



ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΚΗ ΟΡΓΑΝΩΣΗ ΥΠΟΣΤΗΡΙΞΗΣ ΝΕΩΝ
ARIS - ASSOCIATION FOR THE SOCIAL SUPPORT OF YOUTH

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ARSIS STREETWORK FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

NATIONAL
EMERGENCY
RESPONSE
MECHANISM



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
Ministry of Migration & Asylum
General Secretariat of Vulnerable Persons &
Institutional Protection

Χρηματοδοτούς Μηχανισμός Ευρωπαϊκού Οικονομικού
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Iceland 
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Streetwork for the Identification and Support of Unaccompanied Minors

Introduction and Background

ARSIS Streetwork for the Identification and Support of Unaccompanied Minors has been active in Thessaloniki since January 2017, when it was launched as a project with the support of UNHCR and the aim of tracing and supporting unaccompanied children in migration. Over the years, ARSIS is the only remaining actor with a systematic presence in the streets of Thessaloniki, which is the first transit point for many newcomers arriving from the northern borders.

From the outset of the project, the team has been intervening in the city streets as well as in the wider urban areas, where newly arrived refugees, among them undocumented children alone and deprived of parental care in Greece, reside in conditions of homelessness and other states of precariousness. Unaccompanied children are always a population with increased vulnerability¹. Their specific support and protection needs are intensified by the precarious living conditions and the fact that they are a population on the move. As they are underage, they also face serious risks of victimization and exploitation, which among other things prevent them from seeking help on their own.²

1 According to the Council of Ministers of the Council of Europe “unaccompanied and separated children are among the most vulnerable persons in the migration context, and as such are at increased risk of violation of their fundamental rights and freedoms, in particular the right to life, survival and development, the right to non-discrimination, the right to respect for private and family life, the right to acquire a nationality, the right to seek asylum, the right to the highest attainable standards of health and of access to health-care services, the right to education, the right to housing, access to justice, and the right to freedom from all forms of violence” Source: Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)11 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on effective guardianship for unaccompanied and separated children in the context of migration, 11 December 2019.

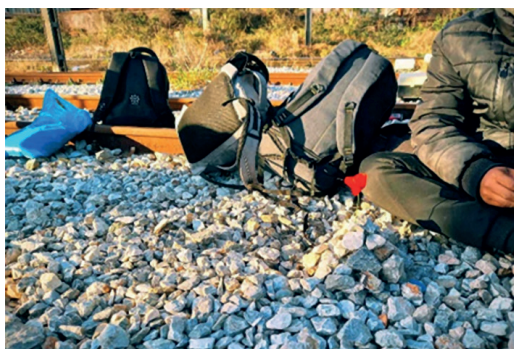
2 For more detailed information and in-depth analysis on the situation of unaccompanied children on the move and the grave risks they are exposed to, please refer to the *Panteion University Research Study on Homeless Unaccompanied Children in Greece*. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/gr/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2023/03/Panteion-Research-Study-on-Homeless-UAC_FINAL_published-Oct-2022.pdf. Cf. *NERM Procedural Handbook*, p. 14. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/system/files/2023-03/NERM%20Procedural%20Handbook.pdf>

During their activity on the field, Streetworkers have repeatedly encountered children that are victims of harmful experiences (such as war, poverty, natural disasters, racial/religious/ethnic discrimination, gender based or domestic violence, sexual abuse, and more) in their home countries as well as violence, maltreatment or life- threatening situations faced during or after the migration journey. In several cases, the children were threatened and abused in many ways by traffickers after the arrival in Greece. Additionally, the traumatic separation from parents and families, the loss of their care, and a lone existence marked by neglect, deprivation, bad health, depression, substance abuse and other similar states, are just some of the perils determining the lives of unaccompanied children as encountered by the *Streetwork* project over the years.

Therefore, the fundamental understanding of child protection behind the *Streetwork* project is, simply put, that “all children need security and physical and emotional care in a setting that encourages their general development”³.

Targeted social work on the street has proved vital for coming closer to the marginalized population of unaccompanied children and creating the first link in the chain of their support and integration in a wider safeguarding network.

The premises of the *ARSIS Streetwork* project in the city of Thessaloniki have always served as a base for the coordination of social work on the street and, at the same time, as a facility for the reception and organized assistance of unaccompanied children based on the conduction of Best Interests Assessments by especially trained child protection officers, the provision of psychosocial support, help in



3 UNHCR Inter-agency Guiding Principles on UNACCOMPANIED and SEPARATED CHILDREN, p. 22. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/inter-agency-guiding-principles-unaccompanied-and-separated-children>

addressing urgent medical as well as legal and administrative issues and, when necessary, bringing the children into contact with other competent child protection actors. The team has always strived for viable solutions to the predicaments of homelessness, which first and foremost pose the challenge of facilitating secure accommodation for the children as well as carrying on with the support of their complex needs until they are housed.

The insufficiency of public measures for guidance, support and accommodation of hundreds of unaccompanied minors arriving via the north borders as of 2015 had created an expanding protection gap, which resulted in the necessity of initiatives such as that of the *Streetwork* project. At the same time, one of the greatest challenges undertaken by the team was to systematically support homeless children regarding their material, legal and psychosocial needs during their stay in protective police custody. Although widely condemned for its incompatibility with children's needs and children's rights, protective police custody was practiced as an interim measure for the well-intended protection of unaccompanied children from the multiple dangers of homelessness. It had to be endured for varying periods (days, weeks, even several months at a time) before placements could be issued in available shelters for unaccompanied minors. Even so, a considerable number of children remained homeless, since the number of available shelters was much lower than the prevailing need for housing.⁴

The National Emergency Response Mechanism for Unaccompanied Minors

Groundbreaking progress in systematically handling the alarming situation of unaccompanied minors in Greece was initiated at the end of 2021 through the abolition of protective police custody and then, the launching of the National Emergency Response Mechanism (NERM) in 2021 and its establishment in 2022 under the *Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors (SSPUAM)* of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. (As of July 2023, *General Secretariat of Vulnerable Persons and Institutional Protection* of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. The General Secretariat was established by Ministerial Decision 77/2023 and took over the responsibilities of the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors, which was abolished by the same Ministerial Decision).

4 "Existing literature and the research findings highlight the lack of accommodation facilities as the most important cause of homelessness. Additional factors which contribute to homelessness of UAC include limited referral mechanisms, inadequate information to children on their rights upon their arrival, and prolonged waiting periods for placement in child-friendly accommodation facilities". https://www.unhcr.org/gr/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2023/03/Panteion-Research-Study-on-HomeLess-UAC_FINAL_published-Oct-2022.pdf

As an alternative to protective custody, SSPUAM established the NERM with the support of UNHCR and the objective of: a) organizing effective tracing of unaccompanied migrant children on a larger scale and b) referring them to be hosted in emergency accommodation facilities, where they can receive necessary assistance and appropriate support before entering the long-term accommodation facilities. At the same time, NERM was designed with a holistic protection approach to homeless unaccompanied children and the purpose of providing a full protective net for the needs and rights of all these children as appropriate to their age. One of its innovative features was the launching of a 24/7 national Tracing Line, operational as of 05/04/2021 and competent for referrals of unaccompanied children by every actor on the field: for example, by Greek public authorities, civil society organizations, public healthcare facilities as well as citizens and unaccompanied children themselves.

2021 – 2023. ARSIS as implementing partner of the National Emergency Response Mechanism for Unaccompanied Minors

Owing to its long-standing experience in the protection of unaccompanied minors, *ARSIS Streetwork* was appointed implementing partner of the National Emergency Response Mechanism (NERM) in the region of Thessaloniki at the beginning of 2021. It continues steadily to operate in this context up to date. Respectively, *the Network for Children's Rights* in Athens was appointed implementing partner of the NERM in the region of Attica, where it is still active in this role.

Originally carried out between 2017 and 2022 in cooperation with UNHCR and co-funding by the European Union, the *ARSIS Streetwork* program including all its activities and operations underwent a scheduled transition to the State in 2023. More precisely, since January 1st 2023 it implements the project “Operational Assistance to the National Emergency Response Mechanism (NERM) Project”, which is funded by the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism (EEA Grants 2014 - 2021).

In line with the main operational features of the NERM, *ARSIS Streetwork* activities as of 2021 are roughly divided into two components: an *Info Desk* and a *Mobile Unit* working jointly for the purposes of tracing unaccompanied children, providing them with immediate support as well as escorting them to emergency accommodation facilities.

A. The Info Desk is situated in a key area of the city and carries on the tradition of the *Streetwork* premises as a point of reference for unaccompanied children, either homeless or residing under other precarious conditions. Whether traced

by ARSIS or referred by the NERM, newcomers are always assessed by especially trained personnel for their best interests, counseled according to their individual needs and vulnerabilities, and offered at the same time extensive information about the NERM and their right to immediate proper housing. Processing the accommodation requests of the children takes place in close collaboration with the General Secretariat, which is responsible for issuing placements in suitable accommodation facilities, as a rule, within the same day the children have been traced. The *Info Desk* provides services to the children that range from psychological first aid and assistance in meeting urgent medical issues to legal and other forms of administrative support. In order to cover some of the urgent daily needs of homeless children, the *Info Desk* also provides light meals (snacks and drinks) and access to personal hygiene (shower and cleaning of clothes) as well as new clothing items and complete KITS as needed. On the whole, the *Info Desk* is suitably equipped to function as a hospitable day center, where the children can relax in a safe and pleasant environment, interact with each other and enjoy various recreational activities while waiting for their requests to be processed.



Apart from supporting fully homeless children, the *Info Desk* also undertakes the Best Interests Assessment of those residing for shorter or longer periods of time in apartments with compatriots without a relative as a designated caregiver. As this kind of communal accommodation raises serious concerns for the safety and wellbeing of the children, it is justly considered a precarious living situation, in which expert support is necessary. Until they are willing to be hosted under the accommodation scheme of the NERM, these children receive systematic counseling at the *Info Desk* as well as home visits from the child protection officers. After varying periods of time, most of them consent to their placement in an emergency or other suitable accommodation facility. At the same time, children that abscond from NERM accommodation receive support from the *Streetwork* team according to the risks they face during the periods of relapse into precarious living conditions until they reenter a designated accommodation facility.

On the other hand, unaccompanied children without their parents sometimes reside with adult family members, who are willing to officially take responsibility for the care of the child. These cases are supported by the team with targeted information sessions and home visits that aim to establish the exact relationship with the adult and, if the adult is in fact a relative, his or her suitability for being assigned the custody of the child. When assessed as such by the child protection officers of the team, the Public Prosecutor for Minors is duly informed and requested by the legal team to officially appoint the specific relative as a caregiver. Upon the issuance of such a custody decision by the Public Prosecutor for Minors, the child is formally considered “separated” from its parents but not from its relatives. Accordingly, the child remains in the custody of the latter without entering an accommodation facility.

As the *Info Desk* provides first line assistance in Thessaloniki, it is frequently also visited by homeless asylum seekers that may not be minors, yet in need of immediate accommodation and access to asylum procedures. Given that newcomers at the *Info Desk* generally lack original identity documents, one of the essential daily tasks of the professionals of the team is to assess if someone requesting services is actually underage or not. When clearly assessed as adults, newcomers are not eligible for inclusion in the NERM, as it is designed exclusively for the protection needs of the more vulnerable population that consists of unaccompanied children. Adults, therefore, are duly informed by the team about their rights and options



according to the asylum system in force and, when possible, referred to actors that could assist them. At the same time, particular cases involving alleged minority, especially when minority can neither be clearly confirmed or excluded by the team, are addressed in compliance with *NERM Standard Operation Procedures*. These provide for procedures which, according to the situation and the status of the individuals, enable access to formal age assessments conducted by competent public authorities in order to determine if someone is under the age of eighteen or not.

B. The Mobile Unit is basically tasked with escorting the children to various locations where they receive services and, most importantly, to accommodation facilities. Sometimes, the same children are escorted more than once to accommodation, since it is not unusual for them to abscond and then be referred and escorted again to the same or another accommodation facility as requested by the General Secretariat. In cases of absconding, the ARSIS team makes efforts to address the reasons and to encourage the children to return to housing, insofar as this is in their best interests. Undocumented children are first escorted to police departments of reference for the conduction of their formal identification and registration procedures before their further accompaniment to accommodation. Regarding children already traced and identified by the police, ARSIS is requested by the NERM to pick them up directly from the police station of reference and escort them to the designated accommodation facilities.

As a rule, newly identified homeless children are hosted in emergency accommodation facilities, especially established to this purpose in the north and south of Greece and run by the *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*. These facilities were funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark up to the end of February 2023. As of March 2023, they are funded by the Swiss Government and offer a total of 198 places. Two of them are operational in the north, regularly serving the accommodation needs of children traced in the wider area of Thessaloniki.



After approximately three weeks of support through the IOM, including complete case management services, psychosocial, legal, and medical support as well and access to asylum procedures, the children are referred by the General Secretariat to long term accommodation facilities (either permanent shelters or semi-independent living units), where they remain until they become of age.

As regards the first emergency accommodation places made available through the NERM in the broader region of Thessaloniki during 2021, specifically in *an IOM Safe Zone* area, *ARSIS Streetwork* undertook the provision of complete case management services, including Best Interests Assessments and legal support in asylum procedures, to the children that were hosted there. These services ended with the closing of the Safe Zone at the end of 2021.

C. Social work on the street. Besides conducting escorts, the child protection officers of the *Mobile Unit* work on the front line, committed to daily Streetwork and community outreach activities according to the tried and tested methodology developed by the team over the years. Indicatively for its effectiveness, ARSIS social work on the street has resulted in the identification of the largest number of unaccompanied minors in Thessaloniki, to which NERM was able to extend its services up to now.

Regarding its regular procedures, social work on the street involves both: a systematic search for homeless unaccompanied children, wherever they are likely to be found, as well as arriving at these children indirectly through community-based interventions.



Photo by Régis Defurnaux



In the first case, streetworkers make every effort to spot the presence of unaccompanied children in specific public areas (the streets, parks, train stations, abandoned buildings etc.) or perhaps residing under other precarious conditions such as in occupied or makeshift premises or temporary accommodation with adults in apartments. As these vulnerable children are frequently fearful, distrustful or unaware of their rights and the assistance they could receive, approaching them in an appropriate manner and earning their confidence is an initial challenge that has to be met before they can be effectively supported. Depending on the situation, the children are accompanied to the *Info Desk*, if they so wish, or encouraged to visit it as soon as possible so that their needs and requests can be more thoroughly assessed and processed.

Streetwork interventions involving the community on the other hand consist in establishing contact and cultivating steady links with members of the local population, especially with shops and other business premises held by migrants and refugees and where children alone are prone to seek contact with co-nationals. Frequent visits to these premises, updates on the nature and scope of services offered by ARSIS and the NERM as well as the distribution of informative material



in various target languages are examples of how awareness of the protection needs of unaccompanied children is promoted. Locals are encouraged by the team to be supportive of and refer such children to *ARSIS Streetwork*. As they also witness the direct benefits incurred to the children previously brought into contact with the team, co-nationals over the years have assumed an active role in directing unaccompanied children to the *Info Desk* or sharing information that motivates them to arrive on their own and express their needs. In this way, the local community has become the main channel, through which the target population of the NERM in Thessaloniki finally reaches the services it requires and is entitled to.

Unaccompanied children from Ukraine

In addition to the target population of third country nationals, NERM has been mobilized by the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors (As of July 2023, *General Secretariat of Vulnerable Persons and Institutional Protection* of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. The General Secretariat was established by Ministerial Decision 77/2023 and took over the responsibilities of the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors, which was abolished by the same Ministerial Decision) for cases of unaccompanied displaced children from Ukraine: children arriving in Greece either fully alone or “separated” i.e, escorted by adults other than their parents. Shortly after the outbreak of the Ukrainian refugee crisis early 2022, an ARSIS Best Interests Assessment team of experienced and specialized child protection officers was added to the regular *Mobile Unit* of the *Streetwork* project and deployed to the Promachonas Border Station in Serres at the Greek-Bulgarian border – the mainland border used by Ukrainian citizens to enter Greece. In collaboration with UNHCR, the Hellenic Police and the Reception and Identification Service (R.I.S), this intervention took place from April to September 2022 during the large influx of new incomers fleeing the war in Ukraine and seeking temporary protection in Greece. Given that the children were traveling without their parents, the purpose of the intervention was to identify and assess their protection needs directly upon their arrival at the border. The cases of children aiming to apply for the temporary protection status offered to Ukraine citizens were further assisted and supported by the legal team at the *Info Desk*. While children assessed by the ARSIS border team as properly escorted and documented were able to continue their journey into the country, children alone or endangered in other ways were immediately referred to NERM for housing and then transferred by the *Mobile Unit* to the accommodation facilities. At the same time, the *Info Desk* in Thessaloniki assumed the conduction of remote follow-ups on cases of unaccompanied Ukrainian children referred by NERM, regardless of their point of entry and where they were residing in Greece.

In 2022, ARSIS conducted a total of 287 Best Interests Assessments for displaced Ukrainian children, while handling approx. 750 more cases of children that arrived with escorts for short stays only.

As the Ukrainian crisis has not come to an end, ARSIS continues during 2023 to support unaccompanied Ukrainian children upon referrals by the NERM or direct requests by the Promachonas border police. As most cases concern “separated” children coming to Greece with escorts for short stays, they are handled remotely by the specialized personnel of the team at the *Info Desk* in Thessaloniki. The team checks the traveling documents and the existence of parental authorizations pertaining to escorts and potential hosts of the children, while also contacting the parents in the Ukraine for more reliable information. In exceptional cases of children arriving fully unaccompanied, ARSIS is notified by NERM to meet them directly at the Promachonas border, assess their best interests and proceed with referrals to emergency housing as well as accompaniment of the children to the designated accommodation facilities.

Between 01/01/2023 and 30/06/2023, the *Info Desk* received a total of 745 case referrals of Ukrainian children entering Greece, mostly in larger groups, interested in vacations or other short stays.

Additionally, the ARSIS team remains available for steady hours of field presence at Promachonas border in times of increased arrivals, depending on the actual protection needs of the incoming children.



Statistics and Conclusions

Indicatively for the success of the NERM, the number of unaccompanied children housed under its accommodation scheme *between 05/04/2021 and 30/06/2023* reached a total of **3.701**. The NERM has been vital not only for housing this vulnerable population and rescuing the children from the threats and risks they were facing, but also for lifting the fear of the future. Through the intensive support offered during their stay in suitable temporary and long-term accommodation facilities, ideally till they become of age, the minors are better prepared for a normal transition to adulthood and for taking further important steps in securing their livelihoods and wellbeing.

ARSIS Streetwork has undoubtedly contributed to NERM's success. For example, it referred a total of **600** newly traced unaccompanied children at least once *between 05/04/2021 and 30/06/2023* to housing under the NERM accommodation scheme. These children belong to a greater total of **1552** newly traced unaccompanied children that were supported by the *Info Desk* upon the conduction of Best Interests Assessments *between 01/01/2021 and 30/6/2023*. As for the number of escorts conducted by the *Mobile Unit* to accommodation during the same period of time, it reached a total of **1192**. It is worth noting that this total includes cases of multiple escorts for the same children (for example, absconders re-entering facilities) as well as children, whose accompaniment was undertaken directly from police stations of reference, where they had been identified. Furthermore, it encompasses children that were not new arrivals during the above period of time, but had been previously traced by the *Streetwork* project and were beneficiaries before the NERM began to operate. These children were transitioned into its services as of 2021.

The possibility of offering immediate proper housing to unaccompanied children has marked a new highlight in the *ARSIS Streetwork* project as regards the scope of services and the results it has been able to produce for its target populations since 2021. The NERM has been well received and widely appreciated, not only with due regard to the vastly improved situation of unaccompanied minors compared to the past, but also because of its holistic child protection approach as well as the ideal of taking not just some but all unaccompanied children in Greece under its wings.

At the same time, *ARSIS Streetwork* as a local actor on the front line has helped unaccompanied children in various precarious situations to place their trust in the protection system of the State, which otherwise may not have reached them on time. It has been vital to establishing and maintaining essential links between the NERM and its target populations. Meanwhile, it has continued supporting children

not only in their times of hesitance to enter the NERM but also during temporary housing availability due to unpredictable circumstances and strain on the capacity of the NERM.

In their respective roles therefore, both the NERM and *ARSIS Streetwork*, have each created examples of good practices in their specific fields of responsibility and activity. Moreover, the successful collaboration between NERM and its local implementing partner has also developed into a cohesive whole, which in itself holds a promising practice in the field of state and non-state collaboration for organized child protection, children's rights and social progress.



Contact Details

The team of Streetworkers is active morning and afternoon hours in two shifts, thus enabling the provision of its services from Monday to Friday at 10:00-22:00. The Info Desk operates Monday to Friday at 10.00-18.00 on the ground floor of 6 Orfanidou Street, Thessaloniki and provides interpretation in five languages.

Additionally, the Streetwork team is available from Monday to Friday at 10:00-22:00 under the following mobile number: 0030-6908070490 and land line number: 231 601 5307.

At the same time, NERM operates a 24-hour hot line for the identification and location of unaccompanied children in need (0030-2132128888 and 0030-6942773030). It is available in six languages seven days a week.



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ARSIS – Association for the Social Support of Youth is a non-governmental organization. It was founded in 1992 and operates in Athens, Thessaloniki, Volos, Alexandroupoli, Kozani and Ioannina. ARSIS develops actions, projects and services for the protection of children and the support of young people with social disadvantages as well as other socially vulnerable groups at risk of social marginalization, regardless of their nationality, origin, religion or social or cultural specificities.

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