

RAISING A NEW GENERATION OF YOUNG ADVOCATES: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES FROM UKRAINE

This case study was conducted by International Charitable Foundation "AIDS Foundation East-West" (*AFEW-Ukraine*), together with its partners New Family (located in Chernivtsi), Blago (Kharkiv), Return to Life (Kropyvnytskyi), and Public Health (Poltava). It focuses on adolescent drug users aged 10 to 19 years of age. Since 2011, partners have been providing direct services to young people who use drugs (PWUD) within the framework of the Bridging the Gaps programme. *AFEW-Ukraine's* role is to provide technical support in piloting new approaches and interventions, build partner-capacity, and support experience sharing on a national level.

Background

This case study illustrates how *AFEW-Ukraine* and its partners implemented a project to ensure the meaningful involvement and engagement of young PWUD.

This demographic faces **limited access to high quality and friendly HIV, SRHR, and harm reduction services**. These include rapid testing on HIV, Hepatitis B and C and other sexually transmitted diseases, counselling on sexual violence prevention, referrals to gynaecologists or other specialists, and the distribution of kits with condoms, pregnancy tests, gynaecological and hygiene items.

AFEW-Ukraine's practical experience and the feedback they have received from clients and service providers, substantiates that young PWUD have limited access to these services due to a **lack of**

FACTS & FIGURES:

- There is an estimated **2.7% HIV prevalence among young PWUD**. In general, at least **1.9% of all most-at-risk adolescents in Ukraine are HIV-infected**.
- **HIV prevalence among all people who inject drugs is estimated at around 20%**.
- **General HIV prevalence amongst adult Ukrainians is estimated to be 0.9%, the second highest in the region after Russia**.

information and understanding of their needs. Young PWUD are **not always a visible population**, and have minimal opportunities to speak up about their needs. Such service providers receive **no special training, programmes or standards** for working with young PWUD in Ukraine. Due to the country's **strict morality standards**, drug use or sexual activity are often not addressed by health professionals or social workers. Practical experience also shows that young PWUD face a lot of **barriers in accessing services**, such as stigmatising attitudes or confidentiality violations.

Bridging the Gaps is an international HIV programme on health and rights for LGBT people, sex workers and people who use drugs, currently operating in 15 countries around the world. For more information on the programme, please visit hivgaps.org

BRIDGING THE GAPS
Health and rights  for key populations

The project

In line with the principle “Nothing About Us Without Us”, that AFEW and its partners support, the project focused on the **meaningful involvement and engagement of young PWUD** in advocacy work and in the planning and evaluation of services. Two key approaches were taken to achieve this goal:

Firstly, a **School of Volunteers** was organised. This was a structured intervention facilitated by social workers and involved young PWUD educating their peers on health issues and human rights. Methods of contraception, prevention of STIs and unwanted pregnancy, and condom negotiation skills were included in the list of topics for peer education.

Secondly, **Young Leader Groups** were established at each of the eight project sites. These groups are run by the most active young PWUD clients, who set the rules, schedule, aims and events, and are supervised by social workers. Young leaders bring their friends and acquaintances to the NGOs to receive services, information, and peer-to-peer counselling. The members of the group also developed training and information sessions to facilitate engagement with officials (e.g. service providers, the police, and probation services) to better inform them of their needs. The supervising social worker provided the group with tasks, such as visiting healthcare facilities to check the quality of services or collecting information from their peers.

RESULTS

- Young PWUD clients were **more motivated to use services** within the project and from other service providers, resulting in a better uptake of services addressing their needs.
- Members of the Young Leader Groups **contributed to the development of drug policy strategies** in two cities (Chernivtsi and Kropyvnytskyi), resulting in policies that better reflect their needs. In Chernivtsi, the young leaders contributed to the draft local Drug Policy, while in Kropyvnytskyi, the young leaders contributed to the city’s 2016-2018 programme on HIV/AIDS. They voiced the need for special information leaflets for parents and helped to identify locations around Kropyvnytskyi for placement of boxes for used needles and syringes. This positive collaboration created a sense of co-ownership, and signalled that state services and authorities are prepared to engage in tangible collaboration with key populations.
- Young PWUD clients were **motivated to change behaviours** and assume greater responsibility, with some reducing or stopping their drug use. They were also more willing to study and take their education seriously.
- Social workers say that there is now more **equal, productive, interesting and inspiring communication** with their young PWUD clients. They saw improved personal skills, trust, and socialisation.
- Finally, the **parents** of the young PWUD who participated in this initiative are now more active and supportive.

“ I started to spend less time on the streets. I left my gang; afterwards I found out that they got into serious trouble. So, basically, yes, my life has changed, otherwise I would have got into this trouble with them ... And it changed for the better, since they [my former gang] went to prison. They were caught trying to steal; there was another charge of burglary, hooliganism... I believe I would have been with them [if I hadn't got into this organisation]. ”

Anton, 16 years old, Chernivtsi

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Involving key stakeholders** is crucial in effecting meaningful and lasting social change. In this project, cooperation and communication with the police, the Probation Agency, youth-friendly clinics, social services, and legal clinics were vitally important. Public events helped to promote better understanding by governmental service providers of the real needs of young PWUD.
2. Health is not the biggest concern for young PWUD, therefore making it difficult to use health protection issues as motivation for making less risky choices. Another way to do this is to provide honest information, **allowing young PWUD to assume responsibility** for their lives and health, whilst continuing to safeguard access to quality, harm-reduction services.
3. Building the capacity of young leaders, and involving them in project activities, requires constant contact. It also involves systematic work that demands **additional time and effort** from social workers. It's essential then that sufficient time and resources are available.
4. Social workers and other project staff need to provide **psychological support** to young PWUD clients, demonstrate trust, and transfer responsibilities to them. This approach will help them to become independent and confident.
5. **Young, female PWUD** are a particularly hard group to reach. Commonly, they are unwilling to systematically use services, but participation in mobilising and empowerment activities has shown to significantly alter their attitudes towards specialists and service providers. There are now more girls who are willing to use services, including specific services available for girls such as referrals to gynaecologists.

