



Spring 2022

# Overview



**LIGHT  
HOUSE  
RELIEF**

# Introduction to Lighthouse Relief

**Our mission is to provide dignified humanitarian relief to refugees and asylum seekers in Greece.**

Refugees have been making the perilous crossing from Turkey to Greece's Aegean islands for decades. By 2015 however, wars and insufferable conditions were displacing millions of people across the Middle East and Africa. That year, a million (mainly Syrian) refugees entered Europe through Greece, with 500,000, according to UNHCR, arriving on the northern shore of Lesbos, alone.

In September 2016, volunteers from Norway, Spain, Sweden, Syria, the UK and met on Lesbos and coordinated the first, round-the-clock, emergency response. Until then, the 300 residents of a fishing village had been trying to provide food and shelter with little outside support. This group of volunteers became the founders of Lighthouse Relief.

Soon after, transit countries along the route to more prosperous countries began shutting their borders, leaving many thousands of asylum seekers stranded in Greece. The once-transient camps became a permanent home for people who had planned to continue their journeys to Germany or Sweden, where many already had relatives and employment prospects were better.

In response, Lighthouse Relief expanded operations to include psychosocial support for people, especially children and youth, waiting out the lengthy asylum procedure in camps.

Present in Ritsona camp since 2016, we continue to provide informal counseling and opportunities for kids and youth to play, learn, build community, and release stress, through sport, art, music, etc..

Increasingly harsh policies enacted as a deterrent have since made life more difficult in camp. They also leave more refugees and asylum seekers vulnerable to homelessness, including families with children and people with vulnerabilities.

Accordingly, in late 2020 we launched an emergency response to support them through Streetwork, case management, and monthly distributions of food and basic necessities.



# Ritsona Camp Overview

At the start of 2022, the needs in Ritsona are greater than ever. Recent arrivals to camp include higher percentages of **unaccompanied children, single mothers, and survivors of gender violence** or discrimination including people who identify as **LGBTQI**. Only **1,000 out of 2,600 residents receive food**. Lighthouse Relief is trying to adapt to meet these urgent needs.

Ritsona camp is located in a sparse industrial area 75 km from Athens and 12 km from the nearest town, Chalkida. In the aftermath of Moria Camp on Lesbos burning down in September 2020 and the subsequent transfer of many refugees and asylum seekers from the islands to the mainland, it is now the largest refugee camp in Greece. Currently, 38% of the 2,600 residents are children and the majority come from Afghanistan (33%) and Syria (32%).

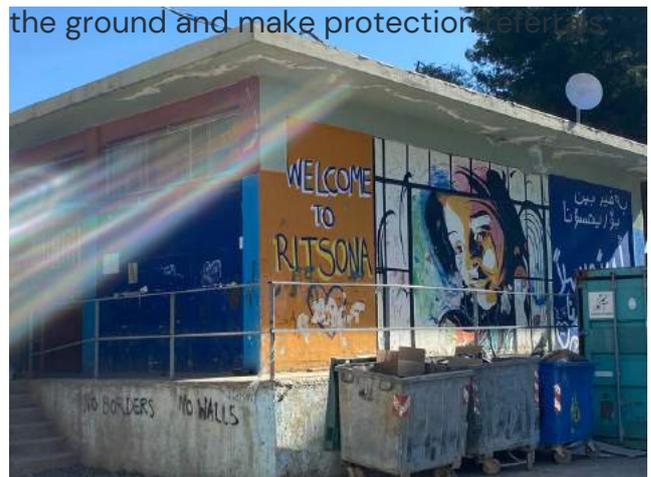
Over the past year, circumstances in the camp have deteriorated:

- Children have had little access to school due to bureaucratic delays, crowded classrooms, transportation issues, and COVID-19 disruptions.
- A high, prison-like wall has been erected around the perimeter of the camp, fostering stress and anxiety.
- One-third of residents have neither access to food nor cash assistance as a result of recent policy changes.
- Tensions are rising as a result of increasing hardship.

Lighthouse Relief established a presence in Ritsona in 2016, with the aim of providing dignified psychosocial support. Our inviting cluster of cheerfully decorated ISO containers and outdoor areas stand as a beacon of hope and light amidst mostly drab surroundings. As safe spaces to gather, play, learn, Lighthouse offers a place where children can be children and the whole community can partake in activities to regain a semblance of normalcy.

Our programmes and activities constantly evolve according to changing needs and circumstances. Currently, we are scrambling to **provide food to the 200 kids who are no longer eligible to receive it in camp**, despite immense bureaucratic hurdles.

Over time, we have earned the trust of the Ritsona community and they have come to rely on us for informal counseling and support. Consequently, the International Organisation of Migration, which runs the camp along with Greek authorities, counts on us to serve as their “eyes and ears” on the ground and make protection referrals.



# Ritsona Camp Programmes

**Lighthouse Youth and Community Center** (formerly known as YES) - A welcoming drop-in space for residents aged 15+ to drink tea and make use of foosball, musical instruments, sewing machines, a multilingual library, etc., and take part in workshops ranging from guitar to photography to English.

**Little Lighthouse** - A child-friendly space that runs an informal daycare for 3-4 year-olds, where they can develop social skills, gain exposure to multiple languages, and learn how to regulate their emotions through play.

**Lighthouse Sports** - Football, basketball, volleyball, and more as a vehicle for physical exercise, stress relief, and confidence-building for kids 5-14. Younger children play games designed to instill values of gender equality and respect for others and also learn healthy hygiene habits such as hand-washing and teeth-brushing.

# 1,150

Ritsona residents participated in 2021

## Lighthouse Relief Values

Dignity and respect for the equal rights of all people guide everything that we do. This is reflected in our commitment to always listen to those we endeavor to support, and ensure that they are equal partners in our activities.

Our goal is for people with relevant lived experience to serve in leadership positions. Accordingly, we make every effort to recruit people with such backgrounds to our Board of Directors, Advisory Board, and staff.

Also, our project teams include volunteers from the community we support, who serve as integral members of the Lighthouse team. **Community Volunteers** receive training in useful skills from conflict de-escalation to CPR, as well as support for professional development.



# Displacement in Athens Overview

**Approximately 100,000 asylum seekers in Greece currently have no form of supported accommodation and struggle to access housing, medical care, and cover their basic needs.**

Since 2020, the number of people living on the streets of Athens has risen dramatically. They are people at various stages of the asylum process including recognized refugees, people with pending applications, and people who have received double rejections. Many are families with children.

The increase is partly a consequence of efforts to “decongest” the islands by transporting people to Athens, where shelters were already overcapacity.

Recently, a series of harsh policy changes have left more people vulnerable to homelessness. They include:

- Asylum seekers outside of official accommodation structures (i.e. camps) no longer receive any cash assistance.
- The provision of housing and cash assistance for recognised refugees was cut from six months to 30 days.
- In early 2022, plans were announced to close Elaionas camp in Athens. It is unclear where residents will go, but likely many will end up on the streets.

- People whose asylum claims are rejected – which now includes most people fleeing Afghanistan and Syria following the designation of Turkey as a safe third country for them – have no access to any public services or the official labour market
- Since skype pre-registration ended in November 2021, asylum seekers must start the procedure in person, but the only open office on mainland Greece is dangerously close to the Turkish border, where they are vulnerable to illegal pushbacks. Therefore, effectively there is no way to claim asylum.
- The ESTIA II accommodation program, which provides apartments for 27,000 vulnerable asylum seekers will soon reduce capacity to 10,000 and be phased out completely by next year. Some of these units will accommodate asylum seekers only from Ukraine.



# Emergency Response Program

## Streetwork Project

In December 2020, we launched the Streetwork Project in Athens to provide dignified support to vulnerable individuals and families, facilitate refugee integration, and strengthen a city-wide support network for people experiencing homelessness. We act as the “missing link” between refugees and services in the following ways:

- Outreach shifts to ascertain the needs of people experiencing homelessness
- Food, hygiene kits, winter clothing, and other essential distributions
- Booking medical and public service appointments
- Assistance entering shelters or housing programs
- Guidance through bureaucratic procedures and translations
- Consultations with a social worker
- Multilingual emergency helplines

Since then, we have supported 2,305 people (including **1,698 children**); provided over **836 referrals**; managed **350 cases**; and addressed over **810 medical needs**. Our team has distributed **390 food baskets** in 2022 so far alone and over **6,300 non-food items**, including **620 baby items** and **5,150 hygiene items**.

## Forecast

Regrettably, we anticipate the number of asylum seekers and refugees experiencing homelessness in Athens to rise over the next few months. The two main reasons for this are the imminent closure of both Elaionas camp in Athens and the ESTIA II urban housing program that currently accommodates 27,000 vulnerable people. These developments will likely leave many more people in need of support. At the same time, it is more dangerous for undocumented people to be on the streets due to increasing police roundups.

In response, we are planning to **open a drop-by space** where asylum seekers can access our services in a clean, safe environment. We also seek to **expand our support for permanent housing**.

2,305

people supported since December 2020



# THANK YOU

For making Lighthouse Relief's work possible.  
We are truly grateful for your support!

