European AIDS Treatment Group

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Press Release – 01 December 2020

EATG launches World AIDS Day campaign focusing on the role of community healthcare workers and services in the COVID-19 era

(Brussels, December 01th, 2020) – In the context of World AIDS Day, the European AIDS Treatment Group (EATG) launches the 'HIV Healthcare and Community Services in the COVID-19 Era' campaign. The campaign focuses on community Healthcare Workers (HCW) from the HIV and co-infections field and the services they provide. We aim to highlight their essential role during the COVID-19 pandemic and urge for their services to be recognised and supported.

"*We want to pay tribute to their tireless efforts to ensure that people living with and communities most affected by HIV in Europe and Central Asia can access the prevention and care services they need. The work of community healthcare workers has been a key component of effective HIV/AIDS responses. Their agility in adapting services in response to the disruption caused by SARS-CoV-2 shows again that the they are crucial to the functioning of the health and social care system. This is why, on this day, EATG highlights the benefits brought by community healthcare workers and invites all to support them*" says Pieter Vanholder, Executive Director of EATG.

Our campaign wishes to highlight that community-based organisations:

1. Provide integrated, easily accessible, user-friendly services – a one-stop-shop
2. Share their experience from the ground with decision-makers to ensure that policy and regulatory frameworks are updated
3. Find innovative solutions such as online counselling and peer groups, self-testing support, delivery of ARVs, adapted schedules, support with basic needs in the face of COVID-19 related disruption
4. Face challenges in maintaining the 'community feeling' and psycho-social support with COVID-19 measures
5. Are an essential part of the healthcare systems and the social system, yet are often overlooked and under-funded
6. Play a crucial role in addressing and overcoming stigma and discrimination in healthcare

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Our message echoes UNAIDS announcement for the World AIDS Day, iterating that *"the leadership and engagement of communities, instrumental in the success of the AIDS response, has also been key in responding to COVID-19. We have seen countless examples of how community activism and solidarity have, once again, been paramount in providing people affected by HIV with information, services, social protection and hope. However, such solidarity cannot be the sole responsibility of communities. Governments, donors, faith leaders, civil society and each and every one of us need to contribute to making the world a healthier place."*

About the campaign

2020 is marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, according to the WHO, this is the year of the nurse and the midwife. On this year's World AIDS Day, EATG showcases the realities faced by community HCW in the HIV field before and during the COVID-19 pandemic across the WHO-Europe region as well as their resilience and achievements to serve communities and adapt to current needs. The stories also highlight challenges faced by community HCW and the need for greater recognition of their key roles in the HIV/AIDS response before and during the pandemic.

EATG reached out to community HCW and people who run community programmes that provide healthcare services (testing, prevention, harm reduction etc.) to PLHIV and affected communities, looking for written and visual stories from personal experiences in the field. We then asked these people to capture and tell their stories in writing, pictures and video. Their stories unfold today across EATG's social media platforms.

The campaign: https://bit.ly/EATG_WAD2020

Interviews [ENG]: https://bit.ly/EATG_WAD2020_Interviews

Interviews [RUS]: https://bit.ly/EATG_WAD2020_Interviews_RUS

The videos: https://bit.ly/EATG_WAD2020_Videos

#SupportCommunityHCW #WeAreEssentialServices #WAD2020 #WorldAIDSDay2020

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QUOTES

1. **Many community-based organisations serve as easily accessible, user-friendly one stop shops**

"Our organisations work with professionals with strong experience in community but also in the different disciplines we need for work, such as psychology, social work, medicine, etc." -Apoyo Positivo, Madrid, Spain

"We have peer to peer empowerment services, rapid testing facilities, streetwork/outreach projects, advocacy and linkage to care services. We also have a drop-in center for sex workers (Red Umbrella Athens), a group that visits frequently incarcerated seropositive people and another one which performs educational/informative seminars for HIV/AIDS, harm reduction and other issues." - Positive Voice, Athens, Greece

2. Community-based services share their experience from the ground with decision-makers to ensure that policy and regulatory frameworks are updated

"During the years we have worked continuously with political parties and authorities. We have managed to change old fashioned regulations and laws have been updated" ADHARA, Seville, Spain.

"It's true that there is a better recognition during the past years, among healthcare system stakeholders, of community health workers, especially from those who have a long experience working beside us, as it happens with HIV. Maybe it comes from the high interest in the figure of patients and how healthcare systems knows that our resources collect lots of information from targeted communities, but there is still a gap in that recognition" Apoyo Positive, Madrid, Spain

3. Community-based organisations have been reacting to Covid-19 measures with innovative solutions such as only online counselling and peer groups, self-testing support, delivery of ARVs, adapted schedules and support with basic needs.

"We were the first community checkpoint opening after the first COVID-19 wave, in May and from that moment, we've been increasing our testing days and services face-to-face, despite the pandemic and even opening on new days, such as Saturday, also the first time as a community checkpoint in Spain." Apoyo Positivo, Spain.

"During the first lockdown, people living in other cities could not easily move outside their district, in order to visit the Hospital and Pharmacy in Larnaca. So, in close cooperation with the Public HIV Reference Clinic's doctors and State Pharmacy, we coordinated the process of picking-up the pills for each person, from the State Pharmacy, after the doctor had prescribed them, and arranged their delivery to the beneficiary who was in direct contact with the doctor and us. This was something we could do, and did implement, but only for the south side" AIDS Solidarity Movement, Nicosia, Cyprus.

"Above all we strengthened our streetwork / outreach activities. For the first time we started- as a response to communal needs- to provide food, water and linkage to the municipal shelters for homeless people including the drug users." Positive Voice, Athens, Greece.

4. The 'community feeling' and psycho-social aspects that community-based services can provide have been severely impacted by Covid-19 measures.

"Before COVID-19, the HIV members group in our community met on a regular basis to socialise. I would categorise members meetings as discussion groups, casual meet-ups for tea, coffee, a bite to eat, walks in parks and the members most enjoyed the weekends away. Everybody looked forward to the weekends away because that is where everyone felt comfortable talking and expressing themselves without watching or looking around

to see if there is anybody they know. Ireland, especially Limerick, is a small place. It has not been possible for members to meet up, bringing the feeling of isolation and disconnection within the group". - GOSHH, Limerick, Ireland

"The connection that we provide through these services hopefully help the community to feel like they have an ally in Carusel and in daily life, confronting shortcomings, illness, addiction and more". Carusel, Bucharest, Romania

5. Community based organisations / healthcare workers are an essential part of the healthcare systems (and the social system) but are often overlooked and under-funded.

"Following our results, and the cost-effectiveness that our models create, it should be logical that governments put more resources and support in our structure instead of cutting HIV and sexual health funding and resources, as is happening during the past months and years, at least in Spain, and many other European countries". Apoyo Positivo, Madrid, Spain

"*The work done at a clinical level and psychosocial support level should complement each other one way or another. If there is a disconnection between the clinical level and support level, the deliverance of psychosocial and health care needs will not be achieved*" GOSHH, Limerick, Ireland

6. Community-based organisations and healthcare workers can play a crucial role in addressing and overcoming stigma and discrimination in healthcare.

"For us, the Cy Checkpoint and its people is a "Safe Space", that allows people to be themselves, to freely express their personalities, with respect to one another, but also to share challenges and obstacles they face, in order to try and find solutions, within the community." AIDS Solidarity Movement, Cyprus

"The fact that due to multiple social exclusions, stigma and discrimination and psychosocial factors our clients can be extremely defensive. By sharing the same experiences using the same language and a mutual value and belief system as peers, we break these defences and make people feel comfortable expressing themselves." Positive Voice, Athens, Greece

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About the European AIDS Treatment Group:

The European AIDS Treatment Group (EATG) is a patient-led NGO that advocates for the rights and interests of people living with or affected by HIV/ AIDS and related co-infections within the WHO Europe region. Founded in 1992, the EATG is a network of more than 170 members from 48 countries in Europe. Our members are PLHIV and representatives of different communities affected by HIV/AIDS and co-infections. EATG represents the diversity of more than 2.3 million people living with HIV (PLHIV) in Europe as well as those affected by HIV/AIDS and co-infections. For more information, please visit www.eatg.org