

## **A Position Paper on Migrant Health by the Irish Society of Specialists in Public Health Medicine**

The ISSPHM is proud that Ireland in conjunction with other European Union countries is welcoming people displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine seeking protection. We must welcome them into our country and make every effort to ensure they feel safe and accepted, and that their medical and social care needs are met fully. The HSE has responded swiftly to this humanitarian emergency, and is prioritising plans to care for this unprecedented influx of people into our health service. This crisis has highlighted a long-standing need for a structured, adequately resourced Migrant Health Programme within the HSE that can provide a national strategy, guidance, development of standards and the clinical governance to meet the health and social care needs of all people seeking International Protection ('asylum') in this country, and of other vulnerable migrants. This Programme should be part of a broader strategic cross-departmental programme that provides services to people seeking International Protection or Temporary Protection in a cohesive and coordinated way.

People fleeing war or persecution often have urgent and/or complex physical and mental health care needs that require holistic and complex GP-led care as well as access to secondary and tertiary care specialist services. While the provision of a GMS medical card is welcome, in itself it is not sufficient to ensure necessary access to primary care when many GP services are already oversubscribed and unable to accept new patients. GPs and their Practice Teams must be resourced to provide this care, including access to translation services in their practices. With long pre-existing waiting lists across many hospital-based services, it will be extremely challenging to provide for the healthcare needs of large numbers of people fleeing Ukraine expected to arrive in Ireland over the coming weeks and months without additional resourcing.

Even before this latest humanitarian crisis, the numbers of people applying for International Protection in this country, approximately 150 per week since August 2021, was challenging the Direct Provision (International Protection Accommodation Services) system with increasing numbers of hotels deployed as emergency temporary accommodation. While providing much needed immediate shelter and accommodation, hotels are unsuitable in the long-term and lack proportionate and adequate health and social supports needed (i.e. mainstream GP and Primary Care). These high-density settings also increase the risk for outbreaks of infectious diseases such as Covid-19.

Many people displaced from Ukraine are also arriving in Ireland independently of the Temporary Protection or International Protection processes with private accommodation arranged through local initiatives, and the HSE will also need information on this group in order to plan sustainable adequate and accessible health services. This requires a coordinated, interdepartmental approach with appropriate, systematic collection, secure storage and sharing of information to enable an effective response in the short and long term.

As the HSE continues to respond to this humanitarian crisis and develop the structures to support this response, it is imperative that these are not limited to the displaced population fleeing war in Ukraine, but broadened to include all people seeking asylum or granted refugee status in this country.

ISSPHM therefore recommends:

1. That we use the lessons learned from this experience to build an adequately resourced, permanent and sustainable Migrant Health Programme that can provide care for all people seeking protection in our country, regardless of where they are from.
2. Greater collaboration and coordination across government departments and with the HSE to enable an effective response that considers the broader determinants of health for these vulnerable populations.