



# CHEERING

CENTER FOR HEALTH EQUITY, EDUCATION, & RESEARCH  
INTERNATIONAL GROUP - GREECE

**A VOLUNTEER'S GUIDE TO CHEERIng**

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## This Guide

Welcome to CHEERing! **Thank you for joining our team.**

As a volunteer for CHEERing, you are part of our small community aiming to provide the best possible services and aid to our beneficiaries. Our team is small, which means communication channels are always open and easy to access for any questions you might have. This guide contains useful information you'll need during your time with us. Please read it carefully and refer to it as necessary.

## Context

The increased frequency and intensity of violence and conflict in countries throughout central Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa have led to mass migration flows to Europe. These migration flows usually manifest through either land or sea travel to Europe- namely to Greece, Italy, or Spain. The goal is usually to continue migrating to parts of Western Europe due to increased support and economic opportunities; however, due to the EU's Dublin Regulations, asylum seekers are obligated to apply for refugee status in their first EU country of contact. This has led to a range of different issues related but not restricted to the capacity of Southern European countries to provide for the mass number of arrivals, asylum seekers, and recognised refugees.

Due to the economic crisis in Greece, the government has not been able to adequately provide aid for those in need. Thus, camps are far over-capacity, shelters are full, and previously accessible aid has been back-logged. NGOs originally attempted to fill these provision gaps but many have failed to sustain funding, and have been forced to shut down or move their services elsewhere. There are a number of different solidarity movements throughout Athens which have attempted to provide where government and NGOs have failed, however, their successes are highly fluctuating and reliant on the ever-changing socio-political landscape.

This creates high levels of frustration and uncertainty among many members of the refugee community. Lack of access to services increases health risks and social inequality whilst inhibiting integration. The situation is constantly in flux and laws, services, and aid provision mechanisms are continually changing.

## About CHEERing

CHEERing, the Center for Health Equity, Education, and Research in Greece, is an NGO (non profit organization) in Athens, Greece, focusing on empowering and assisting refugee mothers and infants, with an emphasis optimal infant feeding. We uphold the World Health Organization recommendation for 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding; the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes; and the Operational Guidance in Infant Feeding in

Emergencies. Breastfeeding is the safest, healthiest form of infant nutrition, and saves lives during a humanitarian crisis. We work with pregnant women and mothers of babies and young children, to provide prenatal counselling, infant feeding support, and other support related to reproductive health as needed. In addition, CHEERing offers regular training in infant feeding in emergencies for clinicians, camp staff and volunteers in other agencies and non-profits involved in serving the refugee population.

CHEERing launched in November 2018 and has an ongoing, parallel relationship with CHEER, the Center for Health Equity, Education, and Research at Boston Medical Center/Boston University in the USA. Although the two organizations operate completely independently, CHEERing is fortunate to be able to draw on a backup volunteer team from CHEER, which includes a paediatrician, several registered nurses, a dietitian, and board certified lactation consultants.

CHEERing's hands on is based in refugee camps and shelters. We have an office on Pipinou St in central Athens, but we do not see clients in our office. All clinical work is done as outreach.

The kind of work that we always need volunteers to do is fundraising (can be done long distance); technical assistance with websites and social media; and hands on help from relevantly qualified individuals in camps, shelters, and at trainings. Please be aware, however, that the work is highly unpredictable. CHEERing operates at the goodwill of the Greek authorities and those who run the camps and shelters. Refugee health is by nature a transient field and circumstances are chronically unstable. Moreover, NGOs depend on grant funding, and our collaborators expand or contract their operations based on funding. It is not unusual for a camp to call us one week and cancel because the power is not working or a new group of refugees is arriving and our services are put on hold. It is critical that volunteers accept these shifting conditions because by nature, nothing in this field goes according to plan.

## **Fire Safety & Emergency Contact Numbers**

If an incident occurs that you are not equipped to handle, please notify the camp or shelter management immediately and / or follow the emergency procedure. The national emergency numbers are as follows:

Medical: 116

Fire: 199

Police: 100

### **CHEERing contact:**

Anne: +1 (617) 947-3683

Or email: [cheer.internationalgroup@gmail.com](mailto:cheer.internationalgroup@gmail.com)

The best way to contact is via WhatsApp. All volunteers must create and operate a WhatsApp account to work for CHEERing.

## Code of Conduct

We have based our code of conduct on those of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, as established in 1994. Please read this thoroughly and feel free to ask any questions during your time with CHEERing.

### **1. The humanitarian imperative comes first.**

The right to receive humanitarian assistance is a fundamental humanitarian principle. The assistance provided by CHEERing is humanitarian in nature and not a partisan or a political one.

### **2. Aid is given regardless of race, creed or nationality and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.**

CHEERing treats all of our beneficiaries equally. We do not tolerate any prejudiced comments or behaviour.

Your role as a volunteer is to conduct a collaborative professional relationship. This means that as a volunteer you do not prioritise time with those who share your race, creed or nationality. Give everyone equal attention irrespective of language barriers but remember to keep a respectful distance. Please *do not* engage in inappropriate or unprofessional behaviour, such as drinking alcohol and smoking with the beneficiaries.

It is not appropriate to seek personal information from beneficiaries unless it is directly relevant to their health and/or wellbeing. In other words, *do not ask refugees about their personal stories out of curiosity*. For example, the type and location of the infant's birth may impact their weight or feeding status, but how the family reached Greece is likely beyond what is needed to be known. If personal information is freely shared, please treat it with empathetic but calm professionalism and do not engage emotionally or demonstrate shock.

To ensure all beneficiaries are treated equally, CHEERing volunteers must not use their own money to offer particular services or aid to individual beneficiaries. This creates an uncomfortable situation for all involved. If you or your personal contacts wish to donate to CHEERing, or to particular aspects of CHEERing, please discuss this with Anne so we can agree on a solution. This also helps ensure the broader needs of CHEERing are met.

If a situation should arise between beneficiaries, please alert the relevant people who are running the camp or shelter. Do not become involved as a volunteer.

**3. Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.**

As stated in 1 above, CHEERing does not take a religious or political standpoint. Volunteers must not distribute any resources on the basis of religious or political affiliation or wear clothing or other items demonstrating political or religious affiliations.

**4. We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy.**

Volunteers must treat any information given to them by or about any beneficiaries as confidential and not to disclose it to any third party unless authorised to do so.

**5. We shall respect culture and custom within the legal framework of Greece.**

Volunteers need to dress conservatively and appropriately. No clothing or accessories that make an overt political statement should be worn. Clothes should not be see-through, revealing or too short; please cover shoulders and knees and do not wear shorts or sleeveless tops when working – even in the hot Greek summer. This is our dress code.

Please also note that the many different cultures we work with bring their own beliefs and knowledge about infant feeding, reproductive health, and child rearing. It is imperative that volunteers maintain a completely open mind about approaches they may never have encountered before, and do not try to impose their own cultural ideas or concepts on others. If a cultural belief (for example, offering prelacteal feeds or starting solid foods at 3 months) directly conflicts with the WHO recommendation, please use the utmost discretion in counseling women. We find that weighing infants and describing their appropriate development and weight on breast milk alone can go a long way towards supporting the message of exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months.

**6. We shall attempt to build our responses on local capacities.**

Please do not attempt to prioritize your ideas over those who have been working in this context for prolonged periods of time. While many people have great ideas, you may only be in this environment for a short period, and we do not want to start new work that we cannot maintain. It is important to respect local capacities, and build on them for continued access and aid provision. Similarly, please do not send goods like diapers or toys from overseas. We try to boost the Greek economy by purchasing needed materials onsite; this also saves on shipping costs and customs duties, which can be huge on imported items. If you would like to donate specific items, we would be delighted to purchase them for you onsite and send you copies of the receipts.

**7. The aid provided must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities as well as meeting basic needs.**

As a volunteer please feel free to share any ideas you may have to help strengthen our offerings at CHEERing. However, please do not be offended if we are unable to accommodate your request.

**8. We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources.**

As a volunteer it is important that you uphold any commitment made. We are relying on you to the same extent we would on a paid employee, when you are volunteering for us. Please do not come to Greece with false expectations – the tourist side of Greece is very different from the context in which you will be working. We owe it to the beneficiaries to be reliable in a very changing world.

**9. In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we recognise refugees as dignified human beings not hopeless objects.**

Please note that as a CHEERing volunteer **you must not take photos or post information about our organization, staff, or beneficiaries, on either your social media (eg Facebook page) or other platforms unless authorised to do so.** We are opposed to voluntourism or glorification of the situation to the benefit of the volunteer. We believe it is an honour to serve this displaced population. Please do not expect outpourings of gratitude or elevated status. The situation is tough on all sides and mutual respect is the best approach.

**10. We do not, under any circumstances, enable or support romantic/sexual relationships infused with clear and exploitative power dynamics.**

There are clear power dynamics which exist between service providers and service users. Those you are aiding with your work are likely dependent upon you and your team for the specific service being provided. This makes it highly unethical, and completely unacceptable to exploit this dependency and foster inappropriate relationships with our beneficiaries.

## **Being a Volunteer**

At CHEERing teamwork is important. You are joining a small team to help provide the best environment, consultation, and support for our beneficiaries. You play a key part in ensuring the pre and post natal well-being of our beneficiaries, please recognise this immense responsibility.

Our limited funds are used to address the needs of the people we support which means we cannot provide food or free accommodation for volunteers. So, you must be able to cover your

own costs while you are with us. We do have access to 2 apartments where you can stay short term for 10 Euros per night. If you need this accommodation please let us know so we can discuss this further with you.

CHEERing relies totally on volunteer support to function. We rely on you. And you are expected to work hard.

Your time will be put to good use but you also need to recognize the limits within which we all work - one volunteer cannot change the world. However your contributions will get us a step closer to making a difference together!

**Please bear in mind:**

- The contextual landscape is constantly changing, please recognise that you will need to be adaptable on the job!
- While we strive to find the right project according to your skills, it isn't always possible. Please be prepared to do any task asked of you or that you see needs doing. This might be completing a task that another volunteer was not able to finish, dealing with a computer or a projector, orienting another volunteer or answering a nutrition related question from a camp case worker.
- Greece is a modern European nation but there are certain areas that may differ from your home environment. The Greek economy is struggling. The plumbing system is far from perfect; WiFi can be spotty/slow; eating hours are unique; smoking is common and transportation and other kinds of strikes are frequent. On the other hand, prices are low, people are generally friendly and helpful, many people speak English (which is also the most common language of volunteer organizations) and Athens is safer than many big cities. In winter Greece is cold and in summer it is hot.
- If you require CHEERing to provide you with any documentation/ letter of recommendation after your volunteer placement you must let us know in advance.
- We are registered as a non-profit organization and as such have to adhere to Greek law. This defines the rules and regulations that CHEERing operate under.
- If you are not sure about a task, ask!
- Emergencies and incidents do happen. Please do not try to solve these on your own. Escalate emergencies immediately to Anne and/or call the emergency numbers listed above.
- As a volunteer you should expect to be treated fairly and kindly; we expect you to treat others the same way. If you have any concerns, please raise them with us.



### Relationships with beneficiaries:

Volunteers must understand that power dynamics exist which place refugee in a more vulnerable position than volunteers. This is due to numerous reasons. To discuss a few:

- **Dependency on services:** The majority of refugees you will come in contact with during your volunteering period will be those who depend or rely on the services being provided by CHEERing. This promotes a clear hierarchy in regards to power dynamics between service provider and service user. As already touched upon, the reason that many NGOs continue to operate and provide vital services for refugees in Greece is due to the inability of the state to provide these services on a wide and adequate scale. Engaging in any kind of inappropriate relationship with beneficiaries has the potential to promote an environment of favouritism, exploitation, or other biases in the provision of equal and fair aid.
- **Reasons for volunteering:** Many international volunteers may choose to engage with refugee aid in attempt to satisfy educational requirements, personal moral obligations/beliefs, professional work experience, CV aid, or sheer curiosity. In contrast to this, many beneficiaries engage with the NGO because they cannot access adequate services, or lack the privileges which enable them to seek help elsewhere. Many refugees are in a state of limbo where they do not know their future, or what will happen to them in the next few months in contrast to volunteers who have the institutional capacity to exercise wide degrees of agency over their own lives.
- **Current situation:** Many international volunteers find themselves in a position where they are able to generally afford (whether financially or otherwise) to give time and effort to travel to Athens and dedicate themselves to volunteering for this period. This entails a specific amount of privilege and illustrates the ability to exercise agency and choice in the matter. International volunteers are not forced to be in Athens, neither are they forced to engage with refugee-related matters. They are not worrying about being deported, or having their volunteer status revoked by the state. In contrast, refugees may find themselves in a constant state of uncertainty. The laws and generally political climate in Greece and the EU as a whole are constantly evolving in regards to refugee and asylum law- our beneficiaries are caught within this crossfire.
- **Mental Health:** Although international volunteers may be struggling with their own mental health issues and concerns; the roots of these may differ significantly from those of refugees. Issues of PTSD and other trauma-related health concerns may place refugees in a situation where they seek comfort from international volunteers. It is important that you recognise that international volunteers, unless disclosing a PROFESSIONAL background in psychology/psychiatry/therapy, are not equipped to deal with these mental health concerns. You are not their therapist, and you should not allow yourself to be placed in a situation where refugee volunteers become dependent on you for comfort. This is especially because of the temporary nature of the volunteer position.
- **Cultural differences:** International volunteers are namely coming from Western regions, which employ a specific set of cultural values within general interactions. These interactions may hold different interpretations for people coming from different cultural backgrounds. It may be normal for international volunteers to go

out with members of the opposite sex/gender alone. However, for many refugees this is not considered without connotations. It may be interpreted as a more intimate attempt to get to know the person.

Listed are just some of the numerous reasons power dynamics continue to exist between international volunteers and refugee volunteers. These are increasingly important to recognise before starting your volunteer period. It is important to find a balance between treating refugees with dignity/ equality/ respect and recognising their situation and its implications. It is ok to be friends with refugee volunteers, it is actually encouraged- but, this must come with general awareness about inherent institutional differences which both constraint and enable behaviours. With this said, it is **FORBIDDEN** for volunteers to engage in **ANY** sexual, physical, or general relationships with one another- unless this was established prior to volunteer status at CHEERing and disclosed to the directors and managers ahead of time.

### Whistleblowing Policy

As an organisation, we are constantly evolving and attempting to implement new dimensions to our project which enable us to provide the best possible care for our beneficiaries. With this in mind, it is important for us- as an organisation- to acknowledge that despite intentions being in the right place, mistakes can be made. We thus encourage our volunteers to provide us with feedback and suggestions for improvement. We also urge volunteers to contact either Airnie or Anne directly if they feel that any form of malpractice has taken place. We take these issues very seriously, and would like to take any opportunity to improve the operation of our organisation and the services provided. This is especially due to the sensitive nature of our work and the vulnerability of the populations we provide aid towards.

### Saying goodbye

Even if you are attached to certain refugees and moved by leaving Athens, it is not appropriate to demonstrate great sadness, especially to the children. This can add to the trauma that they have already experienced. It is not appropriate to maintain contact with beneficiaries after you leave CHEERing, or to offer any false hope that you can help them in the future. Many refugees are desperate to leave Greece and may ask for your help. You cannot help any refugee leave Greece; the situation is far beyond the scope of any of us. Please be aware of this before you come, that your leaving may be a painful experience but it is your responsibility not to burden the beneficiaries with this.

### Managing Supplies

Supply requests are centralised via Willow and Anne. If you think something is needed, please let us know.

### Media and interviews

Media representatives (film crews, journalists, photographers, bloggers etc) cannot interview beneficiaries, volunteers or staff unless they have management permission – check with Anne to confirm. On the basis they have permission, please be cautious, and respect the privacy of the beneficiaries. Without prior permission do not speak with the media on behalf of CHEERing or concerning any matters relating to CHEERing. **Absolutely NO photographs without authorization!**

### **THANK YOU for volunteering with us!**

If there is anything in this guide that is not clear or you wish to ask a question please do not hesitate to contact CHEERing on the following email or phone number:

Anne: +1 (617) 947-3683

Or email: [cheer.internationalgroup@gmail.com](mailto:cheer.internationalgroup@gmail.com)