

AUGUST 2020

Care and guidance for marginalised populations during the COVID-19 pandemic:

# Athens, Greece



During the 2020 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the city of **Athens**, Greece, has been addressing the unique vulnerabilities of marginalised groups through a cross-society collaboration dedicated to health promotion and harm reduction. The city has created temporary housing for people affected by homelessness and a specialised support centre for people who inject drugs (PWID). With support from a global network, the Partnership for Healthy Cities, Athens is also scaling up distribution of essential supplies and developing communication materials to support vulnerable groups in navigating available services and understanding the pandemic.

## COVID-19 and marginalised populations

For an effective COVID-19 response, cities have a key role to play in identifying how emergency measures adopted by national governments may impact marginalised populations within the city, including indigenous people, sex workers, people using drugs and alcohol, unhoused persons, migrants and refugees.<sup>i</sup> To protect the right to health for all people, the specific needs of vulnerable groups must be identified, addressed and monitored.

Greece confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on 26 February.<sup>ii</sup> As restrictive national measures to contain COVID-19 came into force in March, the city of Athens convened a cross-society expert group to address the protection of people who inject drugs and persons affected by homelessness.<sup>iii</sup> The pandemic poses a number of challenges to these groups. These include, disruption to treatment and rehabilitation services, changes to supply of substances, reduced access to harm reduction interventions, social isolation, higher risk of COVID-19 infection and higher risk of severe outcomes due to pre-existing noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as respiratory disorders. In addition, the pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity for these populations, through food store closures.



Source: Hellenic Liver Patients Association "Prometheus"

## — Athens responds with two temporary support centres

Recognising the immediate need to support those affected by homelessness through the pandemic, the city worked with experienced partners to create temporary accommodation for up to 400 people. The *Versatile Center for Homeless People* co-locates guesthouses with health and social care services to promote the physical and mental health of service users. The Centre also offers a day service, where residents can access personal hygiene facilities, a healthy meal and internet, in addition to a space for resting, without conditional administrative requirements.

On April 22, Athens opened a second, more specialised, centre for people who inject drugs. Acknowledging the unique vulnerabilities to the impact of COVID-19 of this marginalised group, the centre offers temporary accommodation alongside drug treatment and rehabilitation services.<sup>iv</sup>

## — Strengthening the response with funding from the Partnership for Healthy Cities

Athens is one of 70 cities that comprise a global network committed to saving lives through the prevention of NCDs and injuries – the [Partnership for Healthy Cities](#). Supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies, in partnership with the World Health Organization and Vital Strategies, the initiative provides technical assistance and resources to support cities in implementing proven policies that significantly reduce exposure to NCD and injury risk factors.<sup>v</sup> Since March 2020, the scope of the network has expanded to support city responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, acknowledging the important role of cities in implementing national measures and addressing challenges on the ground.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, Athens has expanded upon its Partnership-supported opioid overdose prevention intervention, to strengthen support to vulnerable groups. This is done primarily through their [Streetwork Project](#): a whole-of-society collaboration between city government and third sector partners, Hellenic Liver Patients Association “Prometheus” and the Greek Association of People Living with HIV “Positive Voice”. During the pandemic, three days per week in Athens and Thessaloniki, trained staff and volunteers distribute essential supplies such as food, water, gloves, masks and antiseptic liquid to those affected by homelessness, people who inject drugs, sex workers and migrants. Over 4650 service users were supported from March to June, with almost 7000 food and drink packages, 250 pieces of protective equipment and 400 safe injection kits.<sup>vi</sup>



Source: Hellenic Liver Patients Association “Prometheus”



Source: Streetwork Project

During the current pandemic where behaviours are a key aspect of virus transmission, it has been critical to make sure that marginalised populations are reached by new public health messages on issues such as hygiene and physical distancing. The city of Athens is tackling this challenge through developing easy-to-read flyers. Distributed by Streetwork staff and volunteers, the flyers explain the existence of a new virus, the pandemic and how to stay safe. A second flyer has been developed to help readers navigate the changed landscape of prevention and support services, vital when many services have been affected by

pandemic-related restrictions.

## Opportunities for long-term progress in protecting the right to health for all

In recognising and addressing the needs of marginalised groups during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the city of Athens has shown its commitment to equitably protecting the health of the most vulnerable. Their interventions reflect progress in tackling the long-standing challenges of homelessness and substance use, and improving access to health for hard-to-reach groups. Looking ahead, the Streetwork Project is working towards establishing a permanent hub in the city centre, which will provide vulnerable populations with primary health care, infectious disease testing, kitchens, personal hygiene facilities, as well as training courses and specialised counselling. The hub will also provide a space for city partners working with marginalised groups to meet, train and collaborate. Athens is demonstrating how a city can build on learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic to promote future progress on ensuring the right to health for all.

## Key Resources for COVID-19 and Marginalised Populations

- [Strengthening preparedness for COVID-19 in cities and urban settings: interim guidance for local authorities; WHO](#)
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- [COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement; Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working Group on COVID-19 Preparedness and Response in Asia and the Pacific, co-chaired by WHO, IFRC and OCHA](#)
- [WHO Guidance on Preparedness, prevention and control of coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) for refugees and migrants in non-camp settings](#)
- [Scaling up COVID-19 Outbreak Readiness and Response in Camps and Camp Based Settings; jointly developed by IASC / IFRC / IOM / UNHCR / WHO](#)
- [Maintaining essential health services: operational guidance for the COVID-19 context; WHO](#)
- [WHO Q&A: HIV, antiretrovirals and COVID-19](#)
- [Frequently asked questions \(FAQ\) about alcohol and COVID-19; WHO Europe](#)

- [Operational considerations for multisectoral mental health and psychosocial support programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic](#); IASC's Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
- [Handwashing and COVID-19 Prevention for Unhoused People](#); Higher Ground Harm Reduction, Reynolds Health Strategies, Harm Reduction Coalition, and Vital Strategies
- [COVID-19 Stimulant Use, and Harm Reduction](#); Higher Ground Harm Reduction, Reynolds Health Strategies, Harm Reduction Coalition, and Vital Strategies
- [COVID-19, Surface and Disinfection for Syringe Service Providers and Other Harm Reduction Providers](#); Higher Ground Harm Reduction, Reynolds Health Strategies, Harm Reduction Coalition, and Vital Strategies
- [Safer Drug Use During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#); Higher Ground Harm Reduction, Reynolds Health Strategies, Harm Reduction Coalition, and Vital Strategies



Source: Hellenic Liver Patients Association "Prometheus"

<sup>i</sup> Strengthening preparedness for COVID-19 in cities and urban settings: interim guidance for local authorities. World Health Organization. (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331896>; accessed 5 June 2020)

<sup>ii</sup> Coronavirus disease (COVID-2019) situation reports. World Health Organization. (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports>; accessed 9 June 2020)

<sup>iii</sup> Ανακοινώσεις στο Κέντρο Επιχειρήσεων Πολιτικής Προστασίας. Greece: Hellenic Government. (<https://government.gov.gr/anakinosis-sto-kentro-epichiriseon-politikis-prostasias/>; accessed 8 June 2020)

<sup>iv</sup> Χαιρετίζουμε την πρωτοβουλία του Δήμου Αθηναίων που σε συνεργασία με τον ΟΚΑΝΑ και το ΚΕΘΕΑ λειτούργησαν δομή φιλοξενίας αστέγων χρηστών ψυχοδραστικών ουσιών. Hellenic Liver Patients Association "Prometheus". (<https://helpa-prometheus.gr/chairtizoyme-tin-protovoylia-toy-dim/>; accessed 30 June 2020)

<sup>v</sup> Partnership for Healthy Cities. Bloomberg Philanthropies, Vital Strategies, World Health Organization. (<https://cities4health.org/about-us>; accessed 8 June 2020)

<sup>vi</sup> Streetwork Project. Athens, Greece. (<https://streetworkproject.gr/>; accessed 30 June 2020)