

Romania: civil society on the front line of health-care provision to refugees from Ukraine



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On 10 March, staff from WHO and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) visited the Serban Voda temporary emergency shelter in Bucharest, recently set up to provide accommodation and care for refugees fleeing from Ukraine.

The shelter is run by the civil society organization Carusel Association, in collaboration with the Bucharest Mayorality and the Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance of the University of Bucharest. It has been providing a health triage service for incoming refugees, handling anything from bandaging the scraped knees of children who have fallen while fleeing, to referring pregnant women for check-ups, to scheduling people for COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests.

Nina Diaconescu is a retired medical nurse and has been working as a volunteer since the emergency shelter opened on 3 March. She explains, “My shift lasts for 6 hours and I’m usually taking care of people who have less serious health conditions, often developed as a result of their journeys here, such as swollen feet and mild feet infections. For more serious cases, or for follow-up, I can refer them on to clinics that are providing free-of-charge medical services to refugees from Ukraine.”

Spotting health problems early on and referring people to relevant experts and institutions has helped to stop many health conditions from worsening. For instance, one refugee who tested positive for COVID-19 was transported to Matei Bals Hospital for Infectious Diseases, while another was able to get the professional mental health support and medication they needed.

Marian Ursan, Director of Carusel Association, commented, “People arrive at the centre overwhelmed with emotions, tired and scared.

Many don't believe this is really happening to them. They have often been travelling for days before reaching us and some come with pre-existing health issues. We do our best to create a safe and secure space here so they feel comfortable talking about their health – allowing us to ensure continuity of treatments and access to necessary medicines. We also have a volunteer Russian speaker who has been doing an incredible job facilitating the communication between people in need and different health-care providers.”

Since the shelter opened, the staff has welcomed over 100 refugees, and currently has the capacity to accommodate 40 people on a daily basis. Due to the increasing demand for its services, Carusel plans to expand this capacity over the coming weeks.

WHO/Europe has close ties with the Carusel Association, having previously funded and supplied a fully equipped emergency tent to the organization. This provides a mobile solution for lifesaving evacuations and shelter for those most in need, and so contributes to Romania's preparedness and response efforts.

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