

The solution is knowledge

Greece's socio-medical centres help Roma get work, deal with health issues and find out about their social rights. This centre in Volos was the first to open and has had first-rate results at getting children to attend school, among other things

Ioulia Traintafillou is a social worker at a socio-medical centre in Volos, central Greece, her home town. These centres, of which there are 33 across Greece, offer services to counter the problems of social exclusion. They were set up in areas with large Roma populations.

"We have four small and distinct Roma communities in Volos, and they all live in very straightened circumstances. Their houses are really no more than shacks on the outskirts of Volos. My centre is in the Aliveri quarter, where there are some 1,225 Roma. They are Greek citizens, apart from some 10-15 families who come from Albania. Many travel in the summer, at Easter and over Christmas to work on markets where they sell food, fruit, flowers and clothes. They don't have permits for these jobs, and so basically work in the grey economy.

"We have been working continuously with Roma people in Aliveri since 1998, and were the first municipality in the country to do so. Now we work mainly with women and children. The socio-medical centres take a holistic approach. We've helped women with access to health and jobs, and children with access to schooling. Women come to our office, and we help them read the small ads in the papers or on the internet. We also teach many how to read and write in Greek.



Among other things, the centres teach women about the need to vaccinate children

"Health is an important aspect of what we do. Women tend to have abortions rather than use contraception because they don't know enough about it. We regularly invite doctors and other experts to speak about contraceptive methods, cancer screening, smear tests and vaccinations, and many other issues that may interest the women. We help them make medical appointments themselves, and teach about their social rights.

"Around Volos, we also have the phenomenon of early marriages. Girls of 12 or 13 get married and fall pregnant, which is not good for the mother or the baby. We try to teach them how to protect themselves. Young couples are pretty open about this nowadays.

"The project has worked well, and is the only state project aimed specifically at Roma people. The problem right now is the economic crisis. European funding ended in 2009 and since then the socio-medical centres have been financed by the Ministry of the Economy and Finance and the Regions. We don't get the money or it comes late. In most cases the staff is not paid and is stretched to cope with rising demands. People come to us to ask for help, milk for their children and food. In Volos, we are paid directly by the municipality, which is why we have been able to work uninterruptedly over all these years.

"Thanks to these centres, the Greek government has been able to map the Roma communities, issue official papers like identity cards and vaccination records for the children. At our own centre in Volos, our work over all these years means that the vast majority of the children now attend school."

A Good Start

A Good Start is a EU Roma pilot project implemented by the Roma Education Fund and partners, and supported by the European Union, the Lego Foundation and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. It took place in Hungary Slovakia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Romania between June 2010 and May 2012.