

Caring for Gay Sexual Health and Well-Being

- *European civil society suggestions to improve the sexual health and well-being of men who have sex with men (MSM) and to achieve universal access to comprehensive prevention, treatment, care and support for HIV/AIDS by 2010, as pledged by the member states of the United Nations ⁽¹⁾.*

Why is this text called the “Ljubljana Declaration”?

This text presents current priorities about men who have sex with men (MSM), HIV, and related issues shared by European NGO delegates who met in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on May 28, 2008.



“Health promotion works through concrete and effective community action in setting priorities, making decisions, planning strategies and implementing them to achieve better health. At the heart of this process is the empowerment of communities - their ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies.”

Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (November 1986)

When the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) was discovered 25 years ago, many gay men - notably in North America and Western Europe - were among the first to respond to HIV/AIDS: by defending the rights of People Living with HIV/AIDS, by mobilizing members of vulnerable communities, such as fellow gay men, by promoting safer-sex, including the use of condoms and water-based lubricant, and by urging politicians, health practitioners and researchers to face this new most devastating epidemic.

In 2008, HIV remains a most alarming health threat among MSM across the European continent, from Portugal to Russia. In recent years, MSM communities in Europe also have been affected by severe outbreaks of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (2).

In several Western European countries, studies in gay community settings reveal a prevalence of HIV exceeding 10% (3). In most countries in Central and Eastern Europe, surveys have demonstrated that risky anal sex without condoms between men is common (4), yet, as of today, targeted prevention programs still only reach a very limited fraction of MSM.

Overall, in several countries in our wide European region, there remain major, unacceptable shortcomings with regards to both:

- the scope and quality of the prevention, testing, and treatment programs for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) that are available for MSM.
- the knowledge of the situations faced today by MSM regarding the ongoing epidemics of HIV and other STIs (5).

We can estimate that there are at least 18 million MSM in Europe and in nearby countries (6). Making sure that the best possible solutions are in place to protect and to promote the health of MSM is therefore a matter of both public health and of human rights!

• The need to involve MSM - especially MSM living with HIV - at all levels.

Individuals and communities play a central role in improving and preserving health. One of our core added values as civil society organizations is, therefore, our capacity to mobilize the people who are most intimately concerned by and most vulnerable with regards to the HIV epidemic in a safe, non-judgmental and supportive environment in order to make sure that their needs and priorities are fully taken into account when designing and implementing prevention and health promotion programs.

• The need to expand high-quality prevention and support programs for MSM:

Across Europe, it is non-governmental organizations (NGOs) - including both LGBT (7) organizations and HIV/AIDS NGOs - that implement programs which increase consistent condom use and testing for HIV by MSM and that improve the capacities of gay communities and MSM to face the challenges related to HIV/AIDS.

We need to reach MSM wherever they happen to be: therefore, a consistent number of such health programs take place in gay night clubs or outdoor meeting places that are

popular with MSM. These essential outreach services most often provide:

- Free and easy access to condoms and water-based lubrication;
- Gay-friendly and judgment-free information about HIV and STIs;
- Practical and realistic suggestions to reduce the health risks one may face;
- Tailored, individualized support and referrals to access testing and treatments for HIV and other STIs.

It has also now become obvious that some internet sites have become very popular among MSM (some European gay online forums now have several hundreds of thousands of users). Several innovative web-based interventions have succeeded in promoting HIV testing and reducing risky sexual behaviors among MSM (8).

Such successful individualized and tailored prevention and support programs deserve to be urgently streamlined and scaled up across Europe, notably in countries that recently joined the European Union, as well as in neighboring countries.

There is also a crucial need to involve far more medical, social and behavioral researchers in order to further improve the quality of prevention and health promotion programs, as well as to make sure such interventions match the evolving needs of the communities we work with.

“Greater national commitment is urgently needed to strengthen prevention efforts for men who have sex with men.”

April 2008 report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the Implementation of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS and the Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS

• Enabling easy access to MSM-friendly testing services for HIV and other STIs.

With the 2004 “Dublin Declaration on Partnership to fight HIV/AIDS in Europe and Central Asia (9),” representatives of states and governments committed to deliver “universal and equitable access” to “voluntary testing [for HIV], counseling and follow-up” by 2010. Today, however, a lot of progress must still be made: for instance, MSM-friendly testing services that respect international quality standards for Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) for HIV and other STIs remain extremely rare in some countries of our region. A direct - most detrimental - consequence is that the proportion of HIV diagnoses among MSM that are considered as being late diagnoses (ie. the person is diagnosed with AIDS at the same time or within 12 months of an HIV diagnosis) remains very high in several countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (10).

In line with the high-level promises made in Dublin in February 2004, we recommend the vast development of free, voluntary and anonymous testing services for HIV and other STIs that are non-judgmental, gay-friendly and easily accessible by MSM.



[In Eastern Europe and Central Asia] “virtually no infections are reported among men who have sex with men (...) which I find really hard to believe”.

*Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director,
Moscow, May 3rd 2008*

• Fighting for human rights and achieving equality.

We are most alarmed by the fact that several politicians both in EU member states and in several nearby countries are openly homophobic and thus often breach European and international human rights conventions. In Bucharest, Krakow, Moscow and Riga, to name but these cities, organizing a peaceful public demonstration in favor of the rights of lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual people remains very challenging, due to both violent opposition from local extremist groups and/or outspoken homophobia from public officials. Homophobic contexts that force people to hide their sexual orientation obviously make it extremely difficult to effectively reach and mobilize men who have sex with men with HIV prevention and health-promotion programs.

MSM living with HIV all too often face additional specific stigma and discrimination. Whether in some medical settings, in the workplace, and even within some gay communities, disclosing one's HIV status can lead to immediate rejection which can have most damaging consequences.

We, therefore, call upon the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe to be far more assertive in defending and promoting their own founding values: human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Our European institutions along with political, religious, and other leaders from our region must unequivocally denounce and pursue all forms of discrimination to the full extent of the applicable national laws and international conventions. This includes discrimination specifically affecting members of LGBT communities and those related to medical conditions, such as a positive HIV status.

• The following organizations have endorsed this statement:

ALBANIA: Aksion Plus **ARMENIA:** "Education in the name of health" **BELARUS:** Republican youth public association "Vstrecha." **BELGIUM:** SENSOA **BULGARIA:** "Dose of love" Association **CROATIA:** Iskorak - Sexual and gender minorities rights centre **CYPRUS:** RUBSI (Research Unit in Behaviour & Social Issues) **CZECH REPUBLIC:** Bliss without Risk / Czech AIDS Help Society / Společnost pro plánování rodiny a sexuální výchovu (Czech family planning association) **ESTONIA:** AIDS Tugikeskus (AIDS information & Support Centre) / LIGO, Life Is Going On, Estonian Women Association Against HIV and AIDS **FINLAND:** The Finnish Aids Council / Setä ry - LGBT Rights **FRANCE:** Act Up-Paris / AIDES / Tjenbé red / TRT-5 / Warning **GERMANY:** Deutsche AIDS-Hilfe e.V. (DAH) **GREECE:** Center for Life **HUNGARY:** Anonymous AIDS Association / Hungarian Civil Liberties Union **KAZAKHSTAN:** Public Fund "Mental Health" (Almaty) **KYRGYZSTAN:** LGBT Organization 'Labrys' **LATVIA:** AGIHAS (PLWHA Support group) **LITHUANIA:** Association of PLWHA "Požityvus gyvenimas" (Positive life) / Lithuanian Positive Group **MACEDONIA:** Equality for Gays and Lesbians (EGAL) **The NETHERLANDS:** Aids Fonds / STI AIDS Netherlands **POLAND:** Polish National Network of PLWHA "SIEC PLUS" / Social AIDS Committee (SKA) **PORTUGAL:** GAT grupo português dos tratamentos **ROMANIA:** ACCEPT Association / Alaturi de Voi Romania Foundation / ARAS - Romanian Association Against AIDS /





Population Services International – Romania / Romanian Angel Appeal Foundation **RUSSIAN FEDERATION:** GayPlus Project – PWF (St.-Petersburg) / Phoenix Plus, Orel City Regional Public Organization / Positive wave Fond (St.-Petersburg) / PSI-Russia / LaSky / Russian Harm Reduction Network (RHRN) / Russian Red Cross **SERBIA:** NGO "Stav +" Subotica (region Vojvodina) / Queer Vojvodina / SPAIDS / Youth Information Center - OIC / Yugoslav Youth Association against AIDS **SLOVAKIA:** C.A. Odysseus **SLOVENIA:** Skuc Magnus **SPAIN:** Grupo de Trabajo sobre Tratamientos del VIH (gTt) **SWEDEN:** Hiv-Sverige/HIV-Sweden **SWITZERLAND:** Aids-Hilfe Schweiz (Swiss Aids Federation) **TAJIKISTAN:** Center on Mental Health and HIV/AIDS **UKRAINE:** All-Ukrainian Charity Foundation "The Coalition of HIV-Service Organizations" / All-Ukrainian non-governmental organisation GAY Forum of Ukraine / All-Ukrainian Network of People Living with HIV / Donetsk regional civil society organization "Donbas-SocProject" / East European Development Institute / Interregional East Ukrainian LGBT Association "Equinox" **UNITED KINGDOM:** Gay Men's Health (Scotland) / Naz Project (London) / The Terrence Higgins Trust / Waverley Care (Scotland).

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: AIDS ACTION EUROPE / AIDS Foundation East-West (AFEW) / Dance4Life International / The EATG (The European AIDS Treatment Group) / IGLYO (International Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Youth and Student organization) / ILGA-Europe aisbl (The European Region of the International Lesbian and Gay Association).

• Acknowledgments:



This text primarily draws upon the outcomes of the European Gay Health Seminar "East-West exchanges on HIV prevention and support with Men who have Sex with Men" organized in Paris in June 2007 by AIDS ACTION EUROPE, AIDES, and PSI/Russia - LaSky: <http://www.integration-projects.org/euromsmhiv/> as well the follow-up meeting of European NGOs about Gay Sexual Health that took place in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on May 28, 2008.

We are also inspired by the following international meetings and conferences:

- The May 2008 WHO European Region technical consultation on HIV and other STIs among MSM, in Bled, Slovenia: www.euro.who.int
- The February 2008 meeting for "Global Advocacy for HIV prevention Among MSM" in Geneva, Switzerland, convened by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the International AIDS Society in Geneva, Switzerland: www.msmandhiv.org/documents/globaladvocacy_hivprevent_msm.pdf
- The November 2007 HIV in Europe Conference "Working together for optimal testing and earlier care" in Brussels, Belgium <http://www.hiveurope2007.eu/>
- The August 2006 global meeting "MSM & HIV: Advancing a Global Agenda for Gay Men and Other Men Who have Sex with Men" in Toronto, Canada. www.msmandhiv.org
- The November 2005 International conference on Gay Health in Paris organized by the NGO Warning: <http://santegaie2005.thewarning.info/eng/home.html>
- The October 2004 Expert Meeting "Addressing the Rise in HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infection Rates among MSM in Western Europe" in the Netherlands in October 2004 organized by AIDS FONDS and SCHORER: http://www.schorer.nl/bestanden/Report_EEM.pdf



Thanks!

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• Notes and references:

- (1) Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on June 2, 2006 ("UNGASS 2006" - data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2006/20060615_HLM_PoliticalDeclaration_ARES60262_en.pdf). Among the core indicators that have been developed to monitor the implementation of this declaration, indicators 8, 9, 14, 19 and 23 are specifically applicable to MSM (reference: data.unaids.org/pub/Manual/2007/20070411_ungass_core_indicators_manual_en.pdf)
- (2) As noted for instance by Van de Laar MJ, Monnet DL, Herida M. in their article Multidrug-resistant methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) strain in a men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) community in the United States: comment. Euro Surveill. 2008;13(3):pii=8019. Available online: <http://www.eurosurveillance.org/ViewArticle.aspx?ArticleId=8019>
- (3) Presentation "MSM and HIV in Europe" by Medical Epidemiologist Giedrius Likatavicius, EuroHIV, Institut de Veille Sanitaire in June 2007 at the European Gay Health Seminar in Paris. (Link: <http://www.integration-projects.org/euromsmhiv/index.htm>)
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Literature Review on HIV Epidemics among MSM In Eastern and Central Europe by Ivana Bozicevic, MD, DrPH, Luka Voncina, MD, MSc, WHO Collaborating Centre for Capacity Building in HIV/AIDS Surveillance, School of Public Health, Zagreb, Croatia
- (6) The number of 18 million MSM was calculated with the methodologies developed by NATSAL, UK, 2001, Kinsey Institute 1999, and Yankelovich, San Francisco Public Library 1993 on the basis of the population of the countries of the European region as defined by the World Health Organisation being approximately 750 million people as of 2006 (M. Minalto, 2008).
- (7) LGBT: Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgenders
- (8) Examples of successful online interventions about health with MSM include:
 - the work done by online outreach volunteers from several countries on www.gayromeo.com, an internet forum and dating community for gay, bisexual and transgender men.
 - the project www.gaycruise.nl, a theory-based, tailored, interactive intervention directed at men who have sex with men (MSM) in online chat rooms implemented by Municipal Public Health Service Rotterdam-Rijnmond and the Dutch NGO Schorer.
- (9) In 2008, the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization released a comprehensive report assessing the implementation of the February 2004 Dublin Declaration on Partnership to Fight HIV/AIDS in Europe and Central Asia: <http://www.euro.who.int/>
- (10) Likatavicius G, Downs AM, Alix J, Devaux I, Nardone A. Late HIV diagnoses in Europe, 2000-2004. XVI International AIDS Conference, Toronto 2006.