

REFUGEES IN THE NETHERLANDS

REFUGEES IN MEERSSEN



WHAT MAKES SOMEBODY A REFUGEE?

- Refugees are people who have left their native country because they fear for their lives or fear violence.
- Why do people leave their native country?
 - Reasons for persecution:
 - Religion
 - Political conviction
 - Sexual orientation
 - Being a member of a particular ethnic or social group
 - Race
 - nationality

QUESTIONS ABOUT REFUGEES IN MEERSSEN.



Question 1.

How many refugees/migrants live in Meerssen?

- It is hard to say. According to the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, in 2015 there were 214 refugees living in Meerssen, but local authorities do not have exact data. Numbers depend on political changes in the world.(In 2015 the civil war in Syria resulted in an influx of refugees from that country). Each municipality is supposed to provide shelter for refugees in accordance with its population. Our municipality currently houses 345 refugees.

Question 2.

Where do the refugees come from? Have they merely left their country or have they fled?

- Most of them have fled from Syria and Eritrea. Others come from Iraq, Afghanistan, former Yugoslavia and Iran.

Question 3

What is their legal status? Illegal, registered or tolerated?

- Meerssen only houses legal status refugees. There is no center for Asylum Seekers. At the moment there are, however, five single girls below the age of 18 living in the center of Meerssen. The girls have a guardian who manages their affairs.

Question 4.

What is their housing

- In Meerssen, the Maastricht Coordinating Refugee ~Centre, the municipality and housing cooperations have joined forces. The refugees live in houses that are owned by these housing cooperations. There are few such houses available, but the private sector might offer some possibilities. Cities like Heerlen and Maastricht have more rental houses for refugees. The municipality of Meerssen has four locations where refugees live

Question 5.

Do refugees get financial support from the municipality or charity organizations?

- In general they are entitled to a supplementary benefit just like Dutch people. Parents with schoolgoing children receive a school fee compensation of 155 euro per year. Besides getting a house they also receive financial support for home furnishing expenses that has to be paid back in small installments to the municipal services department. Refugees also receive products in kind from a private organization, such as furniture, clothing, shoes, bicycles and equipment such as refrigerators

Question 6.

Who takes care of the refugees? Professionals and/or volunteers?

- Initially, Maastricht Refugee Aid provides social and legal support for a half year. After an evaluation this support may continue for an other year. The emphasis is on AUTONOMY. Mediation is offered to reunite families. Social service institutions assist in finding a job. Maastricht Refugee Aid employs two professionals and nearly 45 volunteers.
- Legal status refugees need to have stayed more than three months in the Netherlands before they can apply for reunification with their family. Furthermore they have to start attending an integration course straight away. They themselves are responsible for finishing such a course within three years. Maastricht Refugee Aid also assist in finding a language coach.

Question 7.

Are refugees allowed to work and earn money? What kind of work? How much will they earn?

- Yes, they may work, but only 20 hours per week. They keep their allowance. Work generally consists of unskilled labour. Once their Dutch language skills are good enough, they might get better jobs.

Question 8.

Are there any problems?

- The local population has few problems accepting refugees. There is, however, a language barrier. Refugees are encouraged to get to know their neighbours. Refugee families with schoolgoing children make contact more easily.
- Refugees who have jobs and are paid more than 200 euro will no longer be entitled to food parcels. In that case a local organization backed by the municipality helps out. There is also a supermarket that sells perishable food products for free!

Question 9

Does the local population show signs of rejection, racism or even violence?

- It depends. People from former Yugoslavia who have arrived in the nineties have been fully integrated. It takes time to settle down in new surroundings and find a job. Initiatives to promote contacts between locals and refugees are appreciated and will contribute to integration. Negative comments about the presence of refugees in Meerssen have not reached our ears.

Question 10.

Have some refugees already been integrated?

- Meerssen has only had refugees since 2012 (a rather short period). Integration is TIMECONSUMING.
- Local inhabitants try to involve refugees in village activities. Refugee children are taught how to celebrate Carnival. They dress up for Carnival processions. For grown-ups it is harder to adapt, but drinking a cup of tea or coffee at somebody's home might break down social barriers.

Question 11.

What do refugees expect for the European Union? Will they get permission to stay?

- The European Union is an unfamiliar concept to these people who have been through a lot. Of course they all want to return to their native countries, there are wars going on in Syria and Iraq. Refugees are looking for safety, social services, education, a better future for their children

Question 12.

Are there arrangements for refugees who have to return to their native country?

- There are such arrangements in the Netherlands, but refugees are never sent back to unsafe countries such as Syria and Eritrea. Refugees are sent back to safe countries, though. Economic refugees are more often required to return.