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**TACKLING THE HIV EPIDEMIC RESURGENCE IN THE EU**

**Media Cluster Meeting 13 – 14 June**



Drug policy, Prevention and Reduction of Health-related Harm associated with Drug Dependence

Collaboration between Health and Security on Drug Prevention

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1. **Introduction**

Integrated drug policies together with international cooperation and exchange of national experiences have been of remarkable concern among European and international partners in planning drug policy.

The scope of this meeting addresses both the above factors and serves to the transmission of recent achievements and recent knowledge to the broader public. To implement drug policies means to have a correctly informed public as allies throughout our endeavours.

Ιn many parts of the western world there has been a shift from criminalisation and punishment of drug users to the promotion of human rights and the protection of public health. Repressive measures against drug users are -among many other things- counterproductive, since they pose barriers in their access to the healthcare services.

The UN Secretary-General called all parties ‘to remove punitive laws, policies and practices that hamper the AIDS response’. (**Secretary General of the United Nations (2009), Message on World AIDS Day)**

Similarly, drug policy managers call for cooperation among and across sectors, for an integrated approach combining law enforcement, treatment and prevention in the field in order to enhance the effectiveness of policies and of interventions and to ensure the rational use of resources in austerity times. (**Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe)**

In 2011, Greece faced an outburst of HIV epidemic among drug users. This was considered as a consequence of both the socio-economic crisis and the long waiting lists for substitution treatment that had ended up in the limited access of drug addicts to treatment and harm reduction for more than a decade. Overconcentration of active drug users in open drug scenes was also observed in certain areas in downtown Athens.

Contrary to a repression approach, OKANA promoted the cooperation of all the co-competent, specialized agencies towards the adoption of measures that would create a shield of protection for public health and safety.

More specifically, OKANA developed a comprehensive plan aiming at the:

* Increase of treatment availability with the establishment of the new substitution units within state hospitals, in order to eliminate the waiting list and to reduce the risk among the intravenous drug users (PWID/People Who Inject Drugs)
* Intensification of already existing health promotion interventions of low threshold services (NSP/Needle Syringe distribution Programs in collaboration with NGOs, raising awareness etc.)
* Targeted harm reduction interventions and actions for specific drug populations as well as complementary activities and programmes within the National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013.

1. **Targeted actions and programs within the National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013**

For the purposes of this presentation we will focus on four interventions that can highlight

(a) either the necessity for cooperation and interaction among drug relevant authorities of different sectors (health, police & justice) in order to response effectively to the current drug situation and the HIV/AIDS epidemic

(b) or the dynamic of this type of interventions that should be incorporated within the legal framework and the overall drug policy

These interventions are:

1. A supervised drug use facility in Athens
2. Police-staff training in drug related issues
3. Implementation of measures alternative to imprisonment
4. Pilot opiate substitution treatment in prison
5. **Supervised drug-use facility in Athens**

The launching of drug consumption rooms was primarily based on the need to “control” problematic drug use, which was associated with overdoses and the transmission of blood borne viruses. At the same time the consumption rooms offered an alternative to drug use that was made in public.

Insofar there is evidence that they constitute an efficient measure to reduce health and social harms for users and to shield public safety against minor delinquency related to drug use and drug scenes.

However, there are barriers in regard to their social acceptance: harm reduction measures continue to be a controversial issue in Greece between treatment agencies as well as between political parties. Moreover, recently it was also noticed, that police patrols have been intensified in the broader area of the first supervised drug-use facility that was inaugurated in the centre of Athens.

The first supervised drug-use facility in Athens ‘ODYSSEAS’ is a pilot project that aims to address issues of personal and public health and improve neighboring conditions in down town Athens.

‘Odysseas’ is a fully equipped medical unit including medical doctors with various specialties, nursing staff, social workers, psychologists, socio-therapists and outreach workers who encourage people who inject drugs to use the facility.

It aims to provide access to harm reduction, advice on safer use/injection, access to drug dependence treatment for intravenous drug users and to reduce the risk of overdose deaths and of HIV and HCV infections.

However, having a closer look at the graph, one can assume that although the number of visits in the station was on the increase until February, reaching 280 visits in total, of which 235 were for safer use, in March the respective numbers declined. Evidence shows that the decline can to a large extend be attributed to the intense police patrols around ‘Odysseas’.

1. **Police-staff Training in Drug Related Issues**

The scope underneath this project is that police could and should play a crucial role in reducing the harms of drug related crime by adopting policing practices that can reduce the harms associated with drug markets, thus contributing to the protection and promotion of public health and ensuring public safety.

The program is developed through the production of innovative interactive educational material. Emphasis is put on the human rights dimension regarding drug users but also on safety issues (i.e. personal safety) regarding police officers. Violence issues and good practices during policing are also included.

Overall 575 police officers will receive training. The educational material of the program will be introduced as a specific course in the police academies in spring semester 2015.

1. **Measures alternative to imprisonment**

OKANA’s Project for the implementation of measures alternative to imprisonment is an effective way to reduce crime and other substance-related problems including HIV risk.

Though the specific law provision for juveniles dates from the 2000s, this notion remains up to now utterly theoretical. The new drug law (4139/13) provides for the possibility of introducing drug treatment instead of incarceration.

Observed delays are mainly due to minor legislation revisions and interministerial memoranda necessary for the implementation of special interventions (i.e. juveniles)

Within the framework of this project, 2 new services have been launched in Athens and Thessalonica. Information and awareness raising activities as well as outreach activities for the programming of special counseling provision have been implemented. Overall 125 individuals have already received services.

1. **Opiate Substitution Treatment in prison**

Last but not least a special reference should be made to the Opiate Substitution Treatment program in prison.

As long ago stated by the World Health Organisation, opioid substitution therapy (OST) is the most effective treatment for preventing HIV and hepatitis C among opiate users. (WHO 2007). There is evidence that the benefits of the OST in prison are similar to the benefits in the community settings: it presents an opportunity to recruit problematic opioid users into treatment, to reduce illicit opioid use and risk behaviours in prison and thus to reduce HIV and other blood-borne viruses transmission etc.

As mentioned in the 2012 European Centre’s Report, Greece was among the four countries in the EU, where OST was still not an option for opioid-dependent prisoners. (EMCDDA 2012). The new drug law (Law 4139/13) provides for the possibility of introducing drug treatment during incarceration making an explicit reference to the operation of the OST program in prisons by OKANA. Moreover, a joint ministerial decree defined the specific terms of the units operation.

Most of the preparatory stages for the launching of pilot OST units in Korydallos and Patra’s prisons have been completed. The operation of the two substitution units is expected soon.

1. **Concluding remarks**

Coming to the end of this presentation I would like to make a specific reference on the following 3 points either as a conclusion or as a remark:

* Targeted interventions implemented within the National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013 and financed by the European Cohesion Policy Fund constitute a significant component to the ongoing efforts to address challenges of drug related health issues in Greece.
* The programs that were presented are close inter-related to national legal and policy issues. Some of these interventions require for legal amendments and thus by now they are carried out as pilots that will be evaluated. On the contrary, some of them constitute the actual implementation of already existing legal provisions that were inactive until now.
* All the aforementioned programs support an effective and evidence based response to HIV/AIDS. They are major steps towards a public health-oriented approach as well as towards essential cooperation across competent sectors, in particular between Health and Security.