

## **WELCOMMON an innovative project for hosting and social inclusion of refugees / August 2017**



**#WELCOMMON** is an innovative community center for hosting and promoting social inclusion of refugees. It is a structure not only for refugees but with refugees for the benefit of the local community as well. It is implemented by the social enterprise [Wind of Renewal](#) (“Anemos Ananeosis”) in cooperation with **Athens Development and Destination Management Agency** (ADDMA), in the framework of the refugees’ relocation program of the Municipality of Athens and the **United Nations High Commission for Refugees** (UNHCR). It is funded partially (hosting and functional costs) by the European Union.

The building where WELCOMMON is housed hosted a public clinic by 2013. We rented the space from the owner company, aiming to transform it into a model space, within the urban fabric, for temporary hosting of refugees - and in the future of other vulnerable groups - in a way that leads to their social inclusion. Our goal was to implement in practice a different refugee hosting model that is win-win for both refugees and Greek society. Our plan aims in an integrated way both in reception and temporary housing (in decent conditions) and in the social and job integration of refugees.

### **Preparing WELCOMMON**

In order to prepare WELCOMMON, we had been working intensively from mid-August to late September 2016, offering personal and voluntary work and reusing equipment and spaces to deliver a quality result at a minimum cost. On October 12, 2016, our first guests, 30 refugees - 5 mothers with 25 children, were welcomed.

### **Some statistics**

We host on a daily basis 160-180 people in separate rooms. In total, from the start of WELCOMMON’s operation to the present day we have accommodated about 500 refugees. More than 50% were children and under 18 years old. Among our guests are:  
-31 newborn babies (0-9 months) together with their mothers, who either were born while their mothers were housed in WELCOMMON or the family moved to the center just after their birth.

- 9 people with special needs.
- 55 people with severe health problems.
- 17 people with psychiatric problems.

Our temporary guests tend now to be recognized refugees who will stay in our country. They are selected and sent to us by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and are the most vulnerable of the refugees (women with babies or pregnant ones, single-parent families often with many children, victims of torture, rape and trafficking, disabled by war or torture, people with medical and pharmaceutical support needs, such as cancer patients and others).

### **Socio-psychological support**

The hosting of refugees in qualitative conditions and the provision of good quality food is not enough. Everyone has gone through many difficult situations that led him/her to refugee as well as during his/her attempt to reach a safe place. Appropriate and systematic socio-psychological support, as well as enhanced social inclusion is therefore needed. Children often have a lot of "wounds", they have stayed out of any context and they are "children of war", of camps, of streets.

### **Social integration -socialisation**

A series of activities we are organizing aim to social and cultural integration of refugees and to familiarize them with another culture, with which there are both common and different elements.

Visiting Museums and Galleries:As part of the process of social inclusion and cultural / environmental awareness of the refugees we host at WELCOMMON, we organize visits to museums, art venues, parks and public spaces: Acropolis, National Garden, Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, Acropolis Museum, Natural History Museum, Archaeological Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art, Museum of Cycladic Art, Pedion Areos Park, Municipal Art Gallery and several painting exhibitions.

During our first visits, we had groups of mostly Syrian children, but now people hosted in Welcommon come from 15-17 countries and speak 11 different languages. The support of the volunteers is very important for such visits.

Since almost every one of our guests speaks different language, we emphasize in art because it works therapeutically and can unite people. We want refugee children (but also all children) to get familiarized with art in their everyday lives. We put great emphasis both on organized visits to museums and exhibitions, as well as on artistic activities in our own WELCOMMON hosting and integration center, created by "Wind of Renewal" in collaboration with ADDMA and with the support of the UNHCR.

For us the return of a refugee child to a "normal" everyday life goes also from the path of art.

### **Non-formal education**

Refugee children need to return to the educational curriculum as soon as possible. Syrian refugees may be out of school for between 1 and 5 years. Many international organizations have highlighted the need to ensure that there is no lost generation of refugees and that there

are no refugee children who do not go to school. Therefore, in WELCOMMON, we are concerned not only about the quality of accommodation, nutrition and socio-psychological support of refugees of all ages (so there is no relation to WELCOMMON conditions with those in many hotspots) but also for formal and non-formal education of children and also for adults needing it. Despite the difficulties and the lack of sufficient resources, we are gradually developing and implementing an integrated strategy for education, training and culture according to the needs of the different groups.

It is natural that each of the 6 groups:

(A) children, (b) adolescents, and (c) adults who will be relocated to another country, (D) children (e) adolescents and (f) adults who will stay in our country, has different needs and an appropriate education and inclusion model needs to be developed.

We are interested in collaborating with organizations outside Welcommon (e.g. language courses in various institutions, visits and collaborations with museums, developing collaborations with European institutions) or in hosting activities in our center (e.g. English courses by ADDMA with British Council volunteers).

Of course, the first priority is to include, the ones who want it, in the public education system (schools) or in certified training structures. However, since solutions are not easy available when needed for all cases, we are trying to offer innovative educational opportunities also inside Welcommon, on fields that are gaps that cannot be covered by other agencies. Besides, we have enough room for that.

A set of activities is organized for all children based on this objective: language learning, socialization, creative activities, team building, organized framework, environmental awareness, social behavior, hygiene and cleanliness and more. Every day we improve the non-formal education structure at WELCOMMON so as to empower both children and adults that we host and organize many important activities and courses:

- Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science courses with Arabic-speaking volunteer refugees,
- Greek courses for women and facilitation of adults and teenagers to learn Greek,
- German courses for beginners by German volunteers,
- Enhanced teaching by Arabic-speaking volunteers for children,
- Computer language learning using video and image,
- Painting and photography lessons with volunteers,
- Creative activities for children,
- Visits to art exhibitions, museums, parks and green spaces in Attica,
- Acquaintance with Athens, its history and culture,
- Participation in actions organized by other institutions (e.g. art therapy).

We are very happy when we find, that many refugees are involved in this project and not only keep their premises in good shape, but also contribute to making it better by painting, decorating and tidying their room, helping to rebuild the common spaces, undertaking important and responsible roles such as the "Arab lessons class", organizing WELCOMMON events (evenings with music, theater, cinema, art exhibitions) and actively participating in other activities outside WELCOMMON (solidarity concerts, "boats of hope" etc.).

## **Collaboration with volunteers, academics and social actors from all around the world**

We need the participation and support of many volunteers. **We specially need more volunteers experienced in teaching.** Volunteers' role is very important in #WELCOMMON. They make a decisive contribution to constantly renewing the work of professionals but also expanding it to areas that are at the center of our planning and interest but we do not have the resources to fund them such as education, socialization, artistic creation, social inclusion and job integration. Among other things, we provided space for hosting a number of volunteers inside the building where WELCOMMON is housed.

Since the inception of WELCOMMON we have hosted and collaborated - for 2 weeks up to 6 months - with over 140 volunteers from different countries. We have developed systematic cooperation with various organizations from Europe (RESPECT for GREECE - Germany, mSocial and ACSAR Fundacio - Catalonia), social cooperatives from Middle East (Humanity Crew-Palestine) and Egypt (Egypt Foundation for Youth and Development), universities from Europe and the US, so as to have volunteers with high skills and will to offer to society.

Our small community is expanding. We want to constantly improve cooperation with volunteers, taking into account their ideas, experiences and suggestions, so that there is continuity and benefit not only for our refugees and our staff but also for the volunteers who will come in the future. From autumn we will also have our volunteers' online community. You are more than Welcome to, in Common, support Wind of Renewal for the additional needs of WELCOMMON and social inclusion actions.

### **Why do we need your support?**

It is a fact that many of the urgent needs of refugee children and adults hosted in #WELCOMMON are not supposed to be covered or cannot be covered either by public services or by existing resources (these mainly concern hospitality, while most of our other actions are done either with the help of volunteers or with the support of micro-donations). We often have to appeal to either civil society or directly to friends and acquaintances for finding immediate solutions. Such urgent needs are medications for people with serious health problems such as cancer, baby prams, products and adaptive equipment for persons with special needs such as hearing aids and others, which refugees do not have the possibility to get from a hospital, since SSN (social security number) sometimes is not issued to them by CSCs (Citizens Service Centers).

The situation is particularly difficult because refugees who are now arriving in mainland of Greece, following the agreement of European Union with Turkey, are only very vulnerable people (victims of torture, rape and trafficking, with multiple disabilities or serious health problems such as cancers and more). As a result almost every day we have to struggle, under time pressure, to find a solution, such as providing medicines for a cancer patient who otherwise cannot begin his treatment.

**Contact us if you are interested in helping and supporting WELCOMMON,  
Mail: [welcommon.project@gmail.com](mailto:welcommon.project@gmail.com)**

*Anmerkung von Hilde Schramm:*

*Der Text ist die gekürzte Fassung einer Darstellung des Model Hostels Welcommon in Athen von Nikos Chrysogelos, dem Initiator und Leiter der Flüchtlingsunterkunft/ Stand Ende August 2017.*