

ed the development of programs for reducing the social and health harm of drug use and limiting the risk of HIV/AIDS infection.

In the Initiative for Health Foundation started the first program “Steps in the Positive Direction” targeted to preventing HIV/AIDS among injection drug users from Sofia who have not been hospitalized for treatment. The program was financed by the Open Society Foundation – Sofia. In 2000 similar programs were developed in Plovdiv, Pleven, and Bourgas.

The programs are targeted to injection drug users and aim at limiting the risk of HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C infection, reducing drug-related harm, motivating drug users to seek treatment, and minimizing risk practices.

The activities are carried out by outreach teams and include:

- needle and syringe exchange; collecting and disposing of used needles and syringes and distributing sterile ones following a specific pattern;
- publishing and distributing information and self-help brochures;
- distributing condoms and informing people how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases;
- encouraging drug users to get tested for hepatitis B and C and for HIV/AIDS;
- advising them to seek consultations and treatment in specialized clinics;
- testing used needles and syringes;
- organizing training and information harm reduction campaigns.

The Initiative for Health Foundation was established in 1997. Its mission is to develop and carry out projects aimed at harm reduction, introduce specially designed harm reduction programs, and train professionals working with drug users. The Foundation’s team consists of experts with extensive experience in the field – doctors, nurses, psychologists, educators, social workers. The team established nine needle and syringe exchange spots in the center of the city, the suburbs and the Roma neighborhoods, developed an outreached network and won the confidence and the trust of the target group. Since its start, the program has reached more than 4,000 drug users with whom the members team had more than 12,000 meetings. 53% of the people covered by the program are Roma.

An important aspect of the project is the outreach work in the Roma community in Sofia, namely the Roma neighborhoods Fakulteta and Tatarli.

In February 2001 the target group of the program was extended to include commercial sex workers who use injection drugs – a group, which is twice as vulnerable to HIV infection. From February to June 2001 the program reached 160 sex workers and had 330 individual meetings.

The program of the Initiative for Health Foundation set a good example, which was soon replicated. In 2000 it was included in the best practices list of UNAIDS.

The program has reached agreements with the National Center on Drug Dependence, the Information and Prevention Center for Drug Related Issues, and the Center for Sexual Health – the key institutions, which offer treatment to drug users.

In Plovdiv the needle and syringe exchange program is carried out by the Panacea Foundation, which also works in the Roma neighborhood Stolipinovo. Since the start of the program in 2000, the team of the foundation established contacts with 177 injection drug users from the Roma community, 45 of whom had come to the exchange spots for the first time.

In the Roma community in Bourgas a similar program is carried out by the Dose of Love Association established in 1999.