 24 nationalities providing interpreter services in 15 languages other than Greek and English. Compared to January to March 2022, when there were 158 consultations, from April to June there were 329 consultations and from July to September 2022, there were 429 consultations.

Each month as by each quarter, the number of consultations increased. Similarly, the number of Athens-based clients rose from 246 in April to June to 284 in July to September. Consultations with clients elsewhere in Greece increased from 4 to 29 to 39, several of whom were clients now seeking our assistance from abroad.



LEGAL AID

The number of clients served in Chios tends to mirror the number of arrivals as the residents of Vial RIC go through the procedure. When there is a sudden increase in the number of arrivals, given the speed with which the Asylum Services proceed after Registration, sometimes results in A.Ss.I.S.T. calling on our lawyers and interpreters to do 'emergency' interview preparations on weekends. For example, released from quarantine and registered on Thursday, appointment on Monday is announced on Friday, allowing no time for the applicants to seek legal services.

The number of representations made by our Greek lawyers with relevant authorities on behalf of A.Ss.I.S.T. clients increased significantly from 622 to 734 contacts (calls, emails and visits to Asylum Services and police).

Regrettably A.Ss.I.S.T. can no longer track the outcome of appeals and subsequent applications submitted by our lawyers. The Greek Asylum Service (GAS) now provides decisions directly to applicants only via email, or in Chios, both in person and by email. Not all clients, for a variety of reasons, inform our office of the outcome of the appeals. To our knowledge, since January 2022, 27 appeals have been won for applicants from Afghanistan (10), Somalia (10) and West Africa (7). Since May 2022, 11 subsequent applications have been successful: of which 3 were Afghan applicants; 1 Somali and 1 Syrian; 1 Iraqi and 4 were LGBTQ+ applicants and 1 other applicant from Western African countries.

The results of A.Ss.I.S.T.'s legal work can be life-changing. Over 400 people received free legal consultations and many more free information and responses to their inquiries that may assist them in making informed decisions in pursuing their applications for international protection.



Chios Team

(Associate Greek Lawyers, Legal Representative, Office & Client Services Manager)

INCLUSION OF BENEFICIARIES IN SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY

AS & BIP communities have always been represented on our Team by on-call interpreters, who are or were themselves AS. As Team members, interpreters/translators are the 'without which we cannot' serve clients. Their language skills and direct knowledge of the experience of AS & BIPS are essential to effective service delivery. They are best placed to truly comprehend the challenges faced by AS & BIPs. The Team has learned and continues to learn much from our interpreters and our services benefit greatly. Their views are integrated into our activities and approaches to improve service delivery.

Information shared by clients also alerts Team members to the changes and 'misadventures' that they experience in the provision of official services. For incidents experienced by individuals, or an issue raised by several clients, particularly on Chios Island, interventions and representations can be made to those in a position to address them: UNHCR and the relevant authorities themselves. Such interventions are made possible through professional relationships with the authorities forged by our Greek lawyers. Similarly, information on local community attitudes and the intricacies of national and local politics, that may or do affect AS and BIPs is conveyed from and to our clients and interpreters: for example, issues within communities and developments surrounding the proposed closed camp on Chios relates directly to the AS communities. Through A.Ss.I.S.T.'s Greek team members, representatives of partner organisations and through our networks, much practical and useful information is gathered to inform AS & BIPs.

CLIENT FEEDBACK

Feedback forms are provided to clients available in six languages to little effect. Provided electronically, the return rate is very low; most express only gratitude without answering the questions asked.

Valuable feedback is received verbally through direct contact with clients, interpreters and other Team members. Sharing information in this way has alerted us to valid additions and improvements to our practice, specifically to details of importance to client cases that require a depth of understanding of the diverse cultural backgrounds not immediately available to those of European culture. The knowledge and experience gained over time within the Team is invaluable to providing sound advice to clients in interview preparations and in arguments in appeal memoranda when countering reasons given in negative decisions.

Based on recent feedback from some clients referred to other services, A.Ss.I.S.T. is endeavouring to improve the impact of these referrals. When a client does not access that service or if the client is not satisfied with that service to which referred, this impacts on their general welfare. By building closer relationships with services identified as reliable to follow up or on-forwarding referrals, A.Ss.I.S.T. hopes to improve the outcome of our referrals to other services.

EVENTS

June 05

A.Ss. I.S.T. Board meeting
(next in November 2022)

June 29

Annual General Meeting-
confirming decision to revise
A.Ss.I.S.T.'s Charter.
(new Charter registered on 10.10)

August

A.Ss.I.S.T. lawyers commenced
supporting people seeking to
register their initial claims to
register for IP.



June 10

New Law No. 4939/2022

"Ratification of the Code of Reception for the reception, the international protection of third country nationals and stateless persons and the temporary protection in case of mass influx of displaced foreigners"

July

Audit 2021 completed.
Recruitment of a new Office & Client
Service Manager and Office & Client
Service Coordinator for Athens.

Team members continue to attend network meetings both local and national.

Local : UNHCR Legal Aid and Protection Working Groups. A Chios Coordination group is proposed to commence meetings attended by those present on the Island.

National: NGO Legal Aid Network meetings, LGBTQI community network.

In-house Team meetings are held as a minimum monthly, but also more often if requested or required.

Team members also attended a UNHCR Seminar on Child Protection in Chios.

Due to funding constraints, no formal training workshops were held. A video-conference "Do's and Don'ts interpreting for lawyers" was held in June and regular in-house workshops led by A.Ss.I.S.T. lawyers were held to update the Team on the changes in the law and in procedures to revise information materials and update the Information Session scripts.

CHALLENGES FOR LEGAL AID ACTORS

On 10 June 2022 the new Law No. 4939/2022 "Ratification of the Code of Reception for the reception, the international protection of third country nationals and stateless persons and the temporary protection in case of mass influx of displaced foreigners" came into force.

As stated elsewhere in-house training workshops and the revision of all information materials is on-going and essential to the accuracy of information provided to clients.

Two significant procedural changes:

1. On the mainland, to claim international protection, one can only register at 2 RICS (<https://apps.migration.gov.gr/international-protection-registration?lang=en>). To do so they must first make an appointment via the Ministry of Migration website.

A.Ss.I.S.T. is supporting people to register for both initial claims and for subsequent applications. It is not uncommon for one of the two sites to respond that no appointments are available or for the site not to be working. Some appointments are not until April 2023. Delayed registration for those seeking international protection means no material assistance from the Greek state. It is not yet clear if the certificate confirming the appointment is sufficient to protect people from arrest and detention.

2. The Ministry's website now provides e-services for asylum seekers at <https://migration.gov.gr/applications/>

Introductory pages are in Greek and English only, difficult therefore for people unfamiliar with Greek or Latin alphabet to navigate. Once one clicks on the relevant e-service tab, if they recognize the icon for languages, the information appears in 18 different languages. A.Ss.I.S.T. 's initial response was to draft a guide to access the e-services. With weekly, sometime daily, changes to the English labelling of the services, it has been decided to demonstrate this live to individual clients and at Information Sessions... hence the latest 'revisions' will be available.



Example of the English/Arabic guide to navigate the e-services.

REFERRALS

As our vision statement is “Fair Process for All”, A.Ss.I.S.T. serves all asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in Greece on an all welcome, first-come-first-served basis accepting all persons interested in accessing our services. Given the deadlines imposed by the law and asylum procedures, scheduling of appointments for applicants and appellants requires some clients be given priority in the timing of appointments. While we do not specialize in specific client groups, we have gained significant expertise in working with LGBTQI and survivors of torture and GBV based on the numerous clients presenting with case histories related to these forms of persecution in their home countries.



VLA conducting an interview preparation of a client in Athens.

A.Ss.I.S.T. is currently working with some network partners in order to gain better assurances of services received post our referrals for social and psycho-social support. A.Ss.I.S.T. actively seeks feedback from clients referred to other services to ensure that we make referrals to organisations that respond to their needs.

STATISTICS

A glitch in the Client Records spreadsheet used as a basis for our statistics has delayed the presentation of the Quarterly Statistics for July to September 2022 in the format usually published in our Reports. Those that appear in the current text have been calculated directly from the Client list. A data specialist is currently reviewing the spreadsheet to identify the problems. It is hoped that the problems will be resolved very soon.

It is proposed to incorporate the following statistics in future reports.

1. Support in using e-services through the Ministry of Migration's website; (<https://applications.migration.gov.gr/en/ypiresies-asylou/> and <https://applications.migration.gov.gr/ypiresies-asylou/>)
2. Referrals made to other services (medical, psycho-social, material assistance, education and employment)

Several efficiency improvements in digital record keeping are being developed by our Coordinator in Athens and should be implemented in the next Quarter.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Financial situation

Fund-raising in 2022 is down by almost 50% as at the same time in 2021. A significant grant received in late 2021 for expenditure in 2022 supported A.Ss.I.S.T. Athens-Chios Co-location Project and a sizeable amount was carried forward from other sources into 2022. Several grant applications are pending, most with anticipated responses in or before mid-November. Several crowdfunding events will take place in November and December 2022. Two recent successful grants awarded assure our continuation, if only at present to March 2023.

The factors contributing to the decrease in funds raised are shared by most NGOs, the impact of COVID19 on the general public, the war in Ukraine and the forecast recession with most countries already experiencing increasing rates of inflation and, from non-Euro donors, the fall of currencies' rate of exchange against the US\$ and the Euro. Several of our previous regular donors are no longer supporting programs in Europe other than the border countries to the Ukraine. Funds are less and spread more widely, therefore thinner.

The A.Ss.I.S.T. Board and partners will meet in mid-November 2022 to review the funding situation and develop a strategy to affect as many savings as possible minimising the impact on current services

Office location in Athens

It is proposed to share an office with Refugee Legal Support UK in Athens as of 01 January 2023 and will retain the current office space in Safe Place Greece's warehouse.

Training 2023

In collaboration with new partners in Athens, it is proposed to make a joint grant application for Team training on Trauma-informed legal practice in the context of working with asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. This is currently being researched. The structure proposed at present incorporates much of the training previously provided underpinned by the theme of 'trauma-informed practice'.

We look forward to your continued support.

Our renewed thanks to all our donors, to our loyal partners and of course to all our Team members, past and present!

Please do not hesitate to raise any questions that you may have with the under-signed.

If you would like to make a donation to ASsIST please visit <https://www.assistchios.info/en/donate> or contact office@assistchios.info

Sheila (Sandy) Cross
Legal Representative
Chios, 23 October 2022.