

Centre for traffic-light kids offers support near Omonia

Social worker who spent years in New York now runs school in Metaxourgio

By DEREK GATOPOULOS

THEY'RE not just at traffic lights. Youngsters scrape a living on trains, in bars, at restaurants - anywhere in Athens where passersby can spare change.

For the large families relying on them, the younger the better. On a very good day a seven-year-old girl selling flowers may return home with 30,000 drachmas - double what a brother twice her age could make.

The problem is that too many kids are now after a limited amount of money.

Ahead of Christmas, the government is planning to stop children begging at traffic lights under a programme aimed at reuniting migrant kids with their families or placing Greeks on welfare projects. With fewer "traffic-light kids" around - the thinking goes - careless families or child exploiters will have to find something else to do for a living.

But it's not that simple, says social worker Myrto Lemou. "They are going to collect the children off the streets - but what will they do if they have no other way to live?" she says. "Will they steal? Will they peddle drugs? They have to do something."

Lemou runs her own day centre for traffic-light kids, opened last year in the run-down Metaxourgio area, near Omonia Square.

On the top floor of an abandoned building, wild and smiling children shriek while playing games or take reading and drawing lessons in the corner as the all-volunteer staff try to hold all the classes in one small room.

With names like Serif and Ali, most of these children sell flowers at nightclubs and are from families of Gypsies or destitute Muslims from Thrace.

Classes start at 11am to give drop-in pupils a chance to lie in. It's an escape from the surrounding roads, where one can find plenty of brothel signs, struggling Kurdish refugees, drug



The family support centre: Very close to the problem

users and even hear domestic quarrels outdoors.

Lemou, who was a social worker in New York for years before returning to Greece, established the school almost by accident early last year. She became involved with families in Metaxourgio while holding teachers' seminars for the welfare department in the area and stayed on when the programme finished.

Her Family Support Centre survives on donations which she uses to pay the 100,000 drachma rent, bills and mounting expenses. Apart from teaching, staff pay house calls, make sure children get their shots, help families receive state benefits and rescue them from

all kinds of personal problems.

Some 87 children left the centre to be enrolled in primary schools this year - not bad for a room that can fit 30 people at any one time.

"Sometimes the older kids can be aggressive. But they are still kids. We try to help them find their 'childness' - to draw, write or play - to feel like kids," says volunteer Evanthia Constantinopoulou, a law graduate.

Lemou argues that traffic-light kids are just a "symptom" of malaise that until now has been less visible. Low-skill labouring jobs in regional Greece have dried up or have been taken over by migrants offering cheap labour.

Migrants, she says, have not caused the problem, they've only made it worse.

The street-light kids in Metaxourgio, she argues, are caught in a typical poverty trap: they are born into large families from unskilled parents who have moved to the city. As kids, they support two generations of relatives but miss school as a result. With few prospects, they marry as teenagers and the problems continue.

"They have very big families sometimes with 10 or even 12 members. And they all expect to live off the money collected by the children, but the money is not enough."

She charges that new government aid projects are not targeted at the youngsters who really need them. State-run centres, planned for "socially excluded" children, will not be set up in Metaxourgio and Liosia or near the Gypsy camps of Zephyri and Menidi but in other parts of the city miles away.

Hoping to move to larger premises next year to split kids into classes, Lemou says her family support centre needs funds so that she can hire permanent staff as well as welcome people willing to volunteer time. Toys for Christmas would also help.

The Family Support Centre is at 12 Yiatrikou St in Metaxourgio. Tel 522-1149