



On the 26th of March, 2020, the Corona Helpdesk for Newcomers was launched: a helpdesk staffed by 40 Arabic/Tigrinya speaking volunteers aiming to answer questions from newcomers on various topics related to the corona pandemic, and to provide further information. In this guide, we share our first insights gained through the support information we provided to newcomers during the corona pandemic. Additionally, we make a few recommendations to professionals and policy makers.

Rationale

Information concerning the corona pandemic and associated measures are mainly communicated in Dutch, while many newcomers have insufficient command of the Dutch language to follow the latest news and to understand and comply with the measures. As a result, feelings of uncertainty and panic are prevalent among this group. In response, a collective of organizations collectively known as the **Corona Actiecomité Statushouders (CAS)**, has set up a help desk for newcomers. The helpdesk answers questions and provides information about the corona pandemic to newcomers in their native languages of Arabic and Tigrinya.

Mission

The Corona Helpdesk aims to provide newcomers with correct information about the corona virus and pandemic based on guidelines of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM). Effectively informing this target group will diminish the panic and unrest that is often caused by a lack of clear information about the virus. Furthermore, it will also contribute to reducing the health risks of newcomers and their immediate environment.

Who is this guide for?

This guide, describing our findings and recommendations thus far, is intended to give insight into newcomers' lives and experiences during the corona pandemic for professionals and organizations in the social care and health domains.

Target Group

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the Netherlands houses more than 100,000¹ newcomers. Between 2016 and 2018, the vast majority of asylum requests from refugees came from Syria and Eritrea². Given the fact that they have only recently arrived in the Netherlands, this group is unable to properly understand information in Dutch. Moreover, there are a relatively high number of low literates and illiterates among this group. It is therefore crucial that the Corona Helpdesk for Newcomers provides information in Arabic and Tigrinya to these newcomers.

Corona Helpdesk for Newcomers

The helpdesk is open for questions on week days between 14.00 and 16.00. The helpdesk is staffed by volunteers and is supported by a back office that tackles more complex questions requiring mediation and/or more in-depth guidance. Our back-office specialists are professionals from the social care and health domains; our trained volunteers use an online database where the most recent information on corona provided by RIVM, GGD and Pharos can be found. In addition, weekly webinars and master classes taught by external specialists from various fields are organized for the volunteers to further equip them in their work.

Besides providing support and information through telephone, the Corona helpdesk also focuses on the following activities:

¹ <https://www.kis.nl/vraag-en-antwoord/hoeveel-vluchtelingen-met-een-verblijfsvergunning-wonen-er-nederland>

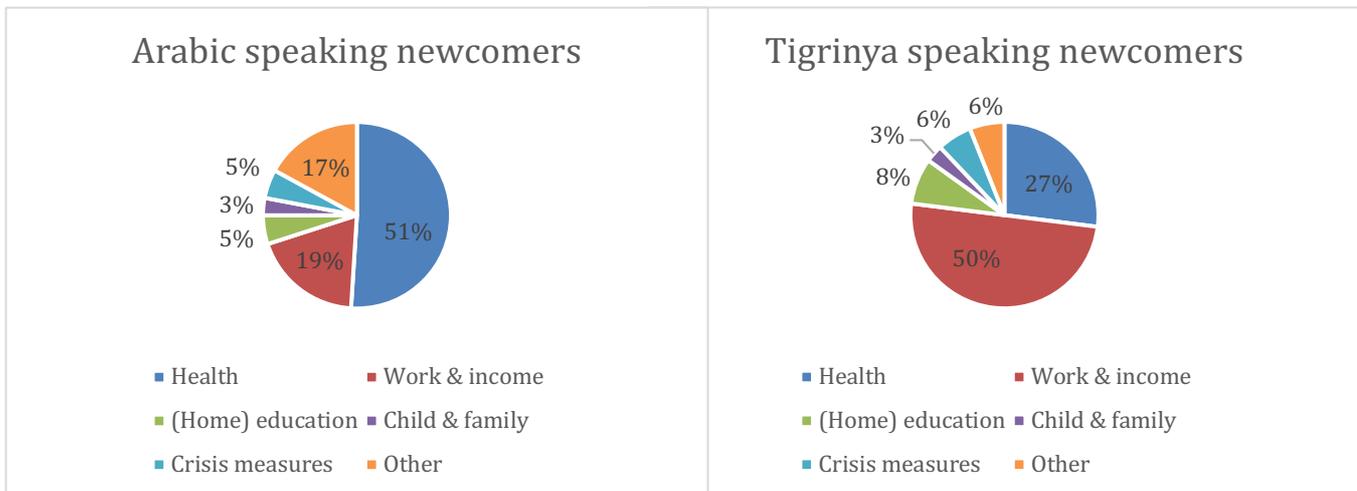
² https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/sites/default/files/Vluchtelingenwerk/Cijfers/20190722_vwn_vluchtelingen-in-getallen.pdf

- Creating awareness campaigns on where information can be found, by using videos and texts in Arabic and Tigrinya and disseminating them through various social media channels;
- Training volunteers and deploying them as community informers;
- Conducting qualitative research;
- Advising social care and health professionals

Findings of the Corona Helpdesk for Newcomers

i. General

As in, between March 26th and April 20th, the newcomers who contacted the Corona Helpdesk, 63% spoke Tigrinya and 37% spoke Arabic. Firstly, we have noticed that Arabic speaking callers mainly have health questions, while Tigrinya speakers inquire about income-related issues more often. Secondly, it was signalled that the language barrier has the effect that information provided by care providers in institutions was often misunderstood. Thirdly, the corona measures have digitalised most of the public services completely, causing an extra barrier for this group. Lastly, the drop-in availability of local volunteers and "buddies" has an impact on the target group, too. This makes it almost impossible for newcomers to apply for unemployment benefits in time and so causes them to fall behind financially and fall into debt.



ii. Health

"I think I have the corona virus and am afraid I will die. What should I do?"

Almost all incoming health questions in the first few weeks were about the corona virus itself. Callers feared that they have the virus, wondered whether they could get tested and were concerned about relatives who had fallen ill. Many questions were

also raised about the accessibility of general practitioners, and because of the language barrier, callers often asked whether there was an interpreter available for communication with the general practitioner. When interpreting, the volunteers have noticed that newcomers panic because they are not allowed to be medically examined in person, unless they have severe symptoms. After completing an interpreted conversation with the general practitioner, the volunteers therefore take the time to reassure the caller and explain, taking into account cultural differences, how medical care works in the Netherlands. Finally, volunteers explore solutions to link the caller to a neighbourhood network that check upon them regularly (by telephone).

iii. *Work & income*

"I have been told to apply for social benefits over the internet, but I don't know how it works".

Due to the corona measures, many callers are no longer able to work and they do not know where to go with questions on this topic. They are uncertain about their rights as an employee and are not sure about the contract that they have. Many of these callers had to submit an online application for unemployment benefits at the UWV, which is a challenging process due to the language barrier and their insufficient digital skills. Explaining this process over the phone takes a lot of time. Moreover, the national system for unemployment benefits and the questions they have to answer do not always match with their personal situation. For example, in the case of newcomers awaiting family reunification, they are asked whether they are married and then have to fill out the citizen service number of the partner. In this case, however, their partner isn't in the Netherlands yet, so they are unable to provide the number, with the effect that they could not complete the application. They could only complete the application if they stated that they were single.

iv. *(Home) education*

"We have four children. Our children have to do their homework, but we only have one computer".

Questions about home schooling have come from parents who face difficulties supporting their children with homework. For many parents, the provision of home education is a major obstacle due to the language barrier and lack of digital skills; many schools facilitate home education via digital environments. Where possible, the volunteers have linked these parents to people who can provide them with structural support. Aside from this, the help desk has received questions related to obligatory integration education and the possibility of a payment term extension at DUO.

v. *Family & child*

"I am pregnant, but I am afraid to give birth in the hospital."

The help desk has received practical questions from pregnant women who wondered whether they were still allowed to work, but there was also fear amongst pregnant callers as some were too afraid to do grocery shopping in fear of getting ill. Questions have also come in from parents who were wondering why their children had to go back to school in despite of the health risks. This group mainly concerned vulnerable children that were under supervision of the school. In one case, an appointed guardian had made the independent decision to let the children go to school; these were children who run the risk of being exposed to, for example, domestic violence or serious neglect in their homes. The volunteers have aimed to erase misunderstandings among parents, by explaining the situation in a, for them, clearer way and by taking away feelings of fear.

vi. Pandemic measures

"My family is in Turkey. Can they come to the Netherlands? I am afraid they will fall ill in Turkey".

Questions about safety measures taken by the government have mainly concerned air traffic and have often come from permit holders with a pending application for family reunification, or with an approved application for family reunification. Because air traffic has come to a standstill, they were concerned about the legal process of authorization for temporary stay (MVV) and wondered when their family was allowed to fly again.

vii. Other

Various questions have come in about letters from tax authorities, letters about payment arrears and general citizen queries, for example, where they could dispose of bulky waste. A striking number of questions concerned the possibility of extending their residence permit. Normally, when applying for this extension, a volunteer or social counsellor supports these newcomers because the application is often too complicated to complete independently. With the lack of the usual assistance, the help desk has received these questions instead. Also, there are callers who do not have a specific question, but feel the need to reach out because they feel lonely.

Optimising the helpdesk based on our findings

- If we signal that many questions centre around a certain topic, we create in accessible media material to inform the public in cooperation with various organizations. For example, we made a video in Arabic and Tigrinya that shows the step-by-step process of renewing your permit at the IND. This way, we organize our social media campaign in a demand-oriented manner.

- Signals came in from callers that they struggle with the costs of our landline. That is why a Facebook and WhatsApp line will be available from the **22nd of May** onwards for newcomer to ask questions through chat. The volunteers follow up on these questions by calling them back so that costs for the target group are avoided.
- Due to the many requests from parents regarding home education, we have set up an extra activity: we now link volunteers to families to lend them support with home education and (digitally) read stories to young children.

Recommendations for educational, social care- and health professionals

1. Invest in the dissemination of multilingual information

When the corona pandemic occurred, it was nearly impossible for newcomers, non-native speakers and low literate people to obtain reliable information about the corona virus, the measures taken, and the regulations made by the government. In times of pandemic, investments must be made in a timely manner to distribute clear multilingual information. In the case of this pandemic, the importance is crucial as the lack of information poses a real threat to our national health. Many newcomers who have lost their jobs in the pandemic are uninformed about the available benefits, so they cannot rely on them. This can cause them to develop debts. Multilingual information could be disseminated both nationally and locally, the latter through municipalities and social organizations that are familiar with the target group.

2. Invest in developing newcomers' digital skills

Many newcomers have been unable to independently apply for unemployment benefits or support their children with home education, not only because of the language barrier and lack of laptops, but because of their lack of sufficient digital capacity. Without "buddies" and volunteers, it renders them unable to cope with these problems. This pandemic has shown more than ever how important it is to invest in educating the process of digitalisation to this group.

3. Invest in cultural mediators

During this pandemic, this vulnerable target group has experienced considerable isolation. Cultural mediators can be used as a bridge between the target group and social organizations / municipalities. They are capable of signalling domestic violence, refer people with mental health problems to the right organizations and / or inform the municipality. At the same time, these organizations can use cultural mediators in turn when they are concerned about a specific person, to reach out to someone in his/her own language and in a culturally appropriate manner.

4. Create more flexibility in the IND process for extensions of residence documents

Because there are no integration exams, many newcomers cannot meet their obligations towards the IND. However, they are obliged to fulfil these obligations in

order to have their residence permits extended. The term of taking the exam six months before the expiration date of your residence permit is no longer feasible for many newcomers. Moreover, many newcomers need assistance with their application, which has proven difficult when completed remotely. Taking into account this difficult position in which many newcomers find themselves, we therefore recommend relaxing the IND process. One option would be an extension of the six-month term. A temporary relaxation of the integration requirements associated with the permanent residence permit application for corona-related reasons is another option. Lots of uncertainty exists around the process of family reunification processes; many newcomers are extremely worried about (the position of) their family. The IND could disseminate, by post, multilingual information on the status quo to those who have applied for family reunification to take away any doubt.

5. Organize summer schools for children of newcomers / non-native speakers

Newcomers' children in primary and secondary schools experience a considerable educational backlog due to the incapability of their parents to help them. Many parents are therefore afraid that their children will have to repeat the school year. By organizing extra classes during the summer holidays, children and adolescents are given the opportunity to make up for this backlog and keep up with the school program.

Colophon:

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