

PRESS RELEASE

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European Union Joint Action on HIV and Co-infection Prevention and Harm Reduction launched with participation of 23 partners in 18 EU Member States

On 14-15 January 2016 in Vilnius, Lithuania, the European Union Joint Action on HIV and Co-infection Prevention and Harm Reduction (HA-REACT) held its first Partnership Forum to kick off activities. HA-REACT addresses existing gaps in the prevention of HIV and other co-infections, especially tuberculosis (TB) and viral hepatitis, among people who inject drugs (PWID). This three-year project was launched in late 2015 with core funding from the European Union (EU), and is being implemented by 23 partners in 18 EU Member States. Twelve collaborating partners are contributing additional expertise, among them the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA).

Implementation of HA-REACT is taking place primarily in three focus countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Hungary), with attention given to preparing toolkits and guidelines that will benefit the entire European Union.

“There is a real opportunity to eliminate debilitating infections among vulnerable people in Europe within a decade. By working together, the HA-REACT partners and the EU Commission will support the focus countries to achieve this goal,” said HA-REACT Coordinator Mika Salminen, who is the Director of the Department for Infectious Disease at Finland’s National Institute for Health and Welfare.

“The implementation of this Joint Action will facilitate the exchange of good practices among all participating EU countries, and build alliances among government institutions, municipalities and NGOs in improving the EU-wide response to HIV, TB and viral hepatitis among people who inject drugs,” says Dr. Emilis Subata, Director of the Vilnius Centre for Addictive Disorders.

“We now have most of the knowledge and tools to end HIV, AIDS and hepatitis C among people who inject drugs in Europe. However, political will and cost remain as top priorities,” adds Luis Mendão, co-chair of the EU Civil Society Forum for HIV/AIDS.

HA-REACT has the following objectives:

- To significantly contribute to the elimination of HIV and to reductions in cases of TB and hepatitis C among PWID in the European Union by 2020. This objective is aligned with strategic action plans issued by the European Union, the World Health Organization, UNAIDS and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- To focus particularly on Member States where there are obvious gaps in effective and evidence-informed interventions, or where such interventions are not being implemented extensively enough.

- To encourage the implementation of comprehensive harm reduction programmes at sufficient scale and of sufficient quality in all Member States as an essential strategy for improving prevention and treatment of HIV, TB and viral hepatitis.

Specific HA-REACT work packages will focus on increasing PWID access to testing for HIV, TB and viral hepatitis and strengthening linkages to care for people tested; overcoming barriers to the scale-up of harm reduction services for PWID; improving harm reduction and health services in prisons; and promoting patient-centred integrated care for PWID.

The project budget is EUR 3.7 million, and it is co-funded (80%) by the Health Programme of the European Union.

HA-REACT is coordinated by the National Institute for Health and Welfare, Finland and led by a Steering Committee consisting of the work package leaders. Partner organisations come from the following countries:

- Croatia
- Czech Republic
- Denmark
- Estonia
- Finland
- Germany
- Greece
- Hungary
- Iceland
- Italy
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Luxembourg
- Malta
- Poland
- Portugal
- Slovenia
- Spain

Collaborating partners in addition to ECDC and EMCDDA include organisations based in Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

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