

# Social working in an airport

Heathrow Travel Care is a dedicated crisis social work team and the only permanent airport-based operation of its kind in the UK. A registered charity celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, HTC workers deal daily with vulnerable people in crisis or distress, assisting a wide variety of client groups and taking referrals from multiple agencies and self-referrals from individuals.

Service manager **Ross Erlam** takes us through a day in the life of the HTC team...

**9:00** **The team plans the day ahead.** As well as ongoing cases from the previous day, there are also pre-planned arrivals and new arrivals that have been referred overnight. Diary, email, and phone messages are checked and triaged, and appointments booked. The team will also receive further referrals from those presenting at the airport throughout the day.

**9:30** **Two rough sleepers are booked for 9.30am to see Gifty.** One is previously known to HTC. There are low level mental health concerns and issues around substance use. HTC staff work to reconnect people with services in their own area where appropriate. In this case, the individual will require housing and additional support to prevent a prolonged period of homelessness. The second rough sleeper is new to the airport. This is not uncommon; each year a large number of people present at Heathrow as rough sleepers. HTC staff arrange for the local homelessness support organisation, Thamesreach, to meet and work with this individual. An assessment is made including a full housing history, medical concerns, and managing the rough sleeper's anxieties around their homelessness.

Thamesreach homeless team works closely with HTC and provide night-time airport outreach as well as daytime support.

**11:00** **A Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) arrival.** The FCDO had previously referred a returning British national who had become homeless in the Philippines. HTC social worker Anoop meets the individual at the aircraft and brings them back to HTC's interview rooms to assess in a private and safe environment. After reviewing various options and assessing potential risks, HTC assist this individual in travelling to the home of a family member. HTC also provide the individual and their family with a list of suggestions and advice on local services.

**12:00** **Internet scam.** Taj is working with a male from Eastern Europe who has paid funds in advance for what he believed was a genuine work opportunity in the UK. On arrival at Heathrow it becomes clear that he has been conned. HTC support him in this distressing situation and work with his embassy to assist him back to his home country. Although the scam can be reported to the police, the money is now gone, which is hugely upsetting for the client and his family.

**14:00** **Afghan arrival.** James meets a flight and a family of four is provided with a welfare check and escorts onto onward transportation to accommodation. In August 2021 Heathrow provided an arrivals process for

Afghan families being airlifted from Kabul airport to the UK. HTC's emergency responder deployed the Initial Response Team to support the repatriation. HTC has since been requested by the Home Office to provide ongoing support to families and individuals arriving in the UK through a planned Resettlement Scheme and, where possible, our team are on hand to meet people at the aircraft, assess their immediate needs, escort them through the landing process and facilitate their onward travel from the airport.

**15:00** **Deportee arrival.** A British national arriving from the USA has been deported. He has been away from the UK for 35 years and was a child when last in the UK. After some generally minor offences, his immigration status came to light, the authorities intervened, and he was deported. Prisoners Abroad had previously referred him, and so HTC social worker Chloe meets him from the flight and provides a supportive first point of contact on his return. This includes providing extra support and reassurance due to his long period away from the UK. He has registered for Prisoners Abroad resettlement support and is helped with transport to their offices. Prisoners Abroad has supported UK deportees to resettle back in the UK for many years. Its dedicated work is invaluable not just to deportees, but also to family members of those in prison abroad.

**16:00** **Mental Health Act Assessment.** Although it is not uncommon for HTC clients to display signs of mental distress, many do not meet the threshold for immediate intervention. One client in particular has been a concern for the team. A US national who entered the UK a few days ago is destitute and has an unrealistic plan for starting a new life in the UK. The individual is displaying paranoid behaviour, is refusing all embassy assistance, and also has very limited eyesight – the team feel she is putting herself at extreme risk. LBH's approved mental health professionals (AMHP) services team has arranged a mental health assessment. The team assesses an admission to hospital under section is necessary. The individual remains with HTC while a bed is sought and a secure ambulance arranged before eventually being conveyed to hospital. HTC staff will work with ward staff to support this individual's return to the USA.

**17:00** **HTC finishes for the day.** Some great results but tomorrow there are new arrivals and new challenges!

With thanks to the HTC and FCDO teams: Anoop, Gifty, James, Taj, Chloe, Steve, Melisha, Chris and Evie. To find out more about HTC's work visit [www.heathrowtravelcare.co.uk](http://www.heathrowtravelcare.co.uk)



From left, Chloe, Gifty and Anoop in the Emergency

## FACT FILE

- ▶ HTC deals with a huge variety of issues: homelessness, mental health concerns, physical health, substance and alcohol use, incoming deportees, repatriations from abroad, victims of crimes, serious stranded or other travel problems, and safeguarding concerns, both adults and children
- ▶ HTC also has an emergency planner who trains the volunteer team, HTC team and airport chaplains to provide a humanitarian response in the event of major incidents at Heathrow



Gifty and Ross

- ▶ There are four people on the permanent team with an additional four staff members. Their areas are older people, homelessness/repatriation, mental health and children and families. They are seconded as advisers to the Foreign Commonwealth Development Office in Westminster
- ▶ Westminster colleagues coordinate the safe return of British Nationals assisted by British embassies across the world, ensuring they return safely via UK ports, including Heathrow
- ▶ Heathrow Airport joint-funds Heathrow Travel Care with the London Borough of Hillingdon and the Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office