

QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025



Startpunt, as part of the Policy and Support team of Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (VwV) provides **socio-legal information to applicants for international protection on their arrival in Belgium**. The team is present on a daily basis at the registration centre (Belliardstraat 68) and at the building of the Immigration Office (IO) where interviews are organised (Cube - Pachecolaan 44). At both locations the team gives advice and information on the procedure and refers to other social and legal services if needed. At the Legal Helpdesk (LHD), Startpunt, in collaboration with the Brussels Bar Association, provides information to applicants three times a week and facilitates access to legal aid. The team consists mostly of volunteers who speak a wide variety of languages. Startpunt monitors the situation on the ground and gathers **signals** which serve as a basis for the policy work of VwV

This report is based on information Startpunt gathered during the first three months of this year and aims to highlight their work, describe the situation in the field, and outline the challenges faced by applicants

KEY NUMBERS



Startpunt gave advice and referral to legal assistance and social services to around **3000** people at the **registration centre**, primarily single men



The **Legal Helpdesk** received a total of **1028 visits**:
609 first time + 416 came to follow up on their case + 9 unknown



Total number of **legal aid lawyers assigned** since April 2022: **11025**¹



Of the 517 people whose reception needs Startpunt recorded **at the LHD, 68% were homeless**



Top 3 nationalities of **visitors at the LHD**: 21% Afghans; 12% Palestinians; 5% Guineans
Top 3 nationalities of **applicants for IP**: 10,66% Afghans; 10,37% Palestinians; 7,39% Congolese



23 volunteers joined the Startpunt activities speaking **20 languages** (Dari/Farsi, Pashto, Urdu, Punjab, Spanish, Croatian, Arabic, Somali, Kurdish, Turkish, Dutch, French, German, Tigrinya, Amharic, Darija, Russian, Chechen, Italian)

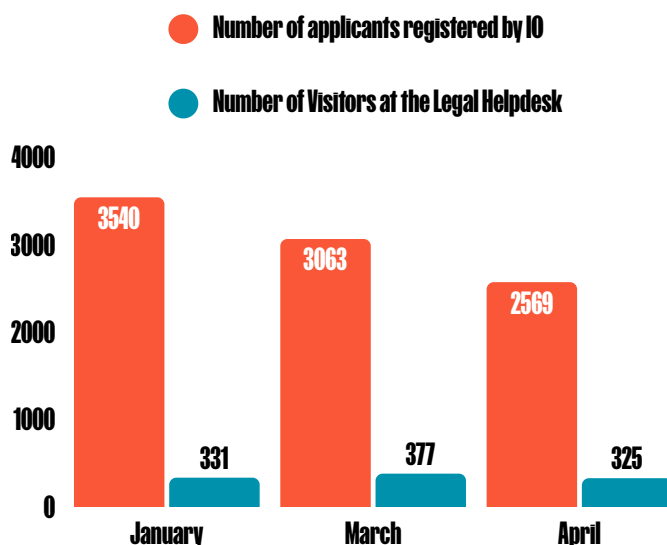
"There has been a significant improvement of the security situation at the registration centre since the change of opening hours from 8h20 - 8h45 to 7h - 8h45"

[1] As of 22 July 2025

QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025

Overview of numbers at the IO and the LHD



While the number of applicants for International protection went down in the first quarter of the year, the number of visitors at the LHD stayed stable.

OBSERVATIONS AT THE REGISTRATION CENTRE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE REGISTRATION CENTRE 2024 - A LOOK INTO THE PAST

Over the past few years, the IO registration centre has changed locations several times. In 2018 it moved from the WTC-III towers in Brussels North to Klein Kasteeltje near the canal. Then in 2022 it moved again to the offices of the IO at Pachecolaan 44. The most recent move took place in October 2024, when it relocated from Pachecolaan 44 to Belliardstraat 68. These moves initially always led to tensions and chaotic waiting lines. Startpunt observed similar issues with the move to Belliardstraat.

At Pachecolaan 44 easy **accessibility** was a major issue given the location's inactive escalators that applicants needed to walk down, and the highly restricted use of the elevator for people with mobility impairments led to multiple incidents on the stairs. Overall, the location provided **no shelter from poor weather conditions** for queuing applicants. In addition, the absence of clear signs and symbols indicating where the lines begin (which were renewed in June 2024) led to tension and aggressive behaviour between applicants and IO staff. Lastly, the location was used by many people as an informal place to sleep. The police dismantled their makeshift shelters multiple times, and in the end of May 2024 the area where they had been sleeping was completely sealed off. As a result, those affected moved to a small park nearby.

QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025

Throughout 2024, police presence was a regular occurrence. At Pachecolaan 44, there were periods when around eight officers were continuously present. On at least two occasions in September and October, they arrived with dogs, which further heightened tensions. At times, the police displayed aggressive behaviour toward applicants, including pushing and dragging them.

The initial move to Belliard at the end of October 2024 did not lead to immediate improvements. In some respects, particularly concerning police presence and the appointment process, the situation even deteriorated before the new year. However, after some time Startpunt noticed significant improvements.

Police presence intensified in the first months at Belliard and their behaviour deteriorated noticeably. Officers displayed aggression toward applicants, including pushing them, even those who were particularly vulnerable such as a man on crutches, and brandishing tear gas canisters in a threatening manner. They also acted confrontationally toward Startpunt coordinators, at one point pushing a coordinator who tried to explain the purpose of the vulnerability and single men's lines when police insisted no such lines existed. One of the main reasons given for the increased police presence was concern about the safety of the bike lane that runs directly alongside the registration centre.

As a general practice, IO staff scheduled appointments for applicants, including single males, families and vulnerable individuals, to lodge their applications at a later date. This meant that they could not introduce their application on the day of their first arrival at the registration centre. If families and vulnerable applicants received an appointment, the IO staff tried to ensure that they had private accommodation until the date of the appointment. In the end of 2024, this practice significantly increased. In November and December over 1000 appointments were given to applicants of which 30% (November) and 73% (December) were set for dates **beyond the legal timeframe of 10 working days.**²



WTC-III towers



Klein Kasteeltje



Pachecolaan 44



Belliardstraat 68

[2] In accordance with Article 50, §2 of the Aliens Act a person's request to apply for international protection has to be registered within the three working days following the request. In case of a large number of people applying simultaneously rendering the three days difficult to meet in practice, the deadline of three days can be extended to ten working days.

QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025



CHANGE OF OPEN HOURS - A CHANGE TO THE POSITIVE

Over the first three months of this year, Startpunt observed a **decline of the number of** people queuing in the morning to register for international protection compared to previous months. In December, 4.551 people **registered for international protection**. Most registrations took place on Mondays, with the highest number—310 applicants—recorded on Monday, January 6th. This decline aligns with the official statistics provided by the CGRS, showcasing a relative decrease in the number of applications in the first half of 2025³.

Since January, the IO **opens its doors at 7:05am**, initially for a trial period of one month⁴. Previously, the opening hours were from 8:20 to 8:45 am. Based on this change Startpunt adjusted the start of their shifts to 6:45 to have at least 15 minutes to talk to the people in the lines. Given that the doors remain open until 8:45, people have more time to arrive. As a result, the waiting lines are usually short and late arrivals are, most of the time, able to walk straight in. Observations at both Belliard and Pachecolaan 44 show that many people are still unaware of Belliardstraat 68 as the new registration location. As a result, they often go to the old location first and arrive late to Belliard—sometimes after the door has already closed. Nevertheless, the early opening hours have led to a **more relaxed and manageable working environment** for everyone with fewer bikes around. Previously, the bike lane directly next to the entrance was a major safety hazard and caused tensions between applicants and staff.

*"In the beginning, it was a tough adjustment as I had to start waking up before 6 a.m. and I've never been an early sleeper. That said, the earlier start means registration opens around 7 a.m., which helps avoid rush-hour traffic and makes the inflow much smoother. While the early mornings have definitely made me more tired - I still haven't quite managed to adjust my sleep schedule - **I prefer this fatigue over the stress and anxiety of the past.**"*

(Noor Ketels, Startpunt coordinator)

Overall, there are multiple positive developments within these three months, which also added to the more relaxed working environment. A stark contrast to before. For Noor,

"the previous routine was much more stressful: uncertainty at the entrance, convocations for a month later, long queues, and unpredictable situations with police interventions."

[3] CGRS, 'Asylum Statistics June 2025', 15 July 2022, available [here](#), p. 2.

[4] Immigration Office, [Contact Meeting International Protection, January 2025](#), available in French and Dutch, p. 7-8.

QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025



REGISTRATION CAPACITY

The only time Startpunt witnessed appointments were given within this first quarter, was on **January 6th**, when the IO **gave appointments to 108 applicants**. Notably, **41** of these appointments were set for dates **beyond the legal timeframe of 10 working days**. In comparison, in **December** of last year **1.173 appointments were given** – including to families and vulnerable individuals, of which, **862 (73%)** were set for dates **beyond the legal timeframe of 10 working days**. **This was partly because of the high number of applicants in December, with 4.551 registered applications.**

“The easier it is for applicants, the better also for us in the ways we can help.”

(Rahwa, Startpunt volunteer)

Another positive development is the **constructive relationship** between Startpunt and the IO staff. This gives Startpunt more room to conduct their monitoring and other activities. In addition, the IO better understands the role of Startpunt. As a result, vulnerable male applicants who do not receive accommodation are sometimes referred to Startpunt by IO to inform them about emergency accommodation. The improved relationship with the IO has allowed for **better communication** between Startpunt and the IO staff at Belliardstraat. Among others, the staff informed Startpunt that the **registration capacity is around 220 applicants per day**, as that is the maximum capacity of seats they have inside. On busy days, they seem to exceed this capacity to ensure registrations for vulnerable applicants. After closing at 8:45, the centre reopens hourly to check for waiting applicants, prioritizing families and vulnerable individuals while asking single men to return the next day. IBZ staff also noted the presence of interpreters for 12 languages, but none for Vietnamese. This poses problems, as there has been a noticeable increase in Vietnamese applicants, many of whom speak little or no English.

POLICE PRESENCE

Police presence **noticeably declined** in the first quarter of the year, especially compared to previous months when officers were present daily. So far this year, when the police came it was primarily to check on the situation and take the numbers of the IBZ staff, which happened about five times each month. However, in March there were three incidences during which the IBZ staff called the police, twice based on confrontation between an applicant and the staff and once based on security reasons posed by a drunk applicant.

QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025



ACCESSIBILITY AND LOCATION

Previously, the registration took place in the same building as the first interview that is part of the asylum procedure, namely at Pachecolaan 44. Since the 24th of October 2024 the registration centre moved from Pacheco to Belliardstraat 68.

Noor, who worked at both sites, says that the new location definitely has its advantages. First, it is **much cleaner** as there are trash bags and cleaning staff that clean the area in front of the building around 8am, unlike at Pacheco. **Accessibility has also improved.** At Pacheco, people had to go down a staircase to enter the registration centre and exceptions were rarely made, not even for those with mobility issues.

“I’ll never forget a woman on crutches being forced to take the stairs. She fell, and an ambulance had to be called.”

At the beginning of January, **access** to the registration centre at Rue Belliard was still challenging, with some **wheelchair** users being tilted over the small step at the entrance. However, over time, we observed that they were increasingly directed to an alternative entrance without a step. Additionally, the staff always helps people with stroller to carry them over the step.

Nevertheless, the location also has its **downsides**. It is situated on a very busy street, and applicants queue behind a metal barrier on a narrow sidewalk. This leaves little room for Startpunt to speak with them, especially as the sidewalk is located right next to a **frequently used bike lane**. Since the opening hours have been changed, the team avoids most of the bike traffic but later in the morning it can still get chaotic. Bikes move fast and applicants often do not realize what a bike bell means, which can be dangerous. Furthermore, the Startpunt team has witnessed some of the **cyclists insulting the applicants**. Added to that, Rue Belliard is a four-lane street where people tend to drive rather quickly, which poses **risks**.

Additionally, the geographical location of the registration centre adds another layer to the experience applicants have when applying for international protection.

QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025

"It is a formal neighbourhood, with many EU buildings and expensive offices. That makes people insecure. They feel watched, unwanted. And because the registration centre opens so early, organizations that distribute food and hot drinks are often only there two to three times a week creating a stark contrast."

(Rahwa)

Overall, Rahwa's answer to the question of how she feels about going to work now, looking back at the last three months, versus last year, demonstrates how important this largely positive change in the Startpunt activities at the registration centre has been, not only for the applicants but for the team.⁵

"Before going to work was combined with stress of the anticipation what will happen today. Now you just think about the people."

TRENDS AT THE LEGAL HELPDESK

Over the last three months the number of visitors at the Legal Helpdesk was relatively constant with slightly higher numbers in February. On average the LHD had **27 visitors per shift**, with a peak of 42 visitors on February 3rd.

Legal Helpdesk – 1st Quarter 2025						
Month	First time		Follow-up		Unknown	Total
	Single men	Families & women	Single men	Families & women		
January	172	18	128	7	6	331
February	188	34	141	11	3	377
March	174	23	116	12	0	325
Total	534	75	385	30	9	1033*

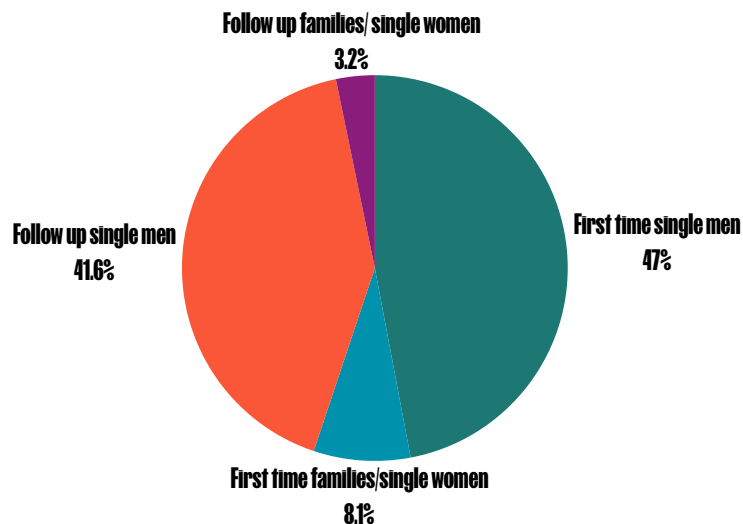
* The Legal Helpdesk was closed on the 1/01 and 31/03

[5] Read more about Rahwa and how she experienced the change in location here: ["Het verschil is dag en nacht" – Hoe vrijwilliger Rahwa het nieuwe registratiecentrum aan Belliard ervaart | Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen](#)

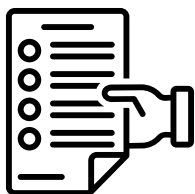
QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025

Visitors at the Legal Helpesk



Most of the visitors at the Legal Helpdesk were first time single male applicants.



The team filled out around **485 request forms** for a legal aid lawyer.



21 M-status cases were counted (people who have already refugee status in another EU country)



5 vulnerable people with exceptional cases were **referred to Fedasil**



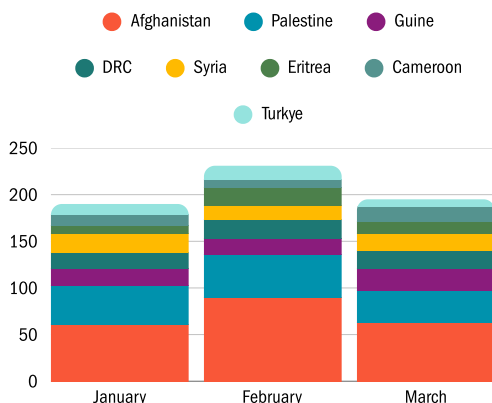
1 referral to Pagasa (an organization who supports **survivors of human trafficking**)

For a case to be deemed exceptional and referred to Fedasil (the agency responsible for reception in Belgium) for shelter, the individual must be considered vulnerable due to exceptional medical conditions. To make these assessments, the team uses a list of recognized exceptional medical conditions. Based on this list, the coordinator on duty at the LHD can email Fedasil, attaching the relevant documents for the individual concerned.

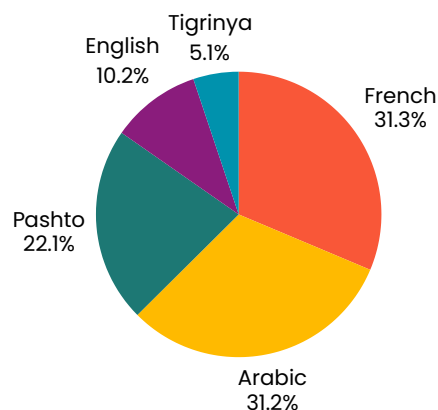
QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025

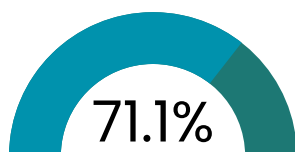
Top countries of origin of visitors per month



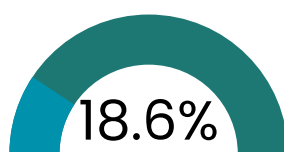
Languages most spoken by visitors with the team



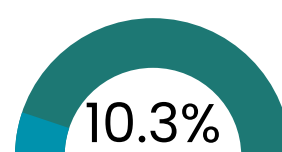
Reception needs of asylum seekers at the Legal Helpdesk



Homeless



Fedasil centre/Emergency centre



Private address

Shelter is a crucial part in the life of many applicants coming to the LHD, since **the majority is homeless**. This makes work at the Legal Helpdesk challenging, since the team cannot structurally help them with this demand. For the most vulnerable persons, Startpunt tries to find short term shelter, primarily through **SAMU Social**. They offer shelter to homeless people, including asylum seekers. This work feels particularly emotionally taxing during the winter months.

"Many asylum seekers seem even more vulnerable during the colder months. It's incredibly difficult to tell someone to leave when the Legal Helpdesk closes, especially if I wasn't able to find them a spot in a shelter. Often, the only option I can give them is to try SAMU Social again the next day and hope they have a phone and a SIM card with data to do so. Thankfully, train stations remain open overnight during winter, but referring someone there never feels good. For a while, we had limited access to the Red Cross emergency centre registration list, which brought some relief, but not nearly enough."

(Noor)

QUARTERLY REPORT

January - March 2025

Throughout the entire month of February, we were able to register highly vulnerable applicants directly for the **Red Cross winter emergency centre** in Schaerbeek which opened in the beginning of February. Unfortunately, the centre closed at the end of the month.

For instance, in January, Startpunt repeatedly encountered young Afghan men who had no place to stay. The team made every effort to find shelter for them, with varying success. Situations like these, where one is not able to help leaves the team frustrated and powerless.



Stuck in limbo - Afghanis struggle in the Belgian asylum system

Currently, a lot of Afghan nationals are stuck in a legal limbo. Startpunt encounters and supports them in the Legal Helpdesk. They turn to civil society to receive help, but we cannot provide them with a long-term solution. The government should work on a solution considering the need for a durable future perspective.

Since the Taliban takeover, the protection rate for Afghanistan decreased significantly. According to the CGRS, there is no longer a risk of becoming victim of random violence caused by armed conflict. The violence that remains is targeted towards specific groups and individuals. In addition, the socio-economic situation in Afghanistan does not constitute “inhumane and degrading treatment” caused intentionally by a specific actor. As a result, subsidiary protection is no longer given. However, refugee status is given to more people. The CGRS states that there are more at risk profiles who might have a well-founded fear for persecution such as human rights defenders, journalists and former employees of the previous government. Belonging to an at-risk group does not mean that refugee status is automatically granted. Applicants must provide individual risk-increasing factors such as gender, age, place of birth, or belonging to a certain social group. For example, Afghan women and girls have a high chance of receiving refugee status. In contrast, many Afghan men struggle to obtain refugee status failing to prove an individual fear for persecution. In the past, subsidiary protection could serve as an alternative form of protection. Since this is no longer the case, many Afghan men are stuck in limbo in the system trying to apply multiple times. Returns to Afghanistan remain highly complex and nearly impossible in practice. Therefore, most rejected Afghans seem to disappear in irregular stay.

[6] For more information: CGRS, ‘Afghanistan: new policy’, 2 March 2022, available in English [here](#).