

National policy debate in Hungary

Full article with photos: <http://www.drugreporter.net>

Almost 100 Hungarian harm reduction service providers and researchers gathered at the the European Youth Centre Budapest (30-31 October, 2006) for the two days event. The conference was sponsored by the Open Society Institute and the Correlation Network. On the first day HCLU staff members provided legal and media training for the participants, later in the afternoon three workshops discussed the problems and challenges in the three important fields of harm reduction (substitution therapy, needle and syringe exchange and rave party services). On the second day researchers from the Research Institute for Drug Studies (RIDS, ELTE University, Budapest) presented their findings from a new qualitative research on the access to treatment among Budapest injecting drug users, carried out in the framework of the CORRELATION network. According to the results, most IDUs found it „difficult” to get into a rehabilitation program and „very difficult” to participate in a methadon maintenance program - even if 33 percent of IDUs demanded this type of treatment last year, only a small minority could finally enter a program. 40 percent of research participants reported that they shared injecting equipment in the last 30 days – this alarming data points out that the access to sterile needles and syringes is also limited. Speakers concluded that there are serious barriers to treatment for injecting drug users in Hungary, and these barriers are even stronger in the case of more addicted and more marginalized people.

Members of the three workshops drafted proposals and recommendations for policy decision makers and researchers. This was the first time when the seven NGOs working in rave-dance scene from different parts of the country could meet, therefore they expressed the need for stonger cooperation in the future and they called for the establishment of professional standards. Party service providers unanimously denounced police raids against young people participating in rave parties – they pointed out that there are rational public health alternatives of repressive law enforcement measures. Participants also urged the government to create legislation which obligates rave party organizers to allow entrance for social workers and encourage them to cooperate with service providers in order to develop a safer environment for young people. The workshop on methadone maintenance stated that the coverage of substitution treatment is very low, therefore they urged the government to open new clinics all around the country. The so called TÁMASZ drug care network has 78 local centers in Hungary - if all these centers provided methadone maintenance, there would be access to treatment for all people in need, concluded Dr. József Csorba, head of the biggest methadone center in Budapest. In their consensus statement needle and syringe exchange providers called for a new legislation which facilitates and normalizes the work of these programs and respects the human rights of clients.

On the second day HCLU also organized a round table discussion where service providers discussed the proposals with political decision makers and law enforcement officials. Here the representative of the Office of Prosecutor General repeated her position that needle exchange have to be considered a crime according to recent legislation. She said the parliament has the responsibility to create a new legislation to regulate harm reduction services. Other participants criticised this position because it derives from a false interpretation of the recent Criminal Code. They said what is needed is not change in legislation but change in the attitudes of law enforcement officials. Katalin Felvinczi, the national drug coordinator of the government said until there is no social consensus we cannot expect the government to decriminalize drug use. She called for more public dialogues and debates to change public attitudes. Opponents from HCLU emphasized that drug use needs to be

addressed as a public health issue and government has to ensure that the human rights of drug users are not violated, even if this does not meet with public expectations. The organizers invited a guest speaker from the Open Society Institute, Mauro Guarinieri, who made an impressive presentation about the importance of user involvement in designing and maintaining services.

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