

Organizing a Rapid Response to War Trauma

Lessons from the Somatic Experiencing Ukraine Task Force

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ABSTRACT

In February 2022, the Somatic Experiencing Ukraine Task Force (SEUTF) was established to respond to the crisis in Europe caused by the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War. A cooperative effort of hundreds of volunteers from 37 countries on four continents, this rapid mobilization and the resources it has garnered to address war trauma represents a historic first for the global SE® community. This article documents the processes and outcomes of the SEUTF in order to inform best practices for other body psychotherapy practitioners who may want to organize and sustain effective cooperative responses to the trauma caused by war and other collective crisis moments in real-time, as situations are unfolding.

Keywords: war trauma, trauma interruption, Somatic Experiencing International, SEI, SEUTF, EASE, rapid response, lessons learned, Ukraine

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On February 24, 2022, Russian forces initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Within 24 hours, senior representatives of the European Association for Somatic Experiencing (EASE) and Somatic Experiencing International (SEI) convened to assess the situation and begin planning a response. The result was the Somatic Experiencing Ukraine Task Force (SEUTF), a humanitarian cooperation that provides an umbrella for hundreds of volunteers from 37 countries on four continents, under which members of the global Somatic Experiencing (SE) community can apply SE knowledge and skills in a coordinated fashion. The following is an account of this experience.

Background

Somatic Experiencing

Somatic Experiencing (SE) is a body-oriented therapeutic model developed by Dr. Peter A. Levine to heal trauma and other stress disorders. For more

“This historic collaboration presents a model for ongoing humanitarian work that can support resolving trauma wherever it arises.”

than 40 years, the SE modality has been used to resolve the symptoms of stress, shock, and trauma that can result from a variety of stressful and traumatic situations, including natural and manmade disasters. SE has been demonstrated to be effective in addressing symptoms of PTSD commonly associated with war and forced migration (Kuhfuß et al., 2021; Neslihan, 2021; Brom et al., 2017). While often applied in traditional clinical treatment settings, evidence also suggests SE is an effective modality for shock release in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, as demonstrated after the 2004 tsunami in Thailand, with 40–60 minute treatments with survivors (Leitch, 2007), and Indonesia, with 75-minute treatments with survivors (Parker et al., 2008). More than 120,000 professionals in 40 countries on six continents have been trained in SE, and at present there are SE students in 74 countries, including Ukraine (Somatic Experiencing International, 2022).

Somatic Experiencing International

Somatic Experiencing International (SEI) is the educational and humanitarian home for the SE modality. The organization is headquartered in Boulder, Colorado, in the United States, and has 36 employees. The extended support network for SEI's education, training, and outreach mission includes more than 1,400 active staff, faculty, coordinators, and training assistants. In this paper, the term "global SE community" refers to the combination of this support network, the 120,000 Somatic Experiencing Practitioners (SEPs) around the world, and the people whose lives have been positively impacted by SE who retain a connection to the organization.

The European Association for Somatic Experiencing

The European Association for Somatic Experiencing (EASE) was established in February 2011 as a focal point for the Somatic Experiencing community in Europe. Its 40 members are comprised of Faculty (called Trainers in Europe), the Organ-

izers of SE trainings¹ throughout the continent, and National SE Associations, which are unique to Europe (European Association for Somatic Experiencing, 2022). The fourteen National Associations² are membership organizations for SEPs in each country. They play a vital role in facilitating communication both laterally within each country, and centrally, to Trainers, Organizers, and to the EASE Board. EASE is a volunteer organization with one part-time staff member. Periodic committee meetings and the annual general assembly are funded by sliding scale fees from the Trainer, Association, and Organizer membership groups.

The Initial Response

Within 24 hours of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, at the urgent request of the SE Organizer in Poland and a senior faculty member who had been conducting training in Poland, a meeting was convened with senior representatives from EASE and SEI to assess the situation. Decisions were made in that first meeting that continue to influence the work to this day:

- It was decided to issue a "call for volunteers" – to which more than 400 SEP and SE students responded, forming the basis of the support that endures to this day.
- It was decided to form a Task Force to move the work forward with representatives from EASE and SEI.
- Several SE-based crisis intervention models were identified, and it was decided that the group would not choose one model, but rather "many people could be training on many models," and the Task Force would establish a "hub" where all the information would be made accessible. These models include, but are not limited to: SEI's Crisis Stabilization and Safety program, Emotion Aid from the SE community in Israel, the Resilience Training program by Elsbeth Horbaty, and the Community Resilience Model of the Trauma Resource Institute.

1. Organizers are private business individuals who set up SE trainings in their respective countries. They are often the first to bring SE to a new region or country.

2. The fourteen National Associations are: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The Netherlands has an SEP Alumni Circle that is under the umbrella of the Organizer.

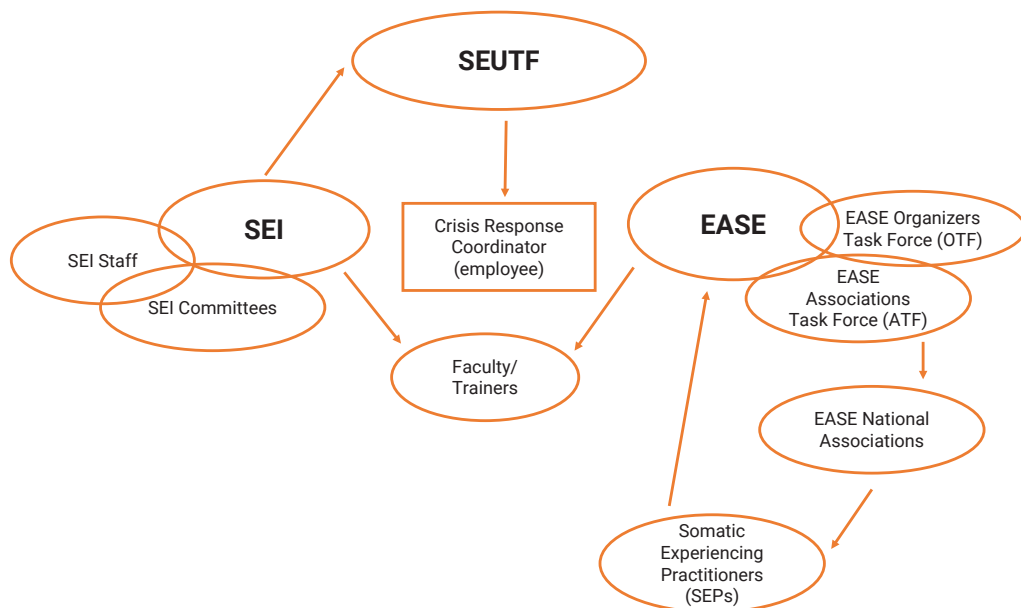


Figure 1: SEUTF Organizational Structure, March 2022

- It was decided to raise money to support SEPs doing crisis work in Ukraine and Poland, and to do so through a broad crisis response fund that would enable SE/SEI to respond to a variety of situations such as shootings, fires, and war.³

Nine months later, as this article is being drafted, the work continues to be fueled by an enthusiastic core of volunteers for whom the Task Force serves as an umbrella organization to connect people and resources. The vision for the work of SEUTF and the structure in which it takes place emerged within the first week, drawing upon the pre-existing network of relationships within the SE™ Community.

SEUTF Structure

The SEUTF Core Team is co-chaired by a representative from the EASE Board and a representative from the SEI Board, and has one paid part-time coordinator with humanitarian crisis experience, as illustrated in the Organizational Chart (Figure 1). EASE and SEI each contribute a unique set

of strengths and capabilities, without which the Task Force would likely be unable to function. For EASE's part, the National Association structure has been invaluable for disseminating information, often in preferred local languages, and making connections with potential volunteers. EASE has also provided strategic guidance and moral support as its members best understand the needs and capabilities on the ground. For SEI's part, the technical skills of staff in the areas of communications and fundraising enabled clear and engaging messaging to be created around the Task Force from the first week of operations through the creation of a Task Force logo, templates for social media posts, letterhead, a slide show, and fundraising activities to commence immediately. The cooperative spirit of senior staff of SEI and members of the SEI and EASE Boards dedicated countless hours to brainstorming and decision-making, which contributed greatly to the formation of this historic strategic partnership.

3. Internal SEI email on February 25, 2022, with subject "Action Items from Ukraine/Poland meeting today."

The pre-existing SEUTF structure within Europe has been equally important for successful operations. The Association Task Force (ATF) of EASE, comprised of representatives from the National Associations, provides a vital bidirectional connection to individual SEPs in each country. With English as the *lingua franca* of EASE, SEUTF is able to communicate with EASE and ATF representatives, who then communicate with individual SEPs through the National Associations in their local languages. The ATF is also able to serve as a “filter” device, enabling ATF Representatives to choose which opportunities they will amplify to their constituent audiences. Likewise, ATF Representatives are able to use the monthly ATF meeting as a forum to raise questions, concerns, and opportunities related to the work of SEUTF. While it is important to note that the ATF is primarily concerned with issues outside the immediate focus of the Ukraine response, the relationships that exist because of ATF connections have provided a reliable network for communication and mobilization, particularly in multiple languages that core members of the SEUTF may not speak.

Another important structural support to SEUTF work has been the SE Faculty, called Trainers, in Europe. From the first moments of the escalation of the war, senior faculty members were involved in mobilizing a response. Trainers are intimately connected to the countries in which they teach through a web of relationships that extend through Organizers to individual SE students and SEPs. They also maintain direct connections to senior leadership at EASE and SEI, creating an organic sense of connectedness and potential network for communicating needs and opportunities. Thus, it is not surprising that the first meeting was held at the joint urging of an Organizer on the frontlines and the senior Trainer who had been offering SE training in her country. Additionally, Trainers are universally respected as sources of wisdom and guidance within the community. This senior group of mentors has been generous in offering free trainings and supervision, and they have demonstrated a tremendous openness to collaboration both with the Task Force and with individual SEPs in affected communities.

Finally, the entire structure is intended to support SEPs and others who are on the frontlines providing direct services both to Ukrainians and to the communities throughout Europe who are impact-

ed by the situation. These SEPs come from a variety of professional backgrounds, such as mental health, medicine, bodyworkers, first responders, educators, mediators, coaches, and clergy. All have completed the three-year SE training process to become practitioners, or are students within the training cycle. The bulk of volunteer hours that sustain SEUTF efforts comes from this incredible cadre of humanitarians. Collectively, they have dedicated thousands of hours to translating SE-based materials, assisting at training events, providing one-to-one SE sessions, and offering general support to those who are responding to this crisis, as described in the next section. In general, SEUTF has put its efforts toward “helping the helpers” – that is, supporting those on the front lines through providing resources and opportunities for community building, rather than coordinating direct service provision.

SEUTF Operations

Two main efforts have developed over the last nine months: *Resourcing* through psycho-education, and *Community Building* through executing collaborative projects and creating online spaces for connecting.

Resourcing

During the last nine months, SEUTF has built a Resource Hub to share the SE-based print and video material that the community has been creating and adapting to respond to the needs of the current crisis: <https://somatic-experiencing-europe.org/se-ukraine-task-force/>. The collection includes resources for children and families, communities, individuals, and NGOs in the form of trainings with subject matter experts, programs to reduce stress, trauma-informed exercises, and a variety of print materials. All resources are free and available to the public.

The Resource Hub began as a way to store and share the information that was being generated by the SE community in response to the needs and opportunities arising in the field. Reflecting the strength of the aforementioned network, it is noteworthy that some of the first webinars to emerge were created jointly by SEPs in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic who had reached out to senior faculty and experts from the SE community, seeking advice about particular challenges faced in their coun-

Date	Speaker(s)	Topic	Registrants	Participants	Online Views
March	Ariel Giarretto with Elsbeth Horbaty	Help for the Helpers	890	300	545
March	Stephen Porges with Sonia Gomes	Trauma Informed Crisis Response	n/a	unknown	1,717
March	Abi Blakeslee	Crisis First Aid	260	195	1,387
March	Elsbeth Horbaty	Activating Resources	n/a	25	769
April	Peter Levine with Abi Blakeslee	Dealing with the Threat of War and Armed Conflict	414	154	934
April	Dr. Gisela Perren-Klingler	From Therapy to Prevention	n/a	47	379
May	Maggie Kline	Tutorial for Using the Trauma Picture Book	n/a	88	819
May	Imke Hansen	Working with Ukrainian Clients	n/a	77	525
July	Ana do Valle	Healing with Fairytales	265	87	347
September	Ariel Giarretto and Lucia Roncalli	Conflict Related Sexual Violence	520	172	n/a
October	Alé Duarte	Schools in Tune	774	307	672
December	Liane Pinto	Caring for Myself and Others in Times of Extended Crisis	110 so far...	—	—

Figure 2: Sample of Webinars March - December 2022

tries. These webinars grew into a monthly series that is now hosted by SEUTF, and are an important component of social connection, as described in the next section. They have provided a platform for psychoeducation for SEPs and others who are responding to the crisis. Figure 2 provides a sample of the webinars and levels of interest.

Since July 2022, SEUTF has been consistently providing live interpretation for webinars, starting initially with consecutive interpretation into Ukrainian for *Healing with Fairytales*. In September 2022, an evaluation of participant data inspired the idea to provide interpretation into Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish. More than one-third of registrants and participants were based in Poland, suggesting that the SE community in Poland was particularly interested in these resources, and that more people might be reached if we moved beyond the English-speaking community there. Spanish was also added in September, based on requests from SEUTF's weekly Resilience Connection meetings, which draws interest from around the world (as explained in the next section). SEUTF thus offered the September webinar in five languages (English, Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, and Spanish). Based on

requests from 25 or more registrants for each new language, the October webinar added Czech/Slovak, German, Hungarian, and Italian to the list, for a total of nine languages. The December 2022 webinar is planned to offer live simultaneous interpretation from English into ten languages: Czech/Slovak, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, and Ukrainian.

A skilled corps of interpreters provides this service, often drawn from the pool of interpreters that assist with SE trainings. Most are familiar with SE concepts, and most earn their living through interpretation. Thus, SEUTF decided to use the donations that have been raised for operations (\$9,012 as of December 2022) primarily to reimburse interpreters for their services. Given the frequency of SEUTF events, the niche skills of these SE-informed linguists, and the demand on their schedules as the war is continuing much longer than originally anticipated, it seemed this would be a wise investment of funds that have been donated to support SEUTF's work. As of December 2022, SEUTF has spent \$3,122 on interpretation services, and is actively fundraising to be able to continue to support inclusion in this manner for the diverse

SEUTF Translation Project Status

as of November 15, 2022

- **SCOPE flyer:** 28 translations published on <https://traumahealing.org/scope/> (Belarusian, Bulgarian, Chinese (simplified), Chinese (traditional), Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, Georgian, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese-BR, Portuguese-PT, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish-Argentina, Spanish-Spain, Swedish, Turkish, Ukrainian), 3 ongoing (Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malayu, Bosnian).
- **Maggie Kline’s Trauma in Children Picture Book:** 9 translations finalized (Belarusian, Bulgarian, Chinese (simplified), Chinese (traditional), Czech, Finnish, Greek, Hungarian, Spanish), 6 ongoing (French, Georgian, Norwegian, Romanian, Russian).
- **Maggie Kline’s Trauma in Children Handbook:** 1 translation published on <https://cesiprosyrii.org/publications/> (Italian), 9 ongoing (Bulgarian, Chinese (simplified), Chinese (traditional), French, Georgian, Greek, Hungarian, Norwegian, Romanian).
- **Ana do Valle’s fairy tale *Dancing with Dragons*:** 3 translations completed (Chinese, Russian, Ukrainian), 2 ongoing (German, Spanish-America), 2 more requested (Polish, Spanish-Spain).
- **Ariel Giarretto’s presentation *Help for the Helpers, based on the experience of women under fire in Central America and prepared by Elsbeth Horbaty*:** 3 translations finalized (Italian, Polish, Slovak), 4 ongoing (Croatian, Dutch, Slovenian, Turkish).
- **Sonia Gomes’ video *Restoring Feelings of Safety and Stability*:** 2 subtitles (Spanish-Argentina, Spanish-Spain), 2 video voice-overs (German + Russian).
- **SE training assistance:** 2 SEPs from SEUTF joined the SE Beginner II module on November 15–21 for Ukrainian and Belarusian therapists.

Figure 3: SEUTF Translation Projects

community that these webinars serve. Working alongside these interpreters are volunteers who record each language channel; additional volunteers then edit the videos for uploading to SEUTF’s YouTube channel.

While the video and print resources that the community is producing are important, the process that SEUTF contributors engage in to produce them is also a resource in itself. For example, the SEUTF Linguistic Affairs Coordinator has been coordinating more than 100 volunteers who, to date, have produced or are actively working on 72 resources in dozens of languages, as listed in Figure 3. The mobilization of this volunteer pool has produced material that far exceeds the capacity of what SEUTF

would have been able to procure through the open market, given its limited operating budget. These projects have also served as a platform for connection, and a sense of meaningful service within the community and from the SE community to those in need. This is demonstrated in a recent interview by the SEI fundraising team with SEUTF’s Linguistic Affairs Coordinator, in which she explained that “her experience as a volunteer helped her discover the power of connection: especially in the wake of widespread lockdown across Europe in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, she says that volunteering helped her feel like part of the world again.” A recent email from a teacher of 6- to 9-year olds in Germany included a photo of five SCOPE flyers hanging on the wall in her classroom – one

for each of the “heart languages” spoken in the homes of her diverse group of students. She wrote on behalf of students whose families are originally from Pakistan and Jordan, who wanted to know if the flyers will be available in Urdu and Arabic soon because they really enjoy the exercises, but would like to have the flyers in the languages their families speak at home too. The motto of the SEUTF Linguistic Affairs team is “Word by word, we make this world a safer and more regulated place.” Anecdotally, it seems that the use of these resources, and the process for creating them, are helping to achieve this objective.

Community Building

In a letter to the global SE community on March 7, 2022, the SEI Board Chair cast a vision that “... in times of crisis in one part of the world, folks in other parts of the world can help to hold the community together, much like a Hoberman sphere expands to give more space for activation” (Stahl, 2022). As the letter indicates, this is the first time that SEI and EASE have cooperated in such a manner, and it’s telling that the initiative grew not from a top-down strategic design, but rather in a bottom-up manner, initiated by “a few emails and WhatsApp messages” between people who had been working hard over the previous four years to

build trust across international borders. The vision of the Hoberman sphere expansion has permeated the SEUTF response, as the initiative brought together people from 37 countries across four continents (Figure 4). An example from Hungary in the first week of the full-scale invasion is illustrative.

Just before the escalation of the war, the SE community in Hungary had completed a round of SE training. The Organizer was in touch with trainees, who were now working as therapists, and sensed that even just a few days into the crisis, they and other responders were starting to experience overwhelm. Like so many people, the Organizer had been wondering how she could offer support to the situation and then “It clicked! We have smart people who are trained to do this type of work – I can ask them to support us!”

The Organizer worked with a senior Trainer and two SEPs seasoned in crisis response to organize a training entitled “Help for the Helpers: Using somatic skills for building stability and resilience in crisis situations.” This 90-minute presentation provided basic information about physiological reactions to stress and fear, walked participants through exercises to help create a greater sense of relative safety, and offered resource suggestions for further training.

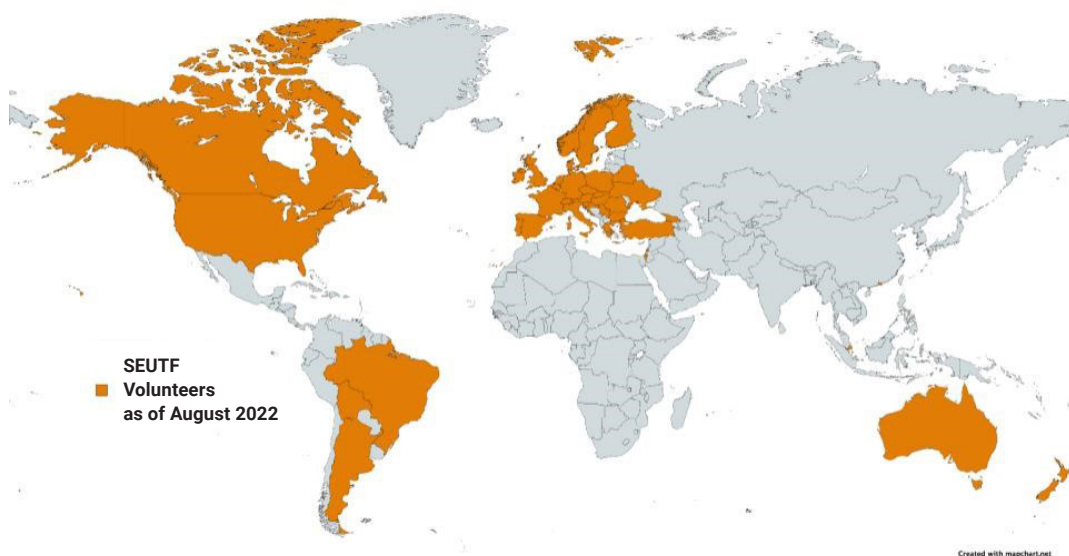


Figure 4: SEUTF Volunteers

The Organizer announced the webinar on the Hungarian SE page and her personal Facebook page. Within 24 hours, she was surprised to see that 290 people had registered. Then, registrations jumped to 700 as word spread. By the time the training started a few days later, there were 890 registrants and 58 SEPs from around the world who had volunteered to assist with breakout rooms.

The outpouring signaled two things. First, notable interest on the ground by “helpers” who were seeking resources and a sense of connection. Second, Hungary was not alone. Emails like “I’m an SEP in Brazil. What do you need? How can I help?” were common. The Organizer shared that “This experience for Hungary and the four neighboring countries of ‘The world is there. We are there. We are not alone. It was powerful.’” Especially in the early days when there was so much overwhelm and uncertainty, this type of connection proved vital to the ongoing effort.

For SEUTF, this early experience was instructive. First, being together matters. It’s a resource in itself. And second, the knowledge within the SE community is valuable for crisis moments like this. A slew of additional trainings followed, and grew into the aforementioned monthly webinar series.

Based on this principle, a new initiative has been launched called *Community of Practice*, in which webinar participants are invited to return a month later for an interactive discussion of their experiences implementing the concepts introduced in the webinars. These sessions combine breakout rooms, which provide peer-to-peer discussion, with plenary sessions guided by an expert from the community. In the future, SEUTF plans to offer language-specific breakout rooms so that peers can work together in the language most comfortable for them. This effort is still in its early stages, so a formal evaluation protocol to collect outcome and impact data is still being processed. But initial feedback indicates that 50 percent of attendees are SEPs or SE students, and 50 percent have not been in SE training, that concepts related to understanding self-regulation and the emotional state of others is particularly useful, and that 100 percent of respondents said the session was “extremely” or “very” useful in helping them to feel “connected and resourced.” Resources relate to a specific skillset, such as working with survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and working with

refugee children, that can supplement general SE training seem to be of particular interest.

Another important initiative is a weekly gathering called *Resilience Connection*. Also known as a “global SEP happy hour”, this 90-minute Zoom meeting starts with a 10-minute grounding exercise, and then moves into a time of semi-structured discussion. Participants are typically SEPs or SE students who are working with refugees or are interested in doing so. Each session is unique, as it follows the flow of the needs and interests of those who arrive. In general, an experienced SEP supports participants’ connection and regulation by using SE techniques to check in with sensations, images, behaviors, affect, and any meaning that is coming up for the participants. When done in a co-regulating space, this way of connecting helps everyone’s nervous systems gain support, therefore increasing their own resilience and regulation. The importance of social engagement is a key factor in SE and in regulating nervous systems (Porges, 2011, 2021).

While fostering a sense of connectedness *within* the SE community is important, building connections with like-minded external organizations has also been important to avoid duplicating efforts, and to extend the reach of SEPs and SE students. For example, SEUTF has an official partnership with Telehelp Ukraine, an NGO founded by Stanford University students in February 2022 to provide free quality medical and mental health support to Ukrainians affected by the war through telemedicine services from a global network of clinicians, interpreters, and volunteers. SEUTF has been recruiting SEPs who are licensed as psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to volunteer with this project. This is a win-win initiative, as it provides the SE community an opportunity to volunteer in direct service provision while it helps TeleHelp Ukraine close the gap in its current deficit of providers. Given the complexity of providing therapeutic services across international boundaries in remote settings with language barriers, SEUTF has decided for now to direct SEPs who seek opportunities to provide therapy sessions toward organizations like TeleHelp Ukraine, rather than embarking on a project to establish and manage direct service provisions as an organization. SEUTF remains committed to the mission of helping the helpers to stay well-regulated and well-resourced, with the hopes that this will help reduce the burn-

out rates that are prevalent in such crisis response situations.

Conclusion

Evolving from a flurry of emails and WhatsApp messages on February 24th, 2022 to a cohesive team that is shepherding volunteer hours toward consistently producing resources and opportunities for community building in response to the War in Ukraine and subsequent crisis in Europe, much has been accomplished and learned over the past nine months.

On the positive side, SEUTF followed best practices in crisis response by building on the strengths of its founding community. These included, but are not limited to:

- A network of pre-existing relationships and governance structures within the SE community in Europe.
- A cadre of well-respected Trainers and other senior SEPs with experience in crisis response.
- An enthusiastic corp of SEPs and SE student volunteers.
- Networks within the local communities of SEPs.
- Embracing the linguistic and cultural diversity posed within this international context.

On the learning curve, SEUTF is still grappling with the implications of questions that arise, particularly as they relate to the degree to which this current effort might inform future humanitarian operations for the SE community. These include, but are not limited to:

- Should we identify a senior cadre of mentors who can shepherd SEPs and SE students at the

local level through developing crisis response programs?

- How can we more effectively serve the needs of people in active war zones?
- Should we target fundraising to specific projects, rather than a generic operational budget in the immediate aftermath of a crisis? If so, what are the decision criteria for these projects?
- Should we pursue standing partnerships with like-minded NGOs now, so that we'll be well-positioned to extend the humanitarian reach of the SE community in the future?
- How can we effectively handle international collaboration in environments where English is not the *lingua franca*?
- Should we use the lessons learned from this experience to build a standing capacity for international response within the global SE community? If so, where will funds be sourced to support such an initiative?

While SEUTF is still developing a more formal evaluation process, anecdotal feedback suggests that therapists and other frontline workers have been able to better understand and more effectively respond to the specific manifestations of trauma that war and forced migration can produce, and that practitioners are more resourced in themselves, because of the community engagement and products that the SEUTF has provided. This historic collaboration between EASE and SEI presents a model for ongoing humanitarian work and other projects that can support resolving trauma wherever it arises. The SEUTF is grateful to all the volunteers for their contributions, and for the learning we have had over the past nine months. Most importantly, we are grateful for the connections because it is in community that we heal.



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