



# Harm Reduction - Moscow

## Project Report

Andrey Rylkov Foundation (ARF)

With the support of AIDS Fonds



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Report on the time period between 01.03.2018 and 31.12.2018

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## Goals

The main goal of the project is to address HIV, Hepatitis C, overdose, legal problems and other harmful consequences amongst people using illegal drugs (PWUD) in Moscow.

## About ARF

ARF is the only organization in Moscow that provides harm reduction services to people who use drugs. We provide daily help to PWUD in Moscow by distributing harm reduction materials, providing consultations and other support. This assistance is in great demand due to the repressive drug policy and absence of other drug services, a situation which our organization strives to change. We advocate for access to effective and scientifically supported prevention strategies and treatments for HIV, hepatitis, and drug addiction, including harm reduction and substitution therapy programs for PWUD who are facing discrimination due to their dependency. We are encouraging change by actively advocating among our community and empowering its members to defend their rights through litigation; as well as by demanding policy change and by informing the public about what humane and effective drug policy can and should be. To accomplish our goals we are working with the media, conducting public campaigns and engaging in educational and activist work.

Our foundation has a horizontal planning and management structure. We are a community organization of people who use drugs and all of our programs and projects have been initiated by members and activists of this diverse community.

## Main accomplishments

### Expanding the reach

Usually, a large part of our work is dedicated to finding funding to support our activities. Despite the instability and unpredictability of funding every year, we were lucky that the work of our harm reduction project has not been interrupted since 2009. And although we have had periods of very little funding, we managed to maintain services at a stable level and increase the coverage and range of services every year.

In 2018, unexpectedly, in a year when it seemed, there would be no money at all, we were fortunate enough to work in conditions of good financing. First, we received an Emergency grant from the Aidsfonds and second, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, decided to support our work for another half a year after initially planning to fund until the summer of 2018. Such generous co-financing has allowed to expand outreach activities as well as our popularity among various community groups. First, we increased the activity of core services: the frequency of outreach in the streets, distributed more materials, provided assistance in solving social, medical and legal issues, released useful informational materials such as a newspaper for drug users “Shlyapa i Bayan”, a brochure “Good news for people living with HIV”, conducted training events and community meetings. We were able to increase our indicators in the number of outreach visits and other parameters by 30 per cent compared to 2017. All of this allowed us to take our work to a new level and help more people than before.

In addition to quantitative growth, we were able to expand our project to reach new key groups and networks of people who use drugs, in particular men who have sex with men (in the context of chemsex), young people (who mainly purchase drugs in the darkweb), young people who use drugs in the context of the dance scene, users of stimulants and new psychoactive substances, street female sex workers. Such a quantitative and conceptual expansion of the project became an important turning point in our work.

Despite the difficulties related to working in the context of hyper-repressive drug policy we manage to improve our work making it more appealing for various groups of PWUD. At the same

time, this context presents many challenges: repression of non-governmental and non-progovernmental organizations, the loss of donors, severe marginalization and stigmatization of PWUD, difficulties in access to necessary medical services and narrow opportunities for work in the field of HIV prevention, protection of human rights and harm reduction.

## Street outreach

Our services are provided in the context of a diverse drug scene. On the one hand, as in previous years, we work nearby pharmacies, which sell psychoactive drugs under the counter. These are not all pharmacies in Moscow, but only those where employees decide to sell medicines without prescriptions. We find such pharmacies with the assistance of the participants or our project, people who use drugs. Some of these pharmacies remain unchanged from year to year, but many pharmacies “close” and activities are transferred to another location. About 20-30 people can approach such pharmacies in one evening and purchase substances such as tropicamide, Lyrica, mydriacyl, phenazepam, as well as syringes and other materials.

Our outreach work is carried out in several districts of Moscow. In 2018, we increased the weekly number of outreach visits from 6-7 in 2017 to 13-15 weekly in 2018. As a result, there was a significant increase in the number of people reached by the project. The project increased its positive impact on the availability of HIV prevention, social and legal assistance among drug users. In addition, we have established regular weekly outreach for street sex workers who use drugs. Outreach is conducted on a schedule, with visits made during the times when most drug users gather.

During outreach trips, we distribute syringes and condoms, conduct HIV testing, counsel on health and legal issues, and direct people to various specialized services in the city. We also cover overdose prevention and provide naloxone, which helped to save 605 lives according to the reports received from our participants. If necessary, requests for more in-depth assistance are addressed by our case managers. A certified surgeon works with us to advise and assist our participants both in person and remotely. Our project participants also have access to a lawyer and a psychologist.

Our project is assisted by 11 social workers with varying degrees of involvement, three case managers, three lawyers, one psychologist and a surgeon. New volunteers are constantly joining our organization. In 2018 about 20 volunteers worked with us.

## E-outreach

At the same time, a large proportion of people using illegal drugs in Moscow buys them on the darkweb. Since they find their drugs through anonymous communication systems and in hidden

places, they usually don't intersect with us on the streets and instead get in contact with us due to our reputation and the recommendations of friends and internet presence. In 2018 we tried to increase our outreach through the Internet and messengers such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Several anonymous popular Telegram drug channels with readership over 100.000 people have written about our work. Additionally, we have also created our own telegram channel "Narcophobia" and our team went through cybersecurity training. We try to assist other relevant channels, promote their initiatives and create partnerships with the use of the Internet and the darkweb.

## Other venues

At the end of 2018 we began to work at various dance venues and engaged in outreach during three raves, as well as at events for the LGBTQ+ community. On the scene, we provide tests for HIV, Hepatitis and consult regarding health, harm reduction and legal issues. These services became very demanded and we are currently seeking additional funding to increase the outreach to dance and chemsex scene.

## Social and Legal Assistance

All of the participants in the project can receive medical and social assistance, as well as legal assistance from "street lawyers" if they require it. We don't simply provide people with syringes and condoms; we offer a holistic approach to people in need. We believe in empowering people by helping them create a plan to solve their specific issue and assist them in following through with the plan, step by step. We developed an algorithm to solve cases in a step by step process, which assists people to acquire the knowledge, skills and strength to operate independently. In this reported time period, we provided social and legal assistance to 83 participants.

## Overcoming difficulties with access to the medical system and HIV treatment

The main difficulty with medical, social and legal support is the inability of the city institutions to meet the needs of our participants due to stigma, discrimination and absence of opioid substitution treatment. Our participants are denied of vital medical services. Often, the methods used when working with drug users are archaic and are not scientifically based, and often aren't medically

ethical. Drug users seeking assistance in medical institutions often face psychological violence and abuse by medical personnel. They are also often denied their right to receive appropriate services. It is crucial to provide support to users on this path so they do not give up.

During 2018 as agreed with Aidsfonds we have placed great attention to ways to improve our abilities to facilitate people's access to HIV treatment and developing a commitment to undergo ART. We are faced with the fact that, despite the positive results of testing, it is difficult for our participants to register with the AIDS Center and initiate ART. The problem lays both in repressive drug policy and absence of opioid substitution treatment that helps to stabilize people on ART, but also lack of client-oriented approach in the AIDS Center. As a response to these difficulties, we have developed and implemented an algorithm to simplify communication with the AIDS Center and increase adherence.

When receiving a positive test in the process of street work, we provide even more information about the importance of registration with the AIDS Center, early initiation of treatment and adherence to ART. An algorithm was developed for the actions of social workers. First of all, we have developed information materials emphasizing the importance of an early start of the treatment. Second, we have developed a strategy to include case managers in communication between the clients and the AIDS Center. We would usually hold an in-depth motivational conversation, provide a travel card for the subway and in case of need assign a social worker for the initial visit to the AC. The final stage of the algorithm is assistance with monitoring the administration of ART drugs. At the outputs of street social work, employees confidentially and kindly ask about ART medications, possible side effects, and support in their committed medication.

## Community Events

ARF places a large focus to events that involve various communities of PWUD into the promotion of humane drug policy as well as solidarity and support of each other. Below we list some of the major events we carried out in 2018.

- ★ The International campaign **Support, Don't Punish** on June 26. During this event, we had a football match with the local communities of PWUD at the neighbourhoods where we carry out outreach, had a quiz and had a good time in the company of our participants. More about it here: <http://rylkov-fond.org/blog/novosti/spd-2018/>

- ★ During the **International Day Against Homophobia**, we held an event aimed to support solidarity action between PWUD and LGBTQ+. As part of this project, a print appeal from LGBTQ+ to drug users was distributed and promoted during outreach. We also discussed with our participants the importance of tolerance and solidarity with each other. You can see the results here: <http://rylkov-fond.org/blog/novosti/antigomofob-day/>
- ★ From June 25th to June 30th, we carried out an **Outreach Internship Program** for a social worker from St. Petersburg and for several new employees and volunteers of the foundation. A brief report can be found here: <http://rylkov-fond.org/blog/hr-moscow/outreach-chronicle/far-delitsya-opytom/>
- ★ At the end of August 2018, we organized our annual **Ready for School** event. This event is aimed to help parents who use drugs to prepare their kids for school. We have organized fundraising to support them financially but our main aim was not only to buy stationery, textbooks and other materials necessary for school but also help parents and children to treat preparation for school as a holiday and a bonding experience. Together families find the things necessary for school, communicate, choose notebooks and bags together. Read more here: <http://rylkov-fond.org/blog/hr-moscow/detskij-proekt/2018-school/>
- ★ We provide our office space for community meetings. Twice a week the community of Narcotic Anonymous meets on our premises. This helps to help those people who wish to stop using drugs but cannot get access to quality drug treatment in Russia.
- ★ Every two weeks we carry out a Movie Club, where our volunteers and participants watch and discuss various movies.
- ★ We have held several workshops for our regular team and volunteers to increase their knowledge in the field of drug treatment, HIV treatment, social work tools, and legal assistance.
- ★ In the summer of 2018, six ARF staff members and volunteers went to Berlin in order to get acquainted with their approaches to harm reduction and social work and principles of work with marginalized communities.
- ★ August 31, during the **International Overdose Awareness Day** ARF held solo pickets "Jean-Michel Basquiat could live!". They were dedicated not only to the famous and beloved American artist who died because of overdose but also to our friends, as well as tens of thousands of other people who could have been saved by naloxone. Here you can watch the video report of this day: <https://youtu.be/BSkuynU3PF4>
- ★ October 31, on the eve of the **International Junkie Day**, we held a grand exhibition of photographs submitted by people who use drugs and sympathetic artists. The exhibition called Positive Moments was visited by about 70 people and two punk bands performed in support of the event.

- ★ Distribution of second-hand items to participants has been a tremendous success. The community is actively involved in these promotions. Community members and our supporters gather the second-hand items and spread the news about these actions.
- ★ Every season we carry out Subbotnics to collect used syringes on the streets of Moscow. It is a common problem since recycling doesn't really work in Moscow and since the municipal services do not care about used syringes laying in layers in the parks and squares. The social workers together with PWUDs take to the streets and collect used syringes. The project has several goals: first, the removal of syringes and needles from lawns and city streets. Second, this event is the perfect opportunity to mobilize the community. Third, this project helps us establish contact with the neighbouring community. This is how our last event to collect used syringes went: <http://rylkov-fond.org/blog/hr-moscow/outreach-chronicle/listopad-2018/>
- ★ Our favourite form of working with the community are **Quiz Nights**. This form of interaction and knowledge acquisition is easy, more interactive and memorable than normal workshops and seminars. In a playful and competitive form, it is possible to convey important information. During this reporting period, quizzes were held on women's rights, support - not punish message, Hepatitis C, HIV prevention, human rights, day against homophobia.
- ★ In the summer we launched a community survey campaign. In the course of this campaign (with the help of Google forms), our employees interview participants on the quality of materials we provide, as well as their satisfaction and knowledge of the services provided by the project. We also ask how we can do better. We intend to collect 100 survey responses.

## Main Indicators

Number of <b>participants</b> that the project assisted	<b>3909</b> Males <b>2765</b> Females <b>1144</b>
Number of <b>new participants</b> who joined the project in the reported time period	<b>1091</b> Males <b>747</b> Females <b>344</b>
Number of <b>interactions</b> with the project participants	<b>5950</b> Males <b>4190</b> Females <b>1760</b>

Number of <b>distributed syringes</b>	<b>208929</b> <b>(of them 44200 AF)</b>
Number of condoms distributed	<b>27940</b> <b>(of them 5000 AF)</b>
Number of informational print materials distributed (co-funded)	<b>8344</b>
Number of disinfectant wipes distributed	<b>93526</b> <b>. (of them 64100 AF)</b>
Number of needles distributed (co-funding)	<b>15466</b>
Number of medicating creams provided (co-funding)	<b>3467</b>

Number of surgical dressings for wrapping wounds (co-funding)	<b>5596</b>
Number of participants <b>directed</b> to HIV testing	<b>1259</b>
Number of participants who received HIV results	<b>246</b>
Number of positive HIV results	<b>32</b>
Number of participants <b>directed</b> to receive STI tests	<b>342</b>
Number of participants <b>directed</b> to receive tuberculosis screening	<b>96</b>
Number of legal consultations	<b>481</b>
Number of Hepatitis C consultations	<b>607</b>
Number of overdose consultations	<b>1419</b>
Number of consultations for overcoming addiction	<b>659</b>
Number of consultations post-injection complications	<b>1158</b>
Number of Naloxone ampoules distributed	<b>2909</b>
Number of lives saved with Naloxone	<b>591</b>

## Special thanks to the Aidsfonds

Our team would like to express hearty thanks to Aidsfonds for providing very timely emergency support to our work. This support was provided at a critical moment when our future was not clear

and we did not know where to find finances to carry out our activities. Therefore this support was important not only financially but also morally, it demonstrated the power of solidarity of the international HIV/AIDS Community. With the support of this funding we were able to increase our outreach activities but also establish contacts with very important key communities, such as men who have sex with men and use drugs in the context of chemsex, young people who use stimulant drugs and buy drugs only electronically, street sex workers, people that participate in dance scene and use dance drugs. Despite the difficult political environment we managed to improve our quantitative indicators and the quality of our services as well as the popularity of our project among all kinds of people who use drugs in Moscow. We believe that our message and services are key to protect health and human rights of underprivileged people and we are sincerely thankful to the AidsFonds for supporting us in supporting our communities!