

Food, medical attention, a safe haven: Poland responds to the Ukraine crisis with an emphasis on the physical and mental health of refugees



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The central train station in Rzeszów has long been a busy transit point in south-eastern Poland, not far from the border with Ukraine. But in late February it took on a new role – a safe haven for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the escalating violence in their homeland, a place where they can receive free medical attention, a warm place to rest, a hot meal and even a welcome toy for their children.

It is just one example of how Poland and many other countries neighbouring Ukraine are giving a warm welcome to refugees from Ukraine. Amid the exodus, government and civil society entities in Poland and elsewhere have swiftly established reception points where the new arrivals can access essential services, including medical and psychosocial support.

The Rzeszów station is where we met Dominika Janas, a nurse who has provided medical attention to dozens of refugees a day for the past week. For many, she is the first health-care worker they have seen since leaving Ukraine. In return, Ms Janas often gets a hug and a brief but heartfelt expression that means the world to her: “You are the best”.

“The people we see are escaping the war and masses of them are coming every day,” says Ms Janas. “We have a medical point here and we are helping everyone who needs it. On average we see 50 to 100 people a day and we work 24 hours a day. Everyone who comes and needs medical care receives medical care. The people we see are mostly women with children and the elderly.”

The refugees' health needs are many.

“The majority of cases are children with medical needs: sometimes they had not eaten for 2 or 3 days, and when they arrive, they often have diarrhoea because they had something hot to eat and are having trouble digesting it. The kids are cold, dehydrated and sleepy. And they only finally let go of all the stress when they get here. Many of the older people arriving have high blood pressure because of the situation and they are sleep-deprived, so we take their blood pressure and sometimes it is up to 180 or 200, which are very high levels.”

“There is one story that particularly affected me,” Ms Janas recounts. She begins to share that story but has to stop and collect herself, visibly moved, before she can carry on.

“One Ukrainian woman I met showed me a photo of her destroyed home. She has 3 children, with no home to return to. She will stay in Poland as she has nowhere to go. She had nothing left. ‘God will bless you; you are amazing people,’ she said to me.”

Janas says that the health facility at the train station was set up only 8 days ago, as soon as Ukrainians started coming to Rzeszów.

As of 5 March, more than 1.5 million people have fled Ukraine for safety in neighbouring countries, 1 million to Poland alone, while around a million people are currently estimated to be internally displaced, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations refugee agency. Many of the refugees are women, often travelling alone with children.

“It is very sad to see all these women with children and elderly people coming because they do not know what they are supposed to do, and they are looking for a place to stay,” says Ms Janas. “They were rendered homeless, they have nowhere to return to and the worst part is not even their medical or physical condition but their mental health. They cry, they hug us, they tell us how they are feeling, and it is extremely depressing for us as well because we are trying to help them as much as we can, with all our might, but we know we cannot do everything.”

The WHO Regional Director for Europe Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge saw for himself the remarkable work being carried out at the Rzeszów station and elsewhere during a visit to Poland on 4 March,

accompanied by WHO Representative in Poland Dr Paloma Cuchi.

Meeting with government officials and health-care workers, as well as listening to refugee families and noting their concerns, Dr Kluge and Dr Cuchi praised responders across the spectrum.

“Like so many countries, Poland has grappled with COVID-19 for 2 years, and now faces this new challenge,” Dr Kluge said. “Health-care workers are so exhausted, health systems have been so stretched, and the pandemic is far from over, yet we see how they are coming forward to do whatever they can to help their fellow human beings at this time.”

“Across Poland, beyond the government and the health sector, there has been an outpouring of support from all sectors of society, including private companies, civil society organizations and groups of volunteers coalescing around the crisis response. WHO Poland pledges its strong partnership in this effort,” added Dr Cuchi.

Justyna Fogler is a volunteer for Grupa Zasoby. They have set up a base at a major train station in the Polish capital Warsaw.

“We are not an institution, we are all volunteers; we started a group on Facebook that became quite big,” Ms Fogler explains. “We are helping with accommodation for people who come to the railway stations and have nowhere to go. We have a large network of people who offered help with apartments and rooms in their homes, and we connect those looking for a place to stay with those who can help them. Yesterday we helped around 170 people to find somewhere to sleep, same as the day before, so yes, this is something that people really need. People are mostly really, really tired as they haven’t slept for a couple of days and they want a warm bed and a place to sleep.”

Ensuring the health and well-being of all people lies at the core of WHO’s mandate and commitments in all situations. This includes protecting the rights of refugees, such as those arriving from Ukraine, in their access to health-care services in the receiving countries.

WHO is working closely with its offices in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, through government and other health partners, to rapidly respond to the health emergency triggered by the conflict and to minimize disruptions to the delivery of critical health-care services.

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