

Fedasil – Federal agency for the reception of asylum seekers in Belgium

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The federal agency for the reception of asylum seekers (Fedasil) in Belgium is a public interest organisation. Fedasil is in charge of guaranteeing the granting of material aid to asylum seekers and other foreigners with equal rights to reception. Fedasil coordinates high-quality reception and support services, both directly and together with its partners. The agency also monitors and provides guidance for unaccompanied foreign minors.

Minors who arrive in Belgium without parents or family follow a different route than adult asylum seekers. Initially, unaccompanied foreign minors are sent to an observation and orientation centre. Fedasil has two such centres, in Steenokkerzeel and Neder-over-Heembeek, each with fifty beds. The aim of this first processing stage is twofold. On the one hand, it gives the Guardianship Service the opportunity to confirm the asylum-seeking minor is effectively a minor and unaccompanied. On the other hand, it provides an opportunity to conduct an initial medical, psychological and social profile of the minor (observation) at the observation and orientation centre. The goal is to determine to which reception centre the minor should be referred (orientation). Minors will spend two to four weeks at one of the centres, which receive both asylum-seeking and non-asylum-seeking minors.

The steering group of the Nordic Network for Research Cooperation on Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (NordURM) visited the reception centre for newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors in Neder-over-Heembeek in June 2012. At the time, the centre had forty boys and ten girls. Usually, there has been an excess of boys. The youngest-ever minor at the centre was a baby who was born there. Currently, the minors' countries of origin are most commonly Afghanistan, Guinea, Congo and Somalia. The centre is located within a

military area. Inside the building, the corridors are lined with drawings made by the children to create a warmer atmosphere. The children live in shared rooms, four to a room, with boys and girls in separate rooms.

Julie Vanderkelen, a psychologist, told the steering group that the most vulnerable unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors are victims of trafficking and prostitution, pregnant adolescents, those with hearing problems etc. Some have sleeping and eating problems when first arriving at the centre. Fedasil has a medical centre for health, allergy and other screenings. Appointments with specialists are also available. The age analyses of asylum seekers are conducted using an x-ray examination, if there is any doubt as to the minor's true age.

The reception centre for asylum seekers provides for residents' basic daily needs: a place to sleep, food and clothing. During their stay at the centre the asylum seekers also receive social, legal, medical and psychological assistance. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors follow a clear daily routine: wake-up at 8 a.m., clean the room, breakfast until 9 a.m., school at the centre (not outside), lunch at noon, free time from 1 to 2 p.m., group activities at 2 p.m., dinner and activities at 6 p.m., bed-time at 11 p.m. (for the youngest, at 10 p.m.). There are also group activities outside the reception centre, such as movies, football matches, museums, trips etc.

According to Julie Vanderkelen, unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors are usually crying when they arrive at the reception centre, but they also shed tears when leaving since they are unwilling to go. Sometimes people disappear. They may want to go, for example, to the United Kingdom and work in order to send money to their family, some as young as twelve.

More information: <http://www.fedasil.be/>