



**ŽIV ir AIDS paveiktų moterų bei jų
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Dear friends,

Association of HIV affected women and their families “Demetra” would like to inform you about the inconceivable situation in Lithuania regarding an attack on community-based rapid HIV testing by governmental organizations. Faced by this recent “institutional violence”, the only community-based organization in Lithuania that ensures the availability of rapid HIV testing is conditioned to suspend its HIV prevention services.

Lithuania is still a country where HIV antibody test is not covered by state, except to donors, pregnant women, patients of substitution treatment and in prisons, while the most affected population is people who inject drugs. Restriction to access HIV testing for risk populations distorts epidemiological situation and creates a false impression of good control HIV/AIDS and response to the epidemic. The activities of “Demetra” that increase the access to anonymous, rapid and free HIV testing for all who need it disclose the real HIV situation, had scared the governmental organization responsible for HIV prevention that real HIV situation will be disclosed.

As a response to Demetra’s HIV testing services, National Communicable Diseases and AIDS Centre (CCAC) started inspections of Demetra without any notice, basing its actions on legislation which has not been updated since 2010 and does not respond to WHO, ECDC or EMCDDA recommendations. In the last two months, CCAC submitted four complaints to governmental institutions against “Demetra”. Based on these complains, four commissions inspected rapid community-based HIV testing services on the pretext that rapid HIV testing is an invasive medical procedure which must be performed only in accredited medical facility. Rapid HIV testing for vulnerable populations who have limited access to medical facilities is already available for self-testing and, according to its official instruction, can be performed at the point of care, is certainly not subject to such medicalized approach.

The governmental institution responsible for HIV response, methodological support and cooperation with the NGO sector, has started a brutal fight with an NGO in which a supportive atmosphere and trust from most affected populations gives us a possibility to provide services that nobody else provides in the country. The inspection commissions also visited our partner institutions that are accredited medical facilities seeking to intimidate and stop the rapid HIV testing activities.

The results of our work have been really successful. In the partnership with the AIDS Healthcare Foundations and other organizations in the country, 71,465 rapid HIV tests were performed between 2011 and 2016, 920 test results (1.3%) were reactive and 798 (87%) persons testing positive were linked to care. Broad advocacy and information campaigns have been attracting more and more people to voluntarily perform rapid, anonymous and free HIV test and to learn

their HIV status. "Demetra" has also established new services for MSM and sexually active populations in Vilnius and Klaipeda cities. During 2016, up to 50 percent of all new HIV cases in the country were found with rapid HIV tests provided by "Demetra"

This is our first appeal to the international community. For several years, we have been trying to address the gaps in HIV prevention through advocacy work, meetings with decision-makers, participating in hearings of national HIV/AIDS plans, using the UNGASS momentum, Dublin declaration reporting platforms, but the situation is getting worse because the number of new HIV cases is rising every day due to inconsistent prevention by the state.

Finally, we would like to stress that, for many years, CCAC has not been taking into account the opinions of international experts from WHO, ECDC, EMCDDA or statements from evidence-based guidelines and recommendations. Mr. Aurelijus Veryga, Minister of Health, and Vytenis Andriukaitis, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, EC have been notified of this.

Sincerely

Svetlana Kulsis

On behalf of Association of HIV affected women and their families "Demetra"