

# UKRAINE SNAPSHOTS

SERVICES FOR  
UKRANIAN REFUGEES  
IN DE REGENBOOG GROEP



**Correlation**  
European  
Harm Reduction  
Network



**DE REGENBOOG  
GROEP**

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## INTRODUCTION

De Regenboog Groep (The Rainbow Group) is a non-profit organisation that hosts Correlation - European Harm Reduction Network. Established almost 50 years ago, it is based in Amsterdam. It provides services to people needing support due to homelessness, mental health problems, use of psychoactive substances, or financial and other personal issues. Among others, De Regenboog Groep operates nine walk-in centres where people can spend their days, enjoy a hot meal, shower, and get clothing. There are also eight shelters available for people experiencing homelessness. Teams of social workers and hundreds of volunteers in these centres help engage clients in diverse activities and work projects. Programmes run by the organisation also include capacity-building in money management for individuals to get out of debt, emergency shelters, spaces for safer drug consumption, and employment support programmes. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, De Regenboog Groep became one of the leading organisations mandated with operating shelters for Ukrainian refugees. This briefing paper looks into the refugee help system and the situation of people fleeing Ukraine in the Amsterdam area.

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Almost one year ago, we became witnesses of yet another war, this time within the European territory. The Dutch state and the municipality of Amsterdam, including De Regenboog Groep, took immediate measures to provide safe spaces for the refugees fleeing Ukraine. As part of the 'Ukraine Snapshots' series of the Correlation - European Harm Reduction Network, this article aims to provide an overall picture of the services organised and offered by De Regenboog Groep to the Ukrainian refugees. To get an insight into the situation on the front line, we interviewed the general coordinator of the shelters, Aukje Polder, Drop-In and Shelter Programme Coordinator at De Regenboog Groep and the on-site manager of the Botel shelter, Jarmo Berkhout; Daphne van Zetten, Aukje's substitute, revised and updated the information close to the publication date. They shared valuable information and discussed their experience regarding how the system works and how the situation has unfolded so far.

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## GENERAL ORGANISATION OF THE SHELTERS

We acquired information about the organisation and functioning of the shelters for Ukrainian refugees from Aukje. At the moment of the interview (mid-July 2022), the Regenboog Groep operated eight shelters, including six emergency shelters and two offering mid/long-term accommodation. Most of the shelters are located in hotels. Typically, the city council rents the space from the hotel owner, and De Regenboog Groep manages the shelter and provides necessary services aiming to help the refugees integrate and organise their lives (e.g., in terms of work, health care, etc.). The hotel can also provide some services such as food and cleaning. A few shelters belong to De Regenboog Groep, where the organisation's staff are responsible for everything. All shelter managers meet twice weekly to discuss emerging issues and challenges.

In 2022, refugees first arrived at a humanitarian service point at Amsterdam Central Station, operated by the Red Cross, where they could register and be offered a place in one of the emergency shelters. The shelters were placed mainly in Amsterdam. There was also one in Diemen and one mid/long-term facility in Weesp, both cities nearby Amsterdam. Nowadays, Daphne told us, the so-called "HUB" has been taken over by the municipal government, and since the beginning of December, most of the new arrivals have been placed somewhere else in the country. Amsterdam is currently full and therefore has temporarily stopped receiving newcomers. The few remaining spots are saved for family reunions and people who need to stay in the immediate environment of Amsterdam due to medical reasons. Also, the shelter in Diemen stopped in 2023, and those still staying there were placed in semi-permanent, more independent container houses in the same city.

Besides the Regenboog Groep, other organisations operate shelters, such as HVO Querido, Leger de Heils (Salvation Army) and the Red Cross. The municipality of Amsterdam provides funding. On the other hand, the city receives the central government's support for expenses related to the refugee crisis. The goal is that refugees could stay up to 6 months in the emergency shelters, after which they can transfer to one of the mid/long-term places. It means the first wave of refugees should have already moved to these accommodations. Aukje Polder stressed that *"it is a different system than the original refugee system. Everything goes quicker, better; it's easier."*

However, transferring to mid/long-term accommodations may be a complicated process. As Daphne reminds us, by January 2023, there are still refugees staying in the same emergency shelter since they arrived in March last year, as *"there are simply not enough places in semi-permanent locations at this moment"*. The two locations that have been set up so far are not sufficient to accommodate all refugees. Ten more buildings were being arranged by mid-July 2022. Emergency shelters operation has been extended until March 2023, and their continuation depends on the future influx of refugees and the extent of transfer of refugees to other accommodations.

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The refugee shelter policy's overarching goal is to move everyone from emergency shelters to longer-term ones gradually. This plan creates tensions and difficulties for shelter staff in their relationship with refugees. As Jarmo Berkhout explained, "*basically, the municipality plans to send letters to people stating they have one shot at moving to a semi-permanent location (otherwise, they would lose the right to the location) because they want people out of the shelters. But the shelters are not run by the municipality, but by organisations, for instance, my colleagues and me; and I, for one, don't feel comfortable forcing people to move to a place they've never seen. So, we have to find some procedure which is more democratic or transparent.*" Notably, many refugees move to other cities or permanent locations independently.

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## PROFILE OF THE REFUGEES

Most Ukrainian refugees found their way to the Netherlands because they either had a connection through family or friends or services were not accessible (reaching their capacity or overcrowded) in other countries. They are mostly families, women and children, as men mostly stayed in Ukraine to fight. Many of these individuals intend to return to Ukraine when the situation permits. However, many refugees, mostly young, see the current situation as an opportunity to start a new life in Amsterdam, where otherwise it would have been challenging to migrate.

There is one group of individuals facing a particularly complicated situation. Namely, non-Ukrainian refugees who had fled another war (for example, in Syria) and settled in Ukraine, the so-called 'third-landers'. Many of them seem to be the first ones trying to flee Ukraine. The complexity of their current situation lies in a recently changed policy that denies the non-Ukrainian individuals who arrived before the policy change to renew their refugee protection status of one-year duration to up to three years. The refugees arriving after the policy change are arguably prevented from even accessing the refugee route set up for Ukrainians. This means that instead, they need to follow the regular refugee route starting in the Dutch Asylum Center in Ter Apel to begin the procedure of applying for asylum and continue staying in the country. Ter Apel has been criticised due to overcrowding and several health hazards, rendering it unsafe to send more refugees. This situation also raises questions about discrimination. As of January 2023, "third-landers" rights to shelter and refugee protection status still end on the 4th of March 2023, causing much stress among the population. Not everybody has a plan regarding the future. There is an offer from refugee foundations and the government to organise a reintegration to the country of origin or Ukraine, along with a 5000 Euro support grant. However, many third-landers prefer to stay in the Netherlands because they don't see a future in their original country, and Ukraine is still at war. Also, many of them have friends or family living in the Netherlands, whom they do not want to leave. It remains to be seen how the authorities will handle this problem.

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## SERVICES OFFERED

The specific services offered to the refugees through shelters include job activation programs, legal counselling, primary healthcare, education, and various community activities.

First, the support workers of the Regenboog Groep shelters help individuals fix their registration and citizen service number (BSN) at the City Council and apply for monthly financial support. Moreover, teams consisting of social workers visit different refugee shelters to offer support and help the individuals find a job. *"The job activation program functions very well. People who speak some English and are motivated have already found work. People with specific education, those who don't speak any English, or who have less ability work, it's a bit more difficult for them to find a job. So, they need more support and a kind of voluntary work."* – explained Aukje. In addition, the Dutch Council for Refugees also helps in dealing with more difficult legal questions.

Primary healthcare is available to all refugees, and every shelter location is connected to a general practice where people can have appointments with a family doctor. Children and youth can continue their education in schools or daycare facilities. There are also well-functioning connections with the local community centres. Thanks to that, various group activities could be organised over the months. As Jarmo Berkhout managing the Botel shelter, recalls, *"Last Tuesday, for example, they all went to the AJAX match because they were playing a benefit match with a Ukrainian team. They [the organisers] gave 3000 free tickets. Also, the places around the NDSM neighbourhood, the bars and restaurants, the street art museum, the IJ-Hallen, they all gave us a bunch of vouchers so that people could go out and do different activities."*

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## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Psychological support is integral to ensuring the well-being of refugees, especially since the mental struggle and trauma they may have undergone may be debilitating for them to get back on their lives, particularly in a new, unknown place. Our interviewees admitted that there is no robust institutionalised psychological/psychiatric support structure that specifically addresses refugees and their unique needs. Individuals needing mental health services must enter the customary route through their GP. However, the waiting times for mental health services tend to be exceptionally long.

For this reason, alternative ways of offering psychological support have been created. The Regenboeg Groep cooperates with the Wereld Psychologen (World Psychologists), a counselling organisation that provides psychosocial help to refugees and aid workers through online and telephone sessions. Additionally, Geestelijk Verzorgers (Spiritual Caretakers) visit the refugee shelters every week, and they help individuals deal with their problems by listening to them and talking with them. Moreover, De Regenboeg Groep took the initiative to set up its support groups with the guidance of a psychologist. One of the crucial questions in this context is how difficult it is to identify people that struggle and need mental health support. Given the number of refugees staying in the shelters, it seems that it is not easy. As explained by Jarmo, **"It's a lot of people, and it's more difficult to do it proactively. In the beginning, we were covering around 18-19 people, most of them from the same group that arrived in the first wave in March. And it was easy to check on them and have an overview. Now it is more difficult. But we do try to check on people that don't seem to be in a good place"**. Refugees with more visible and severe psychiatric problems, for example, strong psychotic tendencies, were later provided with help through municipal health services and treated in clinics.

Other obstacles in accessing mental health services are the language barrier and the cultural stigma surrounding psychological support, which may discourage individuals from asking for help. Jarmo explained that **"being on therapy could be considered being crazy or weak. I know there is this cultural block with psychological care that was conflicting with their [the refugees'] real needs. And talking about personal issues seems to be also gender-divided. Men wanted to talk more to me about their stuff that they couldn't talk about with the female colleagues. And the other way around. But some of those guys I tried to help find the right psychologist through the GP or the Wereld Psychologen."**

Aukje and Jarmo stressed that psychological distress was a temporary state primarily related to adjusting to the new situation for many individuals. Finding a job usually turned out to be highly helpful, giving the people a sense of life, anchoring them within the community, and keeping them distracted from negative thoughts throughout the day. Mutual help within the refugee sub-groups also plays an important role, as people with the same ethnic background or interests tend to develop connections easier.

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Since the 1st of January 2023, two more psychologists started to support the different locations from De Regenboog Groep, as staff saw it was much needed due to the war continuation. Moreover, each location of the Regenboog has a psychosocial coach from Ukraine working one full day a week at the location; the coaches were working as psychologists back in Ukraine.

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## SUBSTANCE USE SUPPORT

In this paper, one of our main areas of interest was substance use among Ukrainian refugees and their access to harm reduction services and services integration in the broader refugee support program.

According to our experts, it is primarily young people who consume cannabis and alcohol. Since they usually do it more intensively right after arriving in the Netherlands, it is likely a part of the Amsterdam experience. The professionals noticed no significant problems related to substance use. *"I was a little bit afraid it could become a problem, but then it didn't turn out as one. We cannot really prevent it or prohibit it if people want to smoke outside, for example. There were some people we were more attentive to because they were drinking a lot, but that also stopped. And for most of these people, it really helped to get a job."* - explained Jarmo.

On the other hand, complements Daphne, some locations have many struggling with alcohol misuse, and there have been many violent incidents related to it. Consequently, the shelter in Weesp, in agreement with the municipality, has implemented an alcohol prohibition in the building since December 2022. *"There are many children living in the building, and we didn't find the amount of alcohol being used around those children safe anymore"*, said Daphne. Besides the cases mentioned above, active drug use was not observed. It seems that there are only a handful of people on opioid agonist treatment (OAT). These individuals were already in therapy in Ukraine; hence, obtaining a methadone prescription in the Netherlands was easy.

In contrast to the more complicated bureaucratic procedures for usual De Regenboog Groep clients who use drugs and are based in the Netherlands, Ukrainian refugees can book an appointment through the municipal health service (benefiting from the initial assistance of the organisation's employees), and they can receive their prescriptions. Regarding the reasons behind this effortless OAT access for Ukrainian refugees, Aukje noticed: *"The only answer I could think about is the willingness of people to help. The difference also is that all the people we have in the [refugee] shelters have accommodation and are a bit more supervised, compared to the people here who are in the drug consumption user room [at the AMOC shelter], but during the night they are outside."*

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There are two Ukrainian persons on OAT at the Botel shelter, and they seem to be satisfied with the care they receive and the fact that they do not need to engage in illegal activities anymore. Jarmo shared part of their story: *"Back in Ukraine, they had troubles with the law; they might have been in and out of jail for a couple of years. But here, they are extremely happy because of the access to methadone. In the beginning, they had to go to GGD [municipal health service] every day to get their dose, but they were well behaving, so later, they could go once a week and get enough for the entire week and self-medicate. I haven't talked to them directly because we don't share the same language, but my colleague has told me they are really happy that they are on 'good' drugs and that they don't have to engage in criminal actions in order to get them."*

Apart from the OAT, a structure of harm reduction services still needs to be organised. In specific locations, such as the Botel shelter, where many young people living there may want to experience the party scene of Amsterdam, monitoring the situation could be helpful. Depending on the needs, specific harm reduction services should be gradually developed and made accessible.

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## THE BOTEL EXAMPLE: INSIDE THE SHELTER

The Botel is a boat hotel located in the NDSM area. During a site visit, we got an insight into how the Botel is organised and how the relationships between support workers and refugees unfold.

The municipality rents two floors of the hotel for the refugees. The hotel provides housekeeping, cleaning and three meals per day. De Regenboog Groep support staff working on site are responsible for helping individuals deal with more bureaucratic processes necessary to organise their life here (e.g., obtaining a citizen service number, municipality registration, finding work). They also take care of maintaining a harmonious atmosphere within the shelter. The staff works over three shifts daily, ensuring that there is always someone there to assist the refugees. **"We provide them with a place where they can feel safe and comfortable. Make sure everyone gets along well and there are no conflicts; if they are, intervene and ensure that everything stays peaceful as much as possible. The staff members are basically the first point of contact; if they [refugees] have any request, we are there, and then we can figure out how to help them or who needs to help them"**, Jarmo shared.

Regarding the background of the support workers, it is optional to have an experience in social work or related fields, and more emphasis is put on language proficiency and communication ability. Jarmo explained, **"In my team, there are two people that came from Ukraine a few years back as asylum seekers. Another colleague speaks Russian. So, for De Regenboog, in the beginning, it was more important for the staff to communicate with the people and make them feel safer and more comfortable. And I think that makes a lot of sense."** Other key characteristics of The Botel's staff include appropriate personality and attitude, compassion, and willingness to help. **"In the beginning, because we didn't have any prior experience in this line of work, we were also figuring out how to provide these people with help and care, some comfort. And we managed to establish a relationship of trust with our guests. You know, like in a relationship with a friend or a loved one, that's the most important thing, to trust each other. And you have to work for it, but then if you have it and there is a strong basis, it really helps."** At the same time, encouraging refugees to take the initiative and stand on their feet is an integral part of Botel's staff work.

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The background of refugees staying at the Botel also paints an interesting and unique picture. While 90% of inhabitants in other shelters are women with children, in the Botel, no children are allowed because of the surrounding water. There is a roughly equal ratio of men and women living there. The age of individuals ranges from 18 to over 60 years old. Most people (around 60-70%) are Ukrainian; the rest come from Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, and Nigeria, among others. According to the shelter's manager, this affects the atmosphere and work in the Botel: **"I think it makes a big difference because, in shelters that have families and kids, it can be in a way more chaotic (...)** Maybe that's what is specific for this location, it kind of sets the barrier from the general refugee population in other shelters." Hostility and conflicts do not seem to be the case in the Botel, although **"there are some Ukrainians that kind of frown upon non-Ukrainians being given the same treatment."** (Jarmo). At the same time, most people are arguably indifferent towards this issue. Overall, the adult, gender-equal, and multicultural (including mixed-nationality couples) environment seems to create a relatively easygoing atmosphere.

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## THE FUTURE

Setting up a well-connected, effective and efficient support system within a limited timeframe and for many people was a demanding task for De Regenboog Groep. Aukje admitted that uncertainty about the future is the main challenge of this initiative. Whether it concerns Ukrainians who want to return to their country, young people who see the current situation as an opportunity to start a new life abroad, or non-Ukrainians whose legal status is still pending, their stories remain to be told. As long as the government, the organisations, and the individuals are willing to help and ready to support, the system will likely run smoothly. How long this willingness will last and what the future brings remain open questions.

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