

WORKING TOGETHER TO END INEQUALITIES



Report of the Webinar on mpox: Reflections, Lessons Learned and Sustainable Strategies

16 May 2023, Zoom

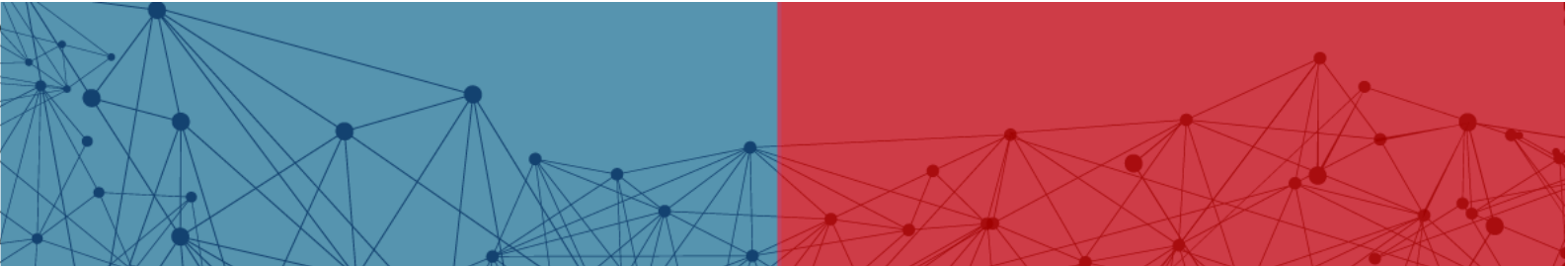
As the first activity in the framework of the program funded by the Gilead's Global mpox Outbreak Emergency Fund, AIDS Action Europe has organized and implemented an informational webinar on mpox for AAE member organisations providing community-led and -based HIV and sexual health services. During the webinar, the leading experts in the field were invited provide the evidence-based information on MPX and provide sustainable strategies for non-judgemental prevention and risk communication.

Nina Tumanyan, Project Manager at AAE, made a short introduction and presented the agenda, as well as the speakers at the webinar.

The first presentation on public health considerations for mpox in EU/EEA was held by Juliana Reyes (ECDC). Reyes showed figures and trends relating to the mpox outbreak – confirmed cases, vaccination rates, affected groups, and distribution of main symptoms. The second part of the presentation focused on public health responses and the topic of vaccination, including vaccine strategy recommendations. In conclusion, Reyes presented the guideline on risk communication and community engagement, as well as a toolkit for mass event organizers, stressing the importance of RCCE as a key element in public health preparedness and response.

Leo Palumbo's (WHO) talk was focused on the latter and presented the WHO/Europe campaign to eliminate mpox, which places affected populations at the center of the response. The campaign is inspired by WHO/Europe's latest mpox policy brief that outlines the actions needed in order to prepare for mass gatherings and to prevent the spread of mpox. It aims to offer a platform for affected communities to express their needs and highlight the contribution of these communities in response to the outbreak. An updated mpox toolkit is part of the campaign and acts as a resource for CSO, event organizers and health authorities. Besides that, WHO has developed a social media campaign and offers communication materials to be shared online.

These talks were followed by two reports on the mpox response from different countries in Europe. Will Nutland (The Love Tank/Prepster) shared the experiences and lessons learned from the United Kingdom. In response to the outbreak in summer 2022, The Love Tank provided information about mpox on the website queerhealth.info, organized informational community panels to disseminate known facts about the infection, and compiled important information for venues and promoters. Their vaccination strategy was characterized by tackling existing inequalities – perpetuated in the national vaccination efforts – by including



marginalized groups left out by those efforts. In the summary, Nutland stressed the importance of a coordinated regional response, which would be more efficient in stopping the spread than separate national strategies.

Axel Jeremias Schmidt (Deutsche Aidshilfe) focused on the response to mpox in Germany, which was based on the AKA (Awareness – Knowledge – Action) approach, where all three levels were approached separately. Schmidt also presented the arguments why mpox can be treated as a sexually transmitted infection, and shared the key messages to GBMSM in order to prevent panic by better informing the affected communities. The presentation highlighted the adverse effects of a mandatory three-week quarantine for people who were infected, and established a correlation of the outbreak with a wave of online homophobia. Furthermore, Deutsche Aidshilfe concluded that this particular STI is an issue that will have to be dealt with long term and suggested to classify it as an AIDS-defining disease. Schmidt also called for an international, or at least a European response strategy.

Miguel Rocha (GAT) and Stéphan Vernhes (AIDES) presented good practice examples from their countries in the response to the mpox outbreak. In Portugal, factors already in place prior to the outbreak enabled an easy implementation of vaccination efforts – the National Vaccination Program already included approved GAT checkpoints as vaccination points and allowed the healthcare system to treat mpox as “just another infection”. Regional health authorities built a communication flow between them, the checkpoints, and the communities. They coordinated the booking process as they had the highest capacities, waiting lists were automatically generated, everyone involved was using the same application, special equipment was used in order to be able to extract six doses from one vial, and the delivery of vaccines to checkpoints was streamlined. Vaccination for staff of sex-on-premises venues was also approved. GAT proactively addressed people who used their services previously. The results showed that this form of population targeting and community engagement increase the vaccine uptake (48% of all vaccinated people in Portugal were vaccinated in GAT checkpoints). In France, mpox is treated as a biological weapon, so the number of vaccines remains a military secret and the responsibility isn't with the MoH, but with the Ministry of defence. Advocacy efforts by AIDES and other civil society organizations resulted in opening the first vaccination centre in Paris in July 2022. AIDES relocated their sexual health services to vaccination centres and provided vaccination support in sex-on-premises venues. Subsequently, the vaccination could also be carried out in certain pharmacies. AIDES also created a peer2peer Telegram-group to better communicate with affected communities (GBMSM, PLWHIV, ChemSex users).

After the presentation, several speakers reiterated the need for a coordinated regional response and stressed the need to include mpox in HIV-, STI-, PrEP-, and similar services.

The webinar was recorded and is available for dissemination among our member organisations and on AAE's online platforms for open access.