

QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2024





Imagine landing in a rubber dinghy on this shore on a cold winter's morning?

PROGRESS

At A.Ss.I.S.T., we understand that the essence of hope for our beneficiaries lies in the quality of the information and legal services we provide. Our efforts are dedicated to investing the funds we raise into providing information and legal services that offer more than just temporary relief. We aim to give hope for those engulfed in despair by listening, providing respectful and honest responses to their queries together with accurate information. This supports our beneficiaries to navigate their daily challenges within their own frameworks of possibility, encouraging them to seek and find the assistance they need and exercise their autonomy.

"Hope is like peace. It is not a gift from God. It is a gift only we can give one another."

- Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize, 1986.

PROGRAM AIMS

This project aims to provide support to asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Greece. Despite significant and increasing challenges, we continue to provide essential assistance to these vulnerable populations.

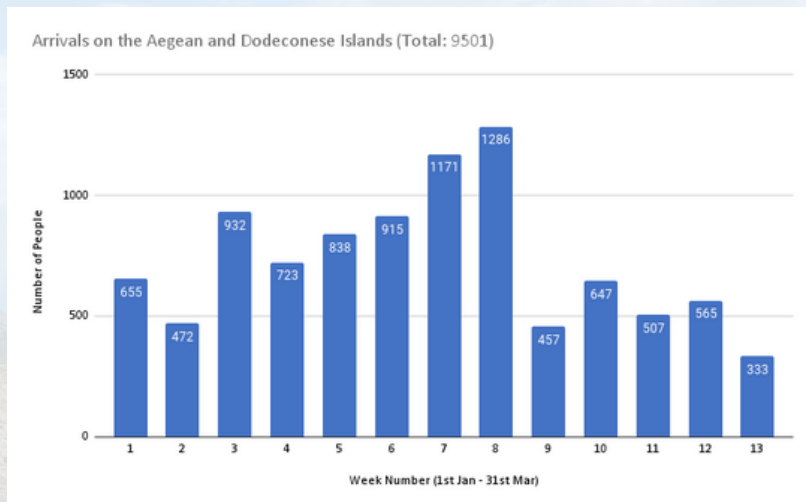
OUR SERVICE REGIONS

Throughout Greece with inquiries also received from those who left Greece for other EU countries and the United Kingdom. In 2023, our beneficiaries were based in 33 different geographical locations

OUR FOCUS POPULATIONS

All persons who arrive in Greece seeking international protection; those who are recognised as refugees or have the protection of the State and those who are under threat of deportation.

According to UNHCR statistics from 01 January to 31 March 2024, 9,501 people seeking asylum arrived by boat from Turkey on the north Aegean and Dodecanese Islands, of whom 1112 arrived on Chios Island (Source: UNHCR).



Many others arrive via overland routes, but no reliable statistics are available for this period.

THEIR CHALLENGES

All persons seeking international protection in Greece must navigate a complex, opaque legal system, facing language and cultural barriers and continued hardship created by poor living conditions, pre-existing trauma exacerbated by limited welfare services, by incertitude and imposed detention. Beneficiaries of international protection also face socio-economic and bureaucratic barriers to settling in Greece or in other European Union countries. Those whose legal options are exhausted are in limbo: subject to inhumane treatment and little understanding of what they may face when deported. Asylum seekers and refugees more generally face cultural and linguistic barriers as well as intersecting challenges like trauma, stigma, discrimination, disability, ill-health, and gender-based violence.

The provision of free, accurate information services is an essential gateway to protect individuals' human rights: free information and access to other essential services -legal, social and welfare services

A.Ss.I.S.T. operates on an inclusive basis, recognising special needs for specific vulnerable groups, and providing them with information and referring them to social and welfare services to meet their expressed needs.

OUR CHALLENGES IN SERVICE DELIVERY

Operational Impediments for all essential services: Overcrowding in Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs), interpreter service gaps, and bureaucratic delays posed operational challenges in service delivery by Asylum Services, impacting on our ability to provide timely responses required by our clients.

Financial Setback: A critical funding shortfall from a donor's default and the stresses related thereto, substantially disrupted our operations. This unexpected situation demanded careful fund reallocation to provide urgent legal aid and cover on-going commitments for overheads (rent and bills for offices and volunteer accommodations). By retaining our office and volunteer accommodation in Chios while leaving our volunteer accommodation and shared office in Athens we are able to reduce costs and optimise funds available to provide services.

ADAPTING TO CHALLENGES

01 January to 31 March 2024

A.Ss.I.S.T.'s volunteers continued to respond to all inquiries received on our helplines. In this way, A.Ss.I.S.T. was able to identify our clients in need of appeals or support at key interviews, to refer clients to other agencies, legal, medical, food and accommodation, etc. and to provide information in response to procedural questions e.g. relating to the Ministry of Migration online services, ID and travel document renewals and many other matters. And this with the continued support of our cohort of 14 on-call interpreters/translators, recruited within the asylum seeker communities, who continued their service offering skills in 12 languages spoken within our target population.

The availability of our free information services operating in real time 'as things happen' provides essential support to asylum seekers and refugees.

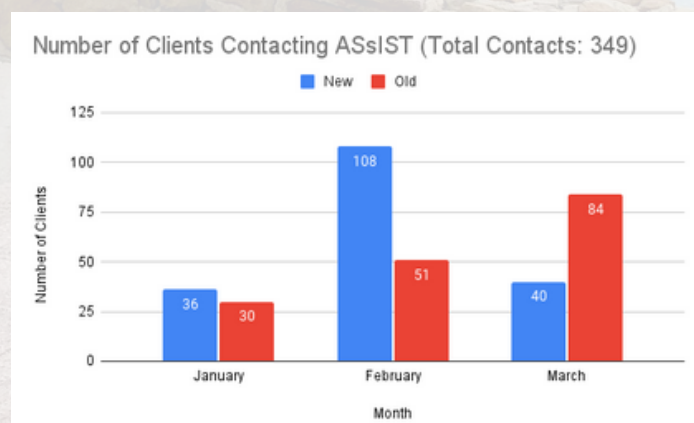
Online and accessible five days a week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. supported by our cohort of on-call interpreters/translators, A.Ss.I.S.T. offers the following:

1. Someone online to receive and provide answers in their preferred language and, as appropriate, refer them to other free services.
2. A confidential and accessible source of information and support.
3. The chance to receive new information or compare with that already received supporting their autonomy in making informed decisions.
4. Information linking inquirers to services essential to their overall well-being.
5. The chance to provide feedback on our services and those to which they have been referred.

A.Ss.I.S.T. aims to:

- respond within a 48-hour period, and much shorter response times for urgent requests.
- support asylum seekers and refugees in their understanding of the challenges that they face daily.

From 01 January to 31 March 2024, A.Ss.I.S.T.'s helpline was therefore able to support a total of 349 beneficiaries of whom 165 were already registered with A.Ss.I.S.T. and 184 were new beneficiaries with information and referrals as well as identifying those who urgently required legal representation, appeals and interview preparation from our lawyers.



In December 2023 and January 2024, three volunteer international lawyers rejoined our Team: all three have significant experience volunteering in Greece with A.Ss.I.S.T. and continue to work in this field of EU law. Their contribution in preparing asylum seekers for interviews has been invaluable.

Although we announced the suspension of our legal services, with the limited funds available, our Greek lawyers continued to conduct appeals for clients seeking our services. A total of seven appeals (two of which were successful, five pending decisions) and one of our lawyers travelled to Athens twice to support two particularly vulnerable clients at their interviews with the Asylum Services and yet another was represented at interview by our Athens lawyer. Two of those represented at interview have received refugee status, the decision for the third client is still pending.

In February 2024, we recommenced legal aid with our two Greek lawyers, who have been providing their services since June 2020.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Service Continuity: Despite overcrowding in Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs) due to a substantial influx of arrivals, January to March 2024, our committed team offered free legal aid to over 93 individuals across Greece, requiring interpreters fluent in 9 languages other than English and Greek. We actively supported appeals, consultations, and provided essential information for self-referrals as well as A.Ss.I.S.T. direct referrals to others services.

Supporting members of the LGBTQI+ communities

Of A.Ss.I.S.T. 's 93 clients from January to March 2024, 20 identified as a LGBTQI+ of whom only one is recorded as being also a GBV survivor. Most of these clients are from countries in western Africa, and countries where to self-identify as LGBTQI+ is a crime as well as condemned and punished by mob violence within their home communities.

It is noteworthy that homosexuality is outlawed in 32 African countries, and many more are proposing to introduce anti-homosexuality legislation. In most of these countries, this is punishable by prison sentences.

In many of these same countries where prison is imposed, given the conditions in the prisons compounded by persecution by others in the prisons, this often equates to a death sentence. So too mob violence often results in death. As the relevant States do nothing to protect their LGBTQI+ citizens, arguably they should all receive refugee status in Europe.

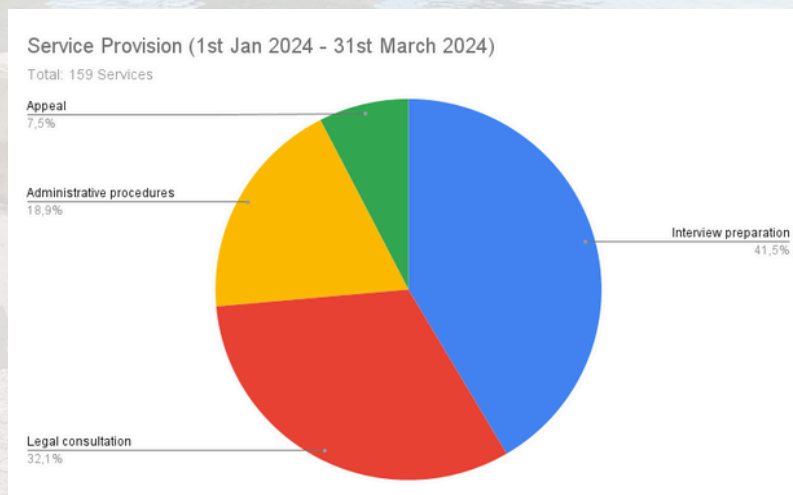
Below is a recent press article on racism and violence against LGBTQI+ people in Greece. <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/04/24/racist-violence-surges-in-greece-report-finds/>

Supporting survivors overcoming gender-based violence and seeking protection

Of the 12 clients who are GBV survivors, 8 women were also survivors of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The case study below is that of a client from 2023 – not one of our current 2024 clients.

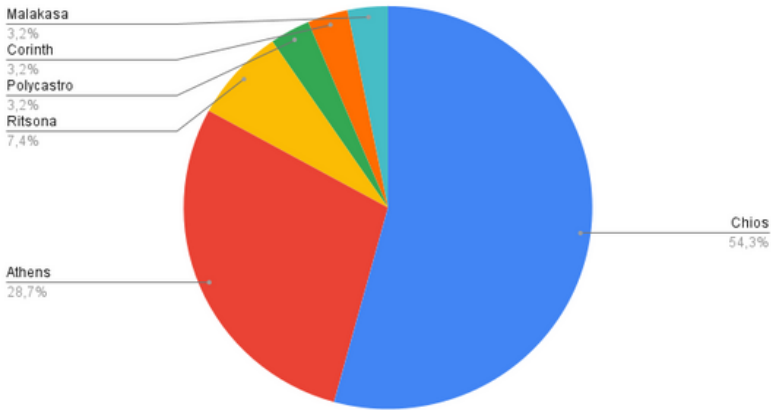
Overall, one-third of our client base for this period, 31 of 93 clients, self-identified as LGBTQI+ or survivors of GBV/FGM.

The results of A.Ss.I.S.T.'s legal work can be life changing as the Case Study provided in attachment to this Report shows. With A.Ss.I.S.T.'s support, a young woman has access to essential welfare services, safety and refuge through long-term protection, but more importantly a life free from fear and filled with hope. In March 2024, we learned that this client received refugee status.

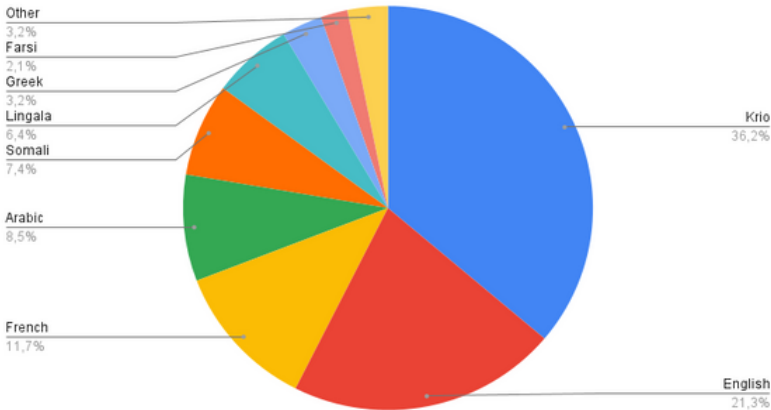


Thirteen of the interview preparations were led by our international volunteer lawyers.

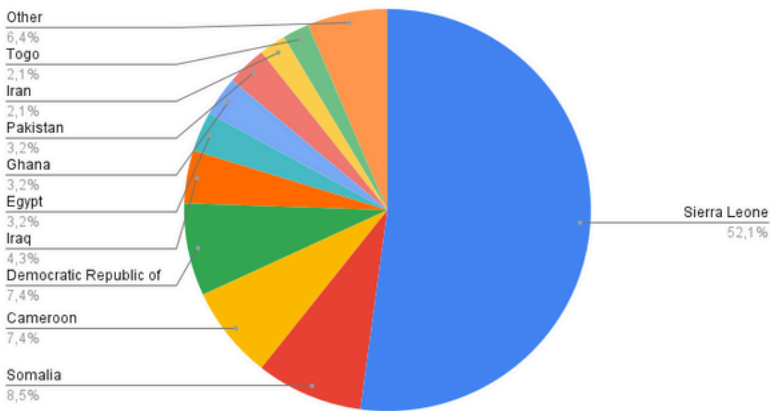
Location of Clients (1st Jan 2024 - 31st Mar 2024)



Languages of Clients (1st Jan 2024 - 31st Mar 2024)

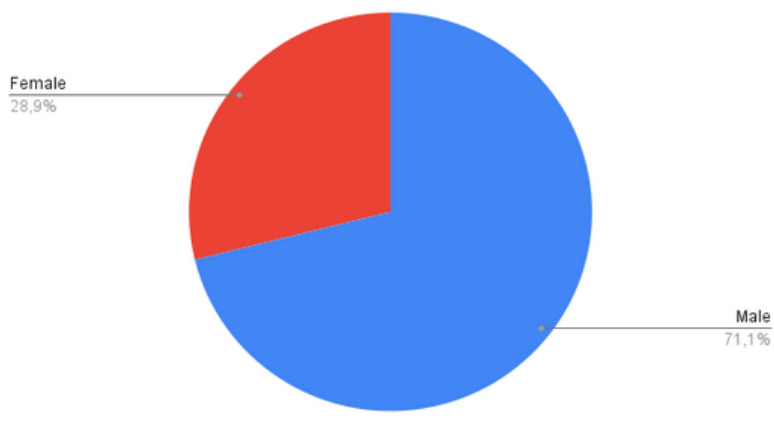


Nationality of Clients (1st Jan 2024 - 31st Mar 2024)



Other includes: Syria (1); Sudan (1); Cuba (1); Republic of Congo (1); Nigeria (1); Afghanistan (1)

Gender of Clients (1st Jan 2024 - 31st Mar 2024)



IMPACT REPORT

A.Ss.I.S.T. aims to maintain our legal services supporting asylum seekers and refugees. Despite significant challenges, A.Ss.I.S.T. has continued to provide some crucial assistance to those seeking support through our helplines.

IMPACT OF OUR WORK

The provision of free accurate information and legal aid contributes to the smoother running of the asylum application procedure, helps to ensure that the individual characteristics of their situations are considered and that the rights of the person seeking asylum are respected

A.Ss.I.S.T.'s services have contributed to substantial positive changes in the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in Greece, notably in four key areas:

- **Continued Access to Information Services and Legal Aid:** The project's implementation led to a significant uptake in beneficiaries seeking critical information services. This surge denotes a crucial breakthrough, allowing individuals to overcome the formidable obstacles inherent in navigating Greece's intricate and often daunting legal system. Our efforts have resulted in continued engagement with asylum seeker and refugee communities, ensuring that as many individuals as our resources permitted received free legal assistance, a service otherwise difficult to access.

- **Facilitating Informed Decision-Making:** By furnishing comprehensive information about their rights, legal procedures, and the asylum process, beneficiaries acquire a deeper understanding, permitting informed decision-making, enabling them to actively participate in their asylum cases. Equipped with knowledge, they can effectively advocate for their rights and navigate legal complexities with greater confidence. Feedback from beneficiaries confirms this impact.
- **Continuous Holistic Support:** A.Ss.I.S.T. emphasizes continuous, comprehensive legal aid. Beyond initial interviews or appeals, we extended our support throughout subsequent applications and other legal queries that may arise during the asylum process. This sustained assistance positively impacts beneficiaries' mental well-being by mitigating the stress associated with legal uncertainties and prolonged waiting periods.
- **Facilitated Access to Wider Support Services:** Leveraging strategic partnerships and a robust referral system, the project has expanded beneficiaries' access to a broad spectrum of essential support services. These encompass healthcare, education, housing, and psychosocial support, ensuring that beneficiaries receive comprehensive aid beyond legal assistance.

In summary, the observed changes signify substantial improvements in beneficiaries' capabilities to navigate the asylum process with informed decisions, essential legal advice, and an expanded network of support services. A.Ss.I.S.T.'s holistic approach not only positively impacts individual lives but also contributes significantly to fostering fairer and more equitable processes for asylum seekers and refugees in Greece.

Facilitated Access to Wider Support Services: Leveraging strategic partnerships and a robust referral system, A.Ss.I.S.T. facilitated beneficiaries' access to a broad spectrum of essential support services: healthcare, education, housing, and psychosocial support, ensuring that those contacting our helplines receive comprehensive aid beyond legal assistance.

CLIENT FEEDBACK

The most valuable feedback continues to be received verbally through direct contact with clients. Sharing of this information between team members, interpreters, lawyers and client service managers contributes to our understanding of those we serve, our efforts to improve services, to assure accuracy of information content and to pass on to others their realities, legal, medical, economic and social.

Our client feedback form forwarded to clients is provided in six languages. Some comments received from clients below.

CLIENT FEEDBACK AT A GLANCE.

(28/2/24): Really really I am very happy for you since I contacted you with you really I don't have what to say what you love me a lot and then I always count on you God bless you God give you everything what you wanted thank you again (translated from the French)

12/3/24: Thank you so much to give me the opportunity to see you I really appreciate you people. (original English text)

(13/3/24): Thank you very much for your effort to help. You are very good people. Have a nice day, good work... (original text)

(20/2/24): Thank you very much. I hope you people's continue your good work. I also give your contact number to my fellow friend's to reach you for more guidance base on there Asylum process. Once again I want to say thank to ASsIST (original text)

(05/04/2024): Yes I'm okay I finished with my interview and I want to say a big thank you to you and your organization for the helping hands, it was very helpful. A Big thank you to Barrister Karen (Original text)

(11/4/24): I wanted to say thank you very much for your help! I learn a lot yesterday I hope my fiance also will thank you once again

(18/04/24): Thanks you guys are the best really appreciate your service.

CURRENT ACTION AND PLANS

Our commitment to providing services to asylum seekers remains strong. Financial limitations highlight the need for securing more grants and innovative solutions to sustain our services. Our strategy of recruiting Client Service Managers exclusively from graduate or post-graduate programs related to our field has notably elevated the quality of our team's performance in providing timely and courteous responses. A.Ss.I.S.T. provides the opportunity to develop their knowledge of EU/Greek asylum law and practice and to hone their skills through the learning experience of working directly with experienced asylum lawyers, our interpreters/translators and beneficiaries and to understand well the challenges faced by our beneficiaries and all actors working with asylum seekers in Greece



Our Operations Manager, Molly Pugh-Jones, volunteered with us in Greece in 2023, and continues to support our work through providing invaluable support in fund-raising and social media.

In January 2024, Kristina von Kaehne, a law graduate, from Glasgow, Scotland, joined our Team as Client Services Manager. She is doing an outstanding job and will remain with the Team until end May 2024.



Our efforts to improve information dissemination are ongoing. Two remote volunteers are currently examining ways to improve both our records and information dissemination methods. Anticipated benefits include: a) quicker access to accurate asylum laws and procedures, reducing response time while ensuring accuracy; b) improved efficiency and service, saving time in information gathering for better support to asylum seekers, improving customer service with volunteers trained to respond to enquiries related to access to the Asylum Service and other practices in place that are not easily navigated by everyone; and c) fostering continuous learning for all team members. The results of this work are not expected to be in place until end-June 2024.

In early May 2024, a new Greek lawyer will join our Team as Legal Officer.

Our commitments to strengthening networks, both formal and less formal, remain firm. Formal networks are informative for changes in process and access (UNHCR Protection Working and UNHCR Legal Aid). Less formal networks (Legal Aid Network of legal actors on the mainland and on the islands, the LGBTQI+ community network and contacts within specialized services for the most vulnerable) are very important for sharing and learning realities faced, and the less reported situations faced by asylum seekers and refugees. It is only through our networks of both organisations and clients that we can strengthen our efficacy in referring people to the most responsive services.



ATTACHMENT 1 - CASE STUDY

From a recent report published by our Legal Aid Network partners, Equal Legal Aid, Thessaloniki:

“Under international law, FGM is considered a grave violation of human rights, infringing on health, physical and mental integrity, as well as equality, the right to maternity, and protection from torture. FGM is also considered as a form of violence against women and girls and a manifestation of unequal gender relations. It is strictly condemned by conventions such as the UN Women's Rights Convention, the European Convention on Human Rights and the Istanbul Convention. The practice is tantamount to torture or ill-treatment and constitutes a form of persecution conferring the right to international protection. Additionally, the principle of non-refoulement also applies, prohibiting the return of an individual to a place where their life is in real danger or where they face torture or inhuman or degrading treatment.”

(TURNING A BLIND EYE: Or the Greek asylum service's disregard for Female Genital Mutilation Claims: A Report by Equal Legal Aid: November 2023. p 2.)

Case Study:

In the midst of vulnerability and trauma, a courageous young woman from sub-Saharan Africa found herself alone in Greece, seeking refuge and international protection. Her journey was not solely an escape from her home country but a flight from the harrowing grasp of gender-based violence.

Meet "Amina" (pseudonym), a survivor of female genital mutilation (FGM) and a victim of an imposed arranged marriage in her home community. Raised within a family structure steeped in rigid hierarchy, she faced the tyrannical control of her uncle, the family's authoritative figure. Her uncle, an advocate of archaic practices like genital mutilation, subjected female members to unspeakable abuse and coerced them into life-altering acts.

Tragically, Amina's cousin fell victim to this barbaric tradition, succumbing to the repercussions of FGM—a haunting reminder of the peril she herself faced. Despite her unwavering resistance, she was forcibly ushered into an unwanted marriage by her uncle, a union orchestrated with a powerful, extremist figure notorious for advocating for female 'circumcision'.

ATTACHMENT 1 - CASE STUDY

Her refusal to accept this fate led to her abduction, landing her in a rudimentary clinic halfway through the mutilation procedure. Only through the valiant intervention of a friend, did she manage to escape and then flee the country.

Supported by an A.Ss.I.S.T. in the submission of a second or subsequent application, Amina received a positive decision in early November 2023. This crucial decision marks a turning point in her tumultuous journey, providing her with the assurance of safety and liberation from a life fraught with violence and subjugation.

Amina's resilience and fortitude in refusing the completion of the mutilation procedure and an abusive marriage stand as a testament to her unwavering spirit. However, the looming threat of forced return to her home country casts a dark shadow over her future. The possibility of being coerced into completing the procedure or facing abandonment by her family paints a distressing picture of her predicament.

Her story is a stark reminder of the urgent need to protect individuals like her from gender-based violence and archaic cultural practices. Amina's pursuit of safety and freedom from coercion resonates deeply, highlighting the pressing necessity for compassion and immediate intervention in such cases.

This case underscores the critical importance of supporting survivors of gender-based violence and ensuring that no individual should endure persecution or forced adherence to harmful traditions. Amina's courage in facing these challenges epitomizes the resilience and strength of survivors, urging a collective response to safeguard the fundamental rights and dignity of every individual.

(Note: Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the individual involved.)

**THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO READ
THIS REPORT.**

WE LOOK FORWARD TO YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT.

**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE A DONATION
PLEASE VISIT:**

[HTTPS://WWW.ASSISTCHIOS.INFO/EN/DONATE](https://www.assistchios.info/en/donate)

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