

# AIDS ACTION & INTEGRATION



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**Strengthening community-based prevention and support for HIV/AIDS in Central and Eastern Europe.**



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## Spring 2008



### Promoting quality of life with People Living with HIV/AIDS

For more than ten years, Wojciech Tomczynski and fellow Polish HIV/AIDS activists have successfully organized yearly gatherings on the quality of life for People Living with HIV (PLWH)

In 1993, I attended training sessions on HIV/AIDS organized by the French NGO AIDES in Paris and in Lyon. Then, I thought it would be genius to have such events also in my country, organized by PLWH themselves. But, at the time in Poland, we did not have an organization of ours.

In 1994, the association "Be With Us" (Bądź z Nami) was established and registered. One of our first projects was in itself the organisation of a Polish National Meeting of People Living with HIV: thanks to the support provided by the Warsaw UNDP office, this event took place in Rynia, near Warsaw, and brought together 68 people. Since then, this meeting has become a yearly event organized in different regions of Poland, from the Baltic Sea to the Tatra mountains. Since 2005, these meetings have been implemented by the Polish Network of People Living With HIV/AIDS "SIEC PLUS", a NGO established in 2004.

The presence of international guests and experts is very important for us - to share experiences and to help one another in our work as community-based advocates. Since 2001, we have been able to invite fellow activists from across Europe, especially from neighboring countries. The Tenth "Jubilee" Meeting, in 2006, was more international than ever: thanks notably to the support of the *AIDS Action and Integration Projects*, a total of 150 participants, including 21 international guests from different European countries, were present. Together, we assertively advocated in favor of promoting and improving the quality of life for People Living with HIV/AIDS. At the meeting in June 2007 in Waplewo, we were also honored by

the presence of many European guests as well as fellow colleagues from both Cameroon and Mauritania.

Why do we still organize such meetings? From the start, we noticed that they are a great tool for breaking the isolation often faced by PLWH. Many of the participants eventually became activists themselves: several local self-support groups have been established as a direct result of our seminars. We are also happy that some of our international guests also decided to set up their own National Meetings of PLWH, for instance in Ukraine and Serbia. Furthermore, these yearly meetings enable the participants to update their knowledge with regards to all aspects related to HIV and improve their capacity to protect their own health and quality of life.

We always make sure the atmosphere be as convivial and welcoming as possible: our meetings always are a great place to make new friends... and several of our past participants have gotten married and now have children!

The Polish National Meetings of PLWH are now one of the stable elements of the Polish HIV/AIDS scene. For several years now, we have been kindly supported by the state's administration, especially the National AIDS Center and the Ministry of Health. *We invite you for our Twelfth Meeting in September 2008!*

Meeting reports are available on:  
[www.integration-projects.org/keydoc.html](http://www.integration-projects.org/keydoc.html)



*"I was very impressed by the lust for life, for a good life promoted at this meeting. I learned that even in very difficult conditions, it's important to come together to confront and solve problems."*  
Fatimata, participant from Mauritania

### Experiences with Group Psychotherapy involving PLWHs in the Czech Republic

Olga Urbankova, Czech AIDS Help Society

In 2005, for the first time ever in the Czech Republic, the Czech AIDS Help Society started running group psychotherapy (GPT) for PLWHs. Due to social stigmatization and discrimination, Czech PLWHs are extremely careful not to be recognized as being HIV positive - and implementing such targeted services proved very challenging. Also, the total number of reported cases in the Czech Republic (968) is still relatively low so the social visibility remains low. Since September 2005, 29 PLWHs have attended the GPT sessions. GPT for PLWHs in the Czech Republic deals primarily with social stigmatization. The GPT consists in an one-hour open session that takes place once every week run by psychologists with training in GPT.

Since antiretroviral therapy was introduced in the world, the social perception of HIV/AIDS has changed significantly. The

first decade of GPT (data collected from researches in the U.S.A.) indicates that the most vivid topics used to be death, mourning, and coping with loss of health and of close friends. Nowadays, the topics are more oriented towards issues like sharing the information about one's sero-status, changing risky behavior, building skills for developing social support, and improving adherence to treatments.

When we talk about the benefits of having attended GPT with our 29 clients, the main results identified were a reduction of risky behaviors, a better social and professional integration, relief from tensions coming from stressful events, and improved self-contentedness.

As a conclusion we may say that although GPT with PLWHs is still at its beginning, it is for sure contributing to improving the quality of life in many areas!



## ARV4IDUs seminar: Access to antiretroviral treatments for injecting drug users remains disproportionately low

Shona Schonning, EHRN

On November 24 and 25, 2007, the European AIDS Treatment Group (EATG) in partnership with the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network (EHRN) held a seminar on Access to antiretroviral drugs for injecting drug users (IDUs) in Central and Eastern Europe. The seminar in Vilnius, Lithuania was attended by 35 guests from 13 countries.

Presentations made it clear that treatment outcomes for IDUs can be as good as those for other patients if appropriate services are provided. In most countries in the region financial resources for HIV treatment have become available, but access to ARV for IDUs remains disproportionately low. This owes to a number of barriers including but not limited to: stigma; a lack of integrated comprehensive services (i.e. HIV, TB, Hepatitis, mental health, addiction care); limited scope and coverage of harm reduction activities; and lack of or misinformation among communities of people who use drugs.

Good practices from the region and neighboring Europe for overcoming these barriers were examined, including models for user mobilization from Spain and Bulgaria, use of multidisciplinary teams in Ukraine and Russia, expansion of the scope of harm reduction services in Spain and Russia. Other issues addressed were the importance of integrating adequate TB and Hepatitis care as well as coordinating the provision of substitution therapy services with ART services.

### ARV4IDUs: a new bulletin!

The London-based treatment activist group I-Base, a grantee of the Open Society Institute, has recently released a new Quarterly bulletin "ARV4IDUs". This publication in English and in Russian aims at providing "a review of the most important medical advances related to clinical management of HIV and its related conditions for people who use drugs, as well as access to treatments".

ARV4IDUs is produced as a supplement to the i-Base HIV Treatment Bulletin and has been supported by a grant from the International Harm Reduction Development Program of the Open Society Institute that has published several volumes on provision of ARV for IDUs, available at <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/health/focus/ihrd/>.

To download the first two issues and subscribe online: <http://www.i-base.info/idu/index.html>

### European Seminars announcements!

**ARAS - the Romanian Association Against AIDS** - will organize in Bucharest, Romania:

- from May 30th to June 1st, 2008 a best practice seminar on **voluntary testing and counseling (VCT)** for HIV. The purpose of the seminar - organized as part of the AIDS ACTION EUROPE / EPAA Project - is to evaluate the present state of VCT all around Europe and to formulate specific guidelines for better and more accessible services.

- from June 26th to June 29, 2008: a best practice seminar on **Youth mobilisation and HIV/AIDS**. We want to enable young activists to exchange information, tools, good ideas, and to learn about the main current challenges related to HIV/AIDS in Europe. (This will be the 9th seminar organized as part of the AIDS ACTION & INTEGRATION projects!)

For more information please contact Nicoleta Dascalu at [arasconference@gmail.com](mailto:arasconference@gmail.com).

### Latest publications from the INTEGRATION Projects

**HIV/AIDS in Slovakia:** this mission report was released in November 2007 on the occasion of the conference "When pragmatism appears controversial" organized by the NGO Odysseus in Bratislava, Slovakia. It presents the main challenges faced by local NGOs.

**HIV Basics / Treatment training for advocates:** our partner EATG has produced multilingual versions of the guidebook initially produced by the UK NGO HIV I-Base. This 120-page publication was written by HIV activists who are mostly HIV positive themselves and aim to help PLWH to understand and take control of their own treatment. The translated versions available so far are in Czech, Polish, Romanian, and Slovak.

These publications are available there: <http://www.integration-projects.org/keydoc.html>

**The INTEGRATION projects started in 2001 and our joint mission is to support community-based mobilisation on HIV/AIDS and related issues in Central and Eastern Europe.** Our contractual partners include the European networks **AIDS ACTION EUROPE**, **EATG**, and **EHRN** as well as the NGOs **AIDES** (France), the **AIDS Help Society** (Czech Rep.), **ARAS** (Romania), **BADZ Z NAMI** (Poland), and **DIA+LOGS** (Latvia). We thank the following for their support to our joint work: the **European Commission**, the **Open Society Institute**, **Fondation de France**, **GSK Positive Action**, **Roche**, **UNAIDS**, and the **French Embassies** in Lithuania, Poland and Romania.

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