



*Danielle Al-Qassir, a return counsellor at the foreign immigration office in Berlin, advising a migrant/Photo: IOM Germany*

**IOM: “Our priority is that people get the support they ask for”**

*How an IOM frontline worker goes beyond return counselling by providing migrants in Germany with the support they need*

Berlin – It is a full day for Danielle Al-Qassir at the foreign immigration office in Berlin. “I have clients calling me on my work phone, my private phone and the landline, and we have clients coming in in-person,” she says. “Today was very busy but it’s really nice because it’s good to be there for people.”

Danielle is a return counsellor and is working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Germany. She advises migrants who are thinking about leaving Germany on a voluntary basis and returning to their country of origin. Her counsel is free, anonymous and unbiased. She also listens to people who do not yet know what to do, who are still waiting for their final asylum decision or are desperate for their families to join them in Germany.

“The majority of people who come to see me, have had their asylum claim rejected for a second time and are looking for humanitarian support,” she says. Frustration and an inability to integrate are other major reasons for

migrants to consider leaving Germany: “Many tell us that they have been here for several years and did not manage to integrate into society, could not work or find a job.” Others want to return because they need to take care of family members. Additionally, there can also be personal, medical or psychological reasons. Especially when diagnosed with cancer, many migrants think about spending the rest of their lives back home, in a familiar setting. In the Berlin area, there are a lot of migrants from Guinea and Nigeria coming for counselling. “It is really amazing how strong those people are. They come to us and say ‘I have been here for some time but you know, it is not working, I tried so many ways. I prefer to go back home and start a new business.’,” Danielle says. “I think this is so brave.”

### *Different programmes for different needs*

Thankfully, there is an array of support programmes for migrants wishing to return, not just IOM programmes, which are financed by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the German Government, the Federal States and the EU, but also European and German ones. This way, they can get the necessary support to get back on their feet, to start a small business or do renovation work on their house. Most importantly, it is crucial that support does not stop after their return. Special [reintegration programmes](#) can be tailored to the returnees’ needs.

In addition, IOM staff in Germany and in the countries of return are available to the migrants whenever they need help. “If they go back home, they can still reach us via e-mail. E-mail work anywhere in the world,” Danielle says. “Sometimes I get calls from people who tell me they just wanted to hear my voice again. And tell me how things have been for them. I think this is really nice.”



A return counsellor at the foreign immigration office in Berlin advising a migrant/Photo: IOM Germany

At the moment, counselling is happening behind plexiglas. It has been a special year for Danielle and her IOM colleagues too, as they have received many clients facing difficult circumstances. Someone from Sudan has been stuck here for two years and with COVID-19, things got even more complicated. “But we are always working towards solutions,” she says. Many of those visiting Danielle are very desperate and not all need return assistance. If necessary, she can refer migrants to other institutions. “Our priority is that people get the support they ask for. In Berlin, there are organizations with different specializations where we can refer people. We want to show those who are in need that we are there for them.” In Germany, IOM can also help with other programmes, such as psychosocial support and family reunification.

### ***Establishing trust and sharing important information***

If people have been through a lot, trusting a return counsellor can be a challenge. “If we feel like the person is not giving a lot of information, this is mostly because of mistrust. And we try to build this kind of trust by telling

them why we are asking these questions and that they have the right to not answer them. It is just to tailor our counselling to them,” Danielle says. Return counselling can happen completely anonymously, if clients wish so. Once the counselling starts, Danielle asks for personal information to check eligibility for the German return programme, which is called [REAG/GARP](#) (Reintegration and Emigration Program for Asylum-Seekers in Germany/Government Assisted Repatriation Program). After this, she explains the different steps of the return procedure: where people have to go next, etc. “If they cannot read, we draw a map on paper and tell them exactly where to go, where to get their passports, etc. Then we tell them which logistical steps IOM has to take until they can go back home.” Meanwhile, the counsellors establish a connection with the IOM mission in the country of return. In some countries, IOM has virtual counsellors, who advise migrants per Skype, Facebook or Viber and most importantly, in their mother tongue. People have the possibility to speak to someone who knows the situation back home, the labour market, the rent prices, the cost of medication. Gathering as much information as possible before a return is vital for migrants to be able to make an informed decision. “It is good that our clients see that return really is a process,” Danielle says.

### *How to get started*

So how should people start if they are thinking about returning to their home country?

“People should go to the information portal [www.ReturningfromGermany.de](http://www.ReturningfromGermany.de) and enter their German address. In almost every city in Germany there are state authorities and independent actors that offer return counselling. The website is available in ten languages and will show you where to go and who to talk to.”

For Danielle, working as a return counsellor, is something like a calling: “I am really happy I can be a frontline worker because we go beyond return counselling. My job means everything to me.”

## Learn more

Should you or someone you know think about returning from Germany, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) can support you. You can get in touch with IOM under +49 30 90269 4848 and check [here](#) for more information. IOM has its own return counselling centres in Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremerhaven and Rhineland-Palatinate. If you live somewhere else in Germany, you can check for your [nearest return counselling centre](#) and learn more about the return and reintegration programmes available to you based on the [country you are returning to](#).

Further reintegration projects such as [ERRIN](#) could also be suitable for you. The programme is carried out by the BAMF.

IOM's return and reintegration programmes are financed by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the German Government, the Federal States and the EU.