



# Lifting Hands International

**Volunteer Info Packet | LHI Serres, Greece**

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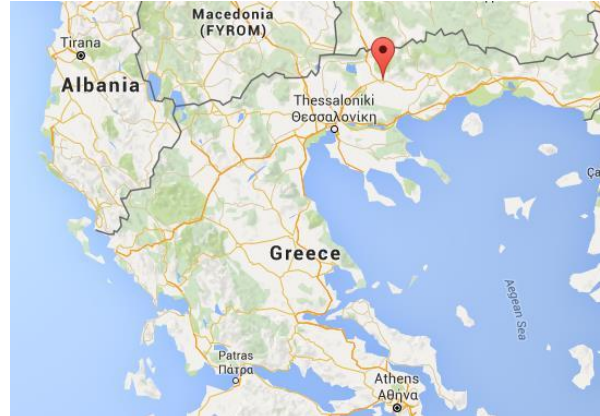
## PART 1: LHI REFUGEE CENTER PROGRAM OVERVIEW

**LIFTING HANDS INTERNATIONAL** LHI is a small, grassroots organization committed to providing humanitarian aid to refugees. Our vision is to create a world where compassion transcends national, ethnic, religious, or political divides. We are politically neutral and have no religious affiliation, but are passionate about helping refugees wherever they are as well as we can. In particular, we seek to assist populations that have been ignored or underserved. We have various projects around the world.

**SERRES, GREECE** Serres is a lovely city in Northern Greece. It has great food, friendly people, historical sites and always-busy coffee houses with locals talking politics. It is not a tourist destination and has a small-town feel. It lies at the base of the gorgeous Vrontous mountain range, making the town quite picturesque and beautiful. Summers are very hot and winters can be a little chilly.

**SERRES CAMPS** While we do not work inside Serres Refugee Camps, here is some important information about them. Serres camps were established in 2016 and are managed by the Greek Government. They are located in the outskirts of Serres and host a population of about 1000 refugees. Originally they were all Yazidis who fled ISIS in Iraq, or Syria, but more recently the camps became mixed with the arrival of many other communities. We now have people from twenty different countries.

**WHAT WE DO** The LHI Refugee Center is located a short walk away from the camps. We have a Female-Friendly Space, Child-Friendly Space, Education Space, Arts and Recreation Space, Community Engagement Program, Professional Development Program, library, computers, garden, sports field and more. Our volunteers teach daily classes on a range of subjects and a number of workshops. We also provide regular food, hygiene, and clothing distribution and have a warehouse a mile from the center. Insights and photos from our current activities can be found on our [facebook page](#).



**THE SITE & INFRASTRUCTURE** The center is located on a plot of rented farmland. There are five incredibly quality and durable tents, and our team has transformed them into cozy and home-like rooms, complete with insulated walls and floors, solar-powered air conditioning, and beautiful murals and decorations. The site also has a sports field, a garden, and a compost toilet.



Some wonder at the “rustic” look of our center. This is because local **zoning laws** forbid structures with permanent roofs, such as containers and isoboxes. Because of this, we build what we are permitted to build. There is a feeling of community and unity throughout the site.

**IS SERRES FOR ME?** Serres program is not a crisis response or emergency intervention. If you thrive on being in ‘crisis mode’, Serres might not be the right fit for you. While this isn’t the worst refugee context to work in, there are some difficult days and stressful situations. This being said, the team at LHI takes great care in ensuring the well-being of volunteers and making sure they have a positive experience.



## PART 2: CAMP POPULATION INFO

**YAZIDI POPULATION** For a long time, all residents from the camp were from the Yazidi community. Yazidis are an ethnic-religious minority from the Sinjar region of Kurdistan (technically Northern Iraq). They speak Kurmanji, a distinct dialect of Kurdish, and are a tight-knit community with an internal caste-system. They are a very peaceful community.



**YAZIDI GENOCIDE** In August 2014, ISIS unexpectedly invaded Sinjar. Within weeks, they'd destroyed 80% of the region's infrastructure, executed thousands of men, and kidnapped an estimated 7,000 women and children, half of whom are still missing. The vast majority of Yazidis live in refugee camps in Kurdistan.

We ask that volunteers read through at least the first third of the [UN's report on the genocide of Yazidis](#), in order to understand what the residents of Serres camp have been through and what sets them apart. It is a tough but necessary read.

As of July 2023, however, even though the vast majority of camp residents are still Yazidis from Iraq, we have communities from 20 different countries and work hard to guarantee multicultural inclusion and understanding of everyone's backgrounds. It is essential for LHI to ensure that our services are being provided and reached out equally to all populations in the camp.

### PART 3: VOLUNTEER ROLES & PROGRAM INFO

**THE FEMALE FRIENDLY SPACE (FFS)** is a place for women to take a break from house and family responsibilities, re-focus on themselves by engaging in activities and connect with one another. It is open for four hours in the afternoon, from Wednesday to Sunday.

We love it when volunteers have additional skills such as arts and crafts, sewing and crochet, but what's most important is:

- Passion for building communities and safe spaces for women.
- Kindness towards vulnerable women, a positive attitude and an open mind
- Ability to engage with those from different backgrounds, even when a language barrier is present
- Some experience or knowledge or willingness to learn of gender-related issues in a refugee context



**THE CHILDREN FRIENDLY SPACE (CFS)** is primarily a play based development programme for Early Years Children. CFS also offers school aged children sports activities, and an After School Club so they can relax and play.

While you do not need any specific skills to work in this space, it is vital that you:

- Enjoy working with young children / have experience
- Are willing to oversee arts and crafts, sensory play, role-play, and reading and writing
- Are able and willing to lead/participate in outside sports, activities and dancing
- Are patient, kind and bring plenty of energy to the team

### THE EDUCATION PROGRAM (English and German)

The main goals of the program is to create a safe space where people can enjoy themselves as well as community building. Many classes are supported by community volunteers who either teach / co-teach or help with essential translation. We offer several levels, from ABC to intermediate.

- Experience and teacher training preferred
- Experience in lesson planning and adhering to a curriculum
- Creativity in teaching low literacy classes
- Attending mandatory teacher training
- Are patient, creative, and kind to make students feel comfortable and empowered



**ARTS AND RECREATION** encompasses several subjects, such as dance, fitness, yoga, music, sport and visual arts with its purposes being an inclusive place for teenagers and adults to go and to provide psychosocial support.



In addition to the schedule of classes, we also have a drop-in recreation space where we have games and a range of different activities. There's a lot of space to bring your ideas to this part of the program.

We already have a strong team of community teachers from the camp but we may ask you to support them with setting up and cleaning their classes, facilitate their class, cover a class or provide new inspiration.

We ask sometimes that volunteers teach yoga, fitness, music, art and dance. We prefer yoga and fitness teachers to be trained in trauma-informed yoga and fitness.

**MUSIC:** Music teachers teach guitar, ukulele, keyboard and tambur (Iraqi instrument). These are group lessons. We also offer 'Music hour' classes which include singing and drums.

### **COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER PROGRAM**

We provide the opportunity for the camp residents to become volunteers for us if they want to. We offer general training about professionalism and safeguarding, and program specific training. This program is of the most importance to us because it gives the residents the opportunity to gain ownership of the community center and to give us insight on what their community wants or prefers. In almost all programs you'll be working alongside community volunteers which is a great opportunity for them and for you!

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT** is our newest program. It focuses on upskilling members of the community including employability skills such as CV building, interview preparation and computer skills. Through training and workshops residents have the opportunity to learn new things and work on improving their current talents.

**DISTRIBUTIONS** are held weekly and volunteers have the opportunity to help out. Not all of the residents of the camp receive food support, we distribute essential hygiene products and food items to all those who don't have access to food inside the camp. You may be asked to help prepare for the distribution or assist with handing out the items. Our distributions are well organized and aim to tackle the biggest needs of the community.



## WAREHOUSE

The LHI warehouse stores seasonal clothing, hygiene, diapers, dry food and program supplies. We've also absorbed many items from other projects that have closed or moved out of Greece. We also donate a lot of our supplies to nearby camps, where beneficiaries are in great need of clothes, whereas the needs in Serres camp are more related to food and hygiene items. There is a full-time warehouse manager, and *we expect all our volunteers to do weekly warehouse shifts.*



## LOGISTICS

Volunteers have the opportunity to spend time with the logistic team maintaining and making repairs to the field. Keeping a beautiful well-kept place where people can relax is as essential as any of the other activities we do!

## SCHEDULE

The majority of programs run from 11 am to 1 pm and 4 to 8 pm. We take Mondays & Tuesdays off and work all other days of the week. We expect our volunteers to be mature, independent, committed and willing to work longer hours when necessary, such as clothing distribution week. We work on Greek holidays. Volunteers are permitted to take off days for religious observation with some notice to the management in advance. The Community Center may be closed around Christmas Holidays from December 19th - January 3rd. Volunteers staying over this time can stay in the apartments for the normal rate. The center can remain open upon leadership decisions.

## BRINGING SPECIAL SKILLS

Volunteers are individuals who offer a wide variety of skills and expertise beyond your volunteer role requirements. It is completely natural and understandable that you want to share your passions and expertise with the community members by running special workshops or setting up new programs. We will try our best to accommodate sharing your skills and knowledge, but it is not guaranteed, as time and space are very limited due to accommodating our current programs. You will make a difference, no matter what. We have a ton of feedback from the community members that our current programs are highly useful to them, and they appreciate volunteers just for being there.

**COMMITMENT & AGE LIMIT**

6 weeks minimum commitment for all roles. Volunteers need to be at least 19 years old. We welcome people of all ages >19 and all walks of life. Experience working with vulnerable people is highly preferred.

**VOLUNTEER COMPENSATION**

We do not pay volunteers or cover flights. Program managers receive a very minimal living stipend, as they are in Serres over several months. Those staying 6+ months will receive a small reimbursement of 100 euros after the third month and accommodation will be free of charge.

**SMART PHONE**

You must have a smartphone with a data-plan. We use WhatsApp to communicate throughout the day.

**DRESS CODE**

We wear culturally appropriate clothing, out of respect to the populations we work with. It helps maintain trust and sends a signal that we are there for them. Clothes should cover shoulders, chest, stomach and knees and not be tight-fitting. This applies to both men and women. You will receive more info upon committing.

**MATURITY & FLEXIBILITY**

Volunteer team means an assortment of personalities, energy levels, life experience, and social idiosyncrasies. Also, working within this context is unpredictable and demanding. Therefore, volunteers need to be flexible, positive, empathetic, compassionate, and physically & psychologically well. We ask that major concerns and complaints are taken directly to managers/directors. Complaining to team members relieves a lot of pressure and feels good, but it is not at all constructive and may potentially affect overall morale. The coordination team welcomes feedback of any kind.



## **PART 4: HOUSING & SERRES LIFE**

### **VOLUNTEER APARTMENTS**

LHI rents 6 apartments in the heart of Serres. Each has bedrooms, a kitchen, toilet, shower, a living area, balcony, washing machine and WIFI. You will be assigned to an apartment upon committing. Please note that, depending on the number of volunteers, housing is not guaranteed.

### **HOUSING COST**

Volunteers staying *less than 90* days pay 5 euros per day. Volunteers staying *more than 90* days pay 50 euros per month. 6+ months and accommodation is free of charge.

Why do we require volunteers to pay? Rent & utilities for 5 apartments are very expensive. For example, it is common for the electricity of one apartment alone to cost 500 euros/month. Technically and legally, your payment is considered reimbursement to LHI for rent and utilities.

### **SLEEPING CONDITIONS**

Volunteers should expect to share their bedroom space with one or two other volunteers. Foam mattresses, sheets, and pillows are provided. It's not fancy living, but it's comfortable enough. We want our volunteers to be as comfortable as possible, within the limitations of our housing budget.

### **SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

LHI apartments are in complexes where mostly elderly people live and adhere to strict local quiet times from 2-5pm and after 10pm. It was very difficult to find landlords willing to rent apartments to us in Serres, so we absolutely must keep our neighbors happy. Please keep alcohol consumption to a minimum at apartments. Smoking is permitted on the balconies. Luckily, Serres is a great town with lots of bars, so we ask that the team socialize away from the apartments during those quiet times.

### **GROCERIES**

There are plenty of grocery stores in Serres. Prices are comparable to the US/UK. Every Tuesday morning (the team's day off), there is a huge farmer's market, where you can buy all fruits and vegetables at very affordable prices. Some volunteers take turns cooking for their flatmates, which saves a lot of money.

### **TRANSPORTATION AROUND SERRES**

We can provide bicycles for each volunteer during their placement with LHI. Serres isn't a large town so everywhere is also walking distance! Renting a car for the weekend isn't expensive either!

## **PART 5: PREPARATIONS**

### **FUNDRAISING**

It helps us a great deal when volunteers fundraise before coming. Volunteer fundraising is extremely effective, as family & friends will be invested in your upcoming volunteer experience. It taps into communities that we wouldn't normally reach on our own. Plus, you get to choose where the funds go. [Here's our official LHI fundraising guide](#), with examples, ideas, and suggestions.

### **CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECK**

We ask all volunteers to provide proof of criminal clearance, due to the sensitive nature of refugee work. Background checks vary from country to country.

### **VACCINES**

Also, it is advisable to be up to date with the following vaccines: Coronavirus, Polio, Diphtheria, Tetanus, Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Typhoid, and Hepatitis A&B.

### **PLANNING FLIGHTS**

In general, you will be asked to arrive during LHI's weekend (Monday/Tuesday) in order to receive your orientation training on Wednesday.

### **GETTING TO SERRES**

The closest airport is Thessaloniki, Greece, followed by Sofia, Bulgaria. We do NOT provide rides to and from the airport. See APPENDIX III to get directions from the airport to Serres.

## PART 6: UPON ARRIVAL

**CHEST (THORACIC) X-RAY** Greek authorities require all volunteers to have a chest x-ray once they arrive in Serres, which screens for tuberculosis. something that everyone who works with children or food in Greece will be expected to have going forward. The cost is 20 euros. You are expected to cover the cost. On arrival one of our field coordinators will arrange for you to have this x-ray as part of your overall orientation and training.

**SAFEGUARDING TRAINING** Working with vulnerable populations requires safeguard training, based on international protocol. Its purpose is to protect refugees from emotional and physical harm. You will get the training from one of our coordinators upon arrival. In fact, you won't be able to step foot at the Center until you've had the training. Some things you'll cover: Our photo policy, setting healthy emotional and physical boundaries, avoiding close attachments with the residents, no gift giving, etc.

**PROGRAM ORIENTATION** You will meet with your program manager to review volunteer roles, set up weekly check-in meetings, and other detailed information about your program.

**WEEKLY TEAM MEETING** All volunteers are required to attend a team meeting every Wednesday at 2:15pm. Meetings typically last one hour and consist of program updates, important announcements, helpful reminders, signing up for warehouse & library shifts, planning team-building activities.

**SELF-CARE** Refugee work is demanding and exhausting, both physically and emotionally. *Burnout is real.* When it hits, it hits hard and is very hard to recover from. The result is physical and emotional exhaustion, disenchantment with the program, team members & even your entire experience, and difficulty remembering the good times once you leave. You don't want that, and we don't want that for you.



You never see burnout coming, so *prevention is key.* Pace yourself. Go out to dinner with team members, visit historical sites, take a walk, get hooked on a TV show, cook dinner for your flatmates, attend local Salsa dance classes, explore Greece on your days off, go to Tuesday market, sit down and enjoy a Greek coffee, rest if you're ill, etc.

## APPENDIX I: SAMPLE 30-DAY BUDGET

This is a SAMPLE budget, not a recommended budget! Flights not included.

Expense*	Euro	Notes
Round trip bus Thess / Serres	18	9 euros each way
Taxi ride from bus station to apartment	5	
Housing (if stay less than 3 months)	150	5 euros per day
Sim card and data	15	Doesn't include top up
Groceries	120	4 per day
Beach day trip to Ofriniou	25	Bus + meal
Eating out 5 times	50	Average of 10 euros per meal
Incidentals (drinks, souvenirs, unexpected small expenses, snacks...)	80	
<b>30 DAY TOTAL</b>	463 euros	

While many businesses take credit cards, plenty others only accept cash. There are plenty of ATMs in Serres.

## APPENDIX II: PACKING LIST

REQUIRED ITEMS	HELPFUL ITEMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Passport/European ID</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Travel insurance that covers health &amp; catastrophic events</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Contact details from an emergency person</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Apartment rent cash</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Debit or credit card, or enough cash to last your stay</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Unlocked smart phone and charger</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Face masks and hand sanitizer</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Weather appropriate clothes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Culturally appropriate clothing (refer to dress code info above)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Comfortable shoes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pillowcase, sheet &amp; duvet cover/inner sheet (we do have enough bedding, so only if you prefer to have your own sheets)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Fanny-pack or small backpack to take daily necessities.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Portable charger for phone is a bonus!</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electric Converters (for those traveling from outside Europe)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Towel</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Laptop / tablet for lesson planning, activity prep, etc.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Bug Spray and Mosquito Cream</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Hat and sunscreen</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> House Shoes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Medicine (cold relief, painkillers, vitamins, etc.)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Notebook / Journal</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Flashlight</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Extra layers of clothing in the winter (drying takes time in the cold and wet climate)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> (Hot) water bottle and thermal clothes</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX III: DIRECTIONS FROM AIRPORTS TO SERRES

### FROM THESSALONIKI AIRPORT TO SERRES

*(2:30 to 3 hours duration)*

#### **STEP 1: LOCAL BUS FROM AIRPORT TO MAIN BUS STATION “KTEL MAKEDONIA”** [\(PIN HERE\)](#)

*DURATION: 45 min-1 hour, depending on traffic.*

- BUS: Take bus 1X. It comes every half hour or so. Stop is right outside the airport. - COST: You can buy a ticket on board for 2 euros (exact change only). - NOTE: the bus goes by the Train Station first. Be careful not to get off there. Ask someone if needed. KTEL Makedonia looks like a huge space station with a big silver dome.

- TAXI : about 34 euros, 30min drive.

#### **STEP 2: KTEL MAKEDONIA STATION TO SERRES STATION.** [Route info and timetables here](#)

*DURATION: 1 hr 15min*

- In Greece, there are different ticket desks for different destinations. Find the Serres desk.

- COST: Tickets cost 9 Euros. You can pay with card. You cannot buy tickets onboard.

BUS TIMES: Buses leave every 30 minutes or every hour. First bus 6am, last bus 10pm. Depending on when you land in Thessaloniki, you might miss the last bus and have to stay in a hotel.

- In the terminal, keep to the right, go to the end and you'll see a large Serres sign above the dock.

#### **STEP 3: SERRES STATION TO APARTMENT** *DURATION: 5-10 min*

- There are always taxis waiting. Costs is around 5 Euros cash (a little more at night)

- If you choose to walk, try to stop before in the center (first or second stop), otherwise it's a 25min walk from the bus station.

## **FROM SOFIA TERMINAL 2 TO SERRES**

*(4h to 5h duration)*

### **STEP 1: AIRPORT TO METRO ([LINK TO METRO MAP HERE](#))**

[If you fly to Terminal 1 there is a free shuttle to the city center]

- Metro is located outside the airport, all the way to the left once you exit. - COST: The ticket is 1.60 LEV (no Euros!). There's an ATM right next to the ticket machine

### **STEP 2: TRAIN TO STOP CALLED "CENTRAL RAILWAY STATION"**

- TRAIN LINE: Take any train lines from the airport.

- Go 12 stops to SERDIKA STATION and get off the train & proceed to platform 2.

- Take the train towards OBELYA and go 2 stops to CENTRAL RAILWAY STATION. This is your stop.

### **STEP 3: BUY TICKET TO SERRES FROM "ARDATUR" BUS COMPANY**

- Buy a ticket in person (go to desks 46 and 47) or online at <https://ardatur.bg>. About 20 Euros one way

- Bus times are only at 12.30, 17.00 and 23.30 so you may have a long wait.

- There are a couple of other companies that you can check, it is always better to book online before you arrive

### **STEP 4: SOFIA TO SERRES. DURATION: ABOUT 3 HOURS**

- You won't have to exit the bus for passport control on the Bulgaria/Greece

- Make sure that the bus will stop at Serres bus station, otherwise you may have to arrange a taxi