

## Success Stories Profile

### Georgian Harm Reduction Network, Georgia



#### HIV and hepatitis C (HCV) in Georgia

There are approximately 7,000 people living with HIV in Georgia, with close to 1,000 new diagnoses being reported in 2017. The main mode of transmission is through heterosexual contact (45.7%), followed closely by injecting drug use (40.9%). Although Georgia has a relatively low HIV/AIDS prevalence in comparison to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, this figure is expected to rapidly increase in the coming years due to the increased number of PWID.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to HIV, Georgia has one of the highest estimated HCV prevalence in the world with an estimated 250,000 persons infected with HCV. The prevalence of HCV is high amongst prisoners (50%), people who inject drugs (50-70%) and people infected with HIV (47%).<sup>2</sup>

The Georgian Harm Reduction Network (GHRN) is the key actor in delivering low threshold harm reduction services to PWIDs in Georgia. Apart from service delivery, GHRN pursues advocacy strategies based on human rights and public health principles. It is represented in the inter-agency council on drug policy, as well in National Drug Policy Platform and actively promotes evidence-based drug policies. GHRN is a strong advocate of community systems strengthening and community's inclusion in decision making and implementation processes at all levels.

#### European Testing Week 2017

For ETW 2017, through a joint effort coordinated by GHRN and a partnership with the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) who operates under the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, a nation-wide testing and awareness raising campaign was implemented. The main purpose was to raise awareness on HIV and HCV in the country, especially for the general population to become aware of the existing free HCV elimination programme and promote testing. As part of the activities, GHRN coordinated HIV and HCV training for peers at harm reduction service sites in 13 cities. Additionally, harm reduction mobile ambulatories provided HIV and hepatitis screening in 45 cities.



Mobile testing for ETW 2017

For testing activities that targeted the general population, the NCDC provided free testing kits and 1,103 individuals received free testing for HIV and HCV. 73 individuals had a reactive HCV result and were referred to confirmatory testing and care. There were zero reactive HIV test results.

<sup>1</sup> Infectious Diseases, AIDS and Clinical Immunology Research Center. (2018, July 26). HIV/AIDS epidemiology in Georgia. Retrieved from [https://aidscenter.ge/epidsituation\\_eng.html](https://aidscenter.ge/epidsituation_eng.html)

<sup>2</sup> Mitruka, K., Tsertsvadze, T., Butsashvili, M., Gamkrelidze, A., Sabelashvili, P., Adamia, E., ... Averhoff, F. (2015). Launch of a Nationwide Hepatitis C Elimination Program — Georgia, April 2015. *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 64(28), 753–757.

Through the harm reduction activities, the Global Fund provided free testing kits and a total of 1,250 individuals received combined HIV/HCV testing. There were 375 who received a reactive HCV test result and they were offered the option to send their blood specimens to a confirmatory laboratory for free RNA diagnosis. Based on the results, they were referred to free HCV treatment clinics within the National HCV elimination program. There were 2 individuals who received a reactive HIV test result and were referred to the AIDS center for confirmation and treatment.



Media event to promote HIV/HCV testing during ETW 2017

Apart from service delivery, GHRN was actively involved in advocacy activities to change strict and punitive drug policy in the country and to support more effective implementation of harm reduction activities in the country. During Testing Week, a high-level round table event was organized by the National AIDS center of Georgia to set priorities for increasing early detection of HIV in the country. GHRN was one of the main actors of the round table which included members from the Ministry of Health, National center for disease control and public health, Gilead Pharma representatives, AIDS national center representatives, HIV and HCV clinics' representatives, a representative from the penitentiary system, and different NGO representatives that work on HIV prevention and screening programs. GHRN presented suggestions on how to increase HIV screening among key affected populations through 1) adoption of oral fluid testing among PWIDs and the general population; 2) suggesting to change regulation and adopt HIV self-testing (with delivery through pharmacies or other HIV prevention sites); and 3) suggesting HIV testing of labor migrants returning to Georgia from neighboring countries (Russia, Ukraine) with high HIV prevalence, as well from Greece and Turkey. Based on the consensus at the round table, the above-mentioned issues will be discussed and agreed to be implemented for 2018.

### **Impact of European Testing Week 2017**

This event was the first joint effort between governmental and non-governmental organizations in Georgia, with a widespread media campaign to disseminate information on HIV/HCV awareness and implement the planned activities throughout the country. The media campaign included participating in talk shows, radio, morning talks, interviews, newspaper publications as well as promoting through social media. The national media coverage and testing delivery that targeted the general population helped to bring more widespread attention to HIV and HCV and minimize self-stigma among PWID and among the general population towards PWID. Additionally, when compared to previous years, coordination between governmental and non-governmental institutions in screening, referral and treatment adherence activities was improved.

**The work of the Georgian Harm Reduction Network (GHRN) proves that joint efforts between governmental and non-governmental organisations can have an impact on all levels—from influencing policy change to creating awareness within the general public.**