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## **Immediate release**

### **Ukrainian government crackdown on NGOs, drug users and people living with HIV**

Hundreds of patients receiving drug substitution therapy and NGOs that are supporting programmes providing substitution therapy are facing harassment and abuse from state authorities in Ukraine after orders from the Ministry of Interior's drug enforcement department in a worrying crackdown on people trying to access health services.

Patients dependent on legal substitution therapy to manage their drug dependency are being withheld treatment unless they provide information on their health and HIV status for a 'voluntary survey'.

"We are not given medication. They say we must first pass an 'interview' with law enforcement officers. A law enforcement officer threatened to arrest me if I do not fill in a questionnaire," said Olha Belyaeva, a substitution therapy advocate.

The crackdown has been steadily building for a number of weeks. Irina Sukhoparova, leader of the Hope and Trust NGO, outlined the problem. "Instead of taking care of patients doctors have to provide clarifications to prosecutors and police. Documents are being taken from charity organisations and in some cities programmes for drug users have already stopped. This is threatening the health of more than 6,000 substitution patients.

The International HIV/AIDS Alliance in the Ukraine and the PLHA Network who for over ten years have been delivering groundbreaking HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment work have been ordered to provide evidence to the Kyiv Prosecution Office

Andriy Klepikov, Executive Director of the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine said, "On January 19<sup>th</sup> I was summoned to provide testimony in person to the local Prosecutor in Kiev. I was particularly questioned on the Alliance's role in programmes related to drug use and the substitution therapy programme."

"This is a very worrying situation which is negatively impacting HIV prevention programmes in Ukraine – doctors don't want to get involved in substitution therapy programmes, injecting drug users are afraid to become substitution therapy patients, and even for NGOs this situation is becoming personally dangerous to be involved in," he said.

All this comes at a time when the Ukrainian President has approved a new and progressive AIDS Law which came into force on 15 January this year. The Law specifically spells out provision of needle and syringe as well as substitution therapy to help tackle the HIV epidemic in the country, which is predominantly driven through injecting drug use.

Both the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine and PLHA Network have been praised by the British Medical Journal and the Lancet Infectious Diseases journal for the work they have been doing with injecting drug users to prevent the spread of HIV.

“We are extremely concerned about the Ukrainian government’s current reaction to HIV prevention and substitution therapy programmes,” said Dr Alvaro Bermejo at the International HIV/AIDS Alliance. Collecting individuals’ personal data including their HIV status is a violation of people’s human rights. Substitution therapy is legal in Ukraine and stopping former drug users from taking their medication is cruel and dangerous.”

### **Editors Notes**

- Harm reduction approaches such as providing clean needles and substitution therapy are legal in Ukraine and an effective way of preventing the spread of HIV in injecting drug users.
- 350,000 people are living with HIV in Ukraine.
- New cases of AIDS decreased for the first time in 2006 and there are fewer cases being recorded among drug users.
- The International HIV/AIDS Alliance is a global partnership of nationally-based organisations working to support communities to reduce the spread of HIV and meet the challenge of AIDS and other health issues such as TB and maternal health.  
[www.aidsalliance.org](http://www.aidsalliance.org)

Photos from Ukraine and interviewees are available. Please contact: Sarah Wheeler at [swheeler@aidalliance.org](mailto:swheeler@aidalliance.org). Tel: +44 (0)1273 718949 / 07590358391