

Alternative Care for Unaccompanied children in Athens – Integration in the National Childcare programs

SOS Children's Villages Greece

Background Situation for UACs in Greece: Many children without care, separate accommodation schemes

As of February 29 2020, there are 5,463 unaccompanied Children in Greece who remain in urgent need of durable solutions, including expedited registration, family reunification and relocation. Among them, 1,752 are housed in over-crowded reception and identification centers. Others are accommodated in various forms of emergency placements. 93% are boys, 7% are girls, and 91% are between 14-18 years old. Three nationalities are most prominently represented, with 44% of UAC originating in Afghanistan, 21% in Pakistan, 11% in Syria, and 24% originating in various other countries.¹

For the children with accommodation, as elsewhere in Europe, unaccompanied minors are cared for in specialized accommodation schemes, separate from the national childcare system. **Based on the right to equality and fair treatment, SOS Children's Villages advocate for the inclusion of children in one unified national childcare system; and are the only actor in the country to have integrated children in its national childcare programs successfully.**

SOS Children's Villages Greece

Since 1975, SOS Children's Villages Greece has provided high quality alternative care to over 3,000 children lacking parental care. SOS CV is a leader in childcare provision in Greece, implementing strict high quality standards in its programs. SOS Children's Villages Greece is also a strong advocate and educator in Foster Care and pushes for De-institutionalization in Greece.

Since 2016, the organisation's commitment to children in need also includes a programme supporting refugee and migrant children. The program focuses on providing care and accommodation to separated and unaccompanied children through a psycho-pedagogical approach, promoting and defending the best interests, the personal development, and the unique skills of every child. Five group homes for unaccompanied and separated children were created by SOS Children's villages in Athens Thessaloniki and Serres. Since May 2016, more than 300 unaccompanied refugee and migrant children were provided with accommodation, psychosocial and educational support, stress relief activities, material assistance and legal assistance. Even though the operation of the shelters for unaccompanied boys and girls was successful (with low rates of children leaving the house, high rates of children attending school and engaging in legal procedures), the facilities

¹ <https://eea.iom.int/sites/default/files/publication/document/Minimum-Child-Protection-Standards-Identification-Unaccompanied-Separated-Children.pdf>

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/74094.pdf>

concluded their operation in December 2018 and June 2019 due to challenges to ensure continuity of funding.

In order to focus on the inclusion of unaccompanied children in the local society, more than 15 children were transferred to regular long-term SOS CV Childcare programs, which provide opportunities for refugee and Greek children to interact within a stable and caring family-like environment. This is the only example in the country of true children integration in the national childcare system.

The High Quality UAC Accommodation Program

Over 300 unaccompanied and separated children supported through this SOS CV programme were provided accommodation, psycho-social, educational and health support. In addition to accommodation, services provided to the children include assessment of educational needs and creation of personalized supportive classes, language lessons according to individual needs in cases of family reunification, psychotherapeutic support in one-to-one sessions and participations to self-empowerment groups for all children, life skills training and preparation of semi-autonomous living, re-establishing or maintaining communication with families, preparation for employment, including children's participation in a summer internship programme in a multinational corporation, involvement of the children in programmes in the local community to facilitate exchange with the local population (i.e. soup kitchens, food distribution, sports activities, recreational classes), voluntary work for children in organizations supporting vulnerable populations, issuance of necessary documentation (Social Security Number) for all children, etc. All children were assisted to be enrolled and to attend school together with other local children. Zero drop-out rate in formal education was reported, despite the lack of preparation classes in some public secondary schools.

High quality Alternative Care

The project built on SOS Children's Villages' Greece 70-year experience in providing quality alternative care for children lacking parental care. The program was based on the Child Protection Policy (CPP)² and safeguarding regulations of the Organization as these are guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. The main aim was the protection, development and support of each child's right to prevent any cases of child abuse and exploitation risks, have access to basic rights through the provision of a stable supportive and encouraging environment where children will have the opportunity to become children again, will be equally treated without any discrimination and will have the opportunity to develop their personal skills.

More specifically, children were:

- Provided with an environment where children lacking parental support, are being undergirded by a caregiver and their biological siblings in a family based model
- Promoted to become semi-autonomous and develop their life skills in everyday activities
- Cared for in an environment where cohesion, regularity and stability are of value, interpersonal bonds are empowered and links with the biological family (where this serves the best interest of the child)
- Supported to strengthen their psychosocial and emotional state and empower their self-growth through a personalized supportive plan according to the needs of each child

- Supported to their resilience and ultimately increase their opportunities to undergo a smooth transition to adulthood, fulfil their potential and contribute to their society
- Supported to develop their educational background, cultivate personal interests and talents
- Facilitated to health care, educational, legal, cultural and community based services
- Supported and guided to regain their sense of childhood that for several reasons have been deprived of and regain trust and self-confidence for the humanity and the future
- Aware and actively engaged of their rights and their active role in child protection. Children and young people need to know and understand their rights, develop their future, and have to acknowledge their own responsibilities in keeping other children safe as well

Emphasis on Staff training Staff members, including pedagogues, care-takers, social workers and psychologists, received regular supervision from experienced specialists in child mental health in a support group setting in order to address daily challenges, prevent burn out and enhance quality of services. In addition, staff received training on child protection and the protection needs and vulnerabilities of unaccompanied and separated children.

Child Support and Participation All unaccompanied children staying in SOS CV shelters had regular private meetings with psychologists and social workers, with whom they discussed their personal plans and receive counselling. All children participated in weekly group meetings – assemblies, in which they discuss about their experiences, plans, challenges and difficulties. They exchanged opinions and took decisions about sharing responsibilities, forming common rules and resolving possible conflicts. Children were asked about the daily programme, their environment, their educational challenges and their social and cultural interests. Children also participated in internal evaluation discussions, offering their views on the quality of the services provided.

Unique Best Practice: Child Integration in the National Childcare programs

The program promotes the best interest of each child separately, including the integration and inclusion of children under a family-based care model, reassuring that children have access to basic rights such as life survival and development, education, health care facilities and self-growth services. In particular, children attend school, are assisted with their legal status, have access to information and child-friendly services that promote growth, self-empowerment and are strongly engaged into community building activities.

Considering that a large number of children did not qualify for family reunification and their countries are not considered safe for repatriation, a mechanism was prepared to include refugee children to alternative care programs at national level and support their smooth and gradual integration into the Greek community. Specifically, in 2018 fifteen (15) children were moved from the shelters where they have been accommodated and supported into the SOS CV Greece's long-term care programs, such as the Children's Village SOS in Vari and the Youth House.

Criteria for their transfer relied on the vulnerability, the age and the legal status of the children. In particular, there were cases of biological siblings that were either approved with family reunification (four girls have been reunited with their mother in Italy, two girls with their

mother in Austria and two boys with their brother in Belgium), have been granted asylum or are still pending their legal status. Children have been accommodated in Houses both in the Village and the Youth House. These Houses are the typical family oriented households, where a mother (in this care an SOS Mother) is the main care figure of the house and children are growing with their biological siblings.

The intgration experience required hard work and has proven to be a huge national and European success. All children, both refugee and Greek, have connected and benefitted from the co-existence and integration, they have thrived. Integrating refugee children in the national programs is a unique best practice feature implemented by SOS CV Greece, which proves, in practice and beyond doubt, the need for unified rather than segregated childcare systems for all children.