

HIV services in Serbia during COVID-19 pandemic



- **Asocijacija Duga/ Association Rainbow** was established in June 2004 and operates on the territory of Serbia.
- In the context of prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), currently, our main focus is MSM population
- On the territory of Serbia, we have developed an outreach service of counselling and testing for HIV and STIs, in a mobile medical unit. We are one of the few NGOs in Serbia which has the possibility of providing health services outside the medical institutions
- **Our services include:** counselling and testing in mobile medical unite and drop in center, linkage to care, PEER support, psychosocial support, and medical consultations



COVID-19 situation in Serbia

- At the moment the emergency state has been removed, but the protection measures are still in power.
- At the very beginning of the epidemic in Serbia, the state of emergency has been introduced with the aim to stop the fast spread of the virus
- This included introduction of the measures of complete lockdown for the persons older than 65
- Partial lockdown for the rest of the population between 5PM and 5AM during week and complete lockdown during weekends.
- This also pertains to the working hours of the shops, schools, universities, cafes, bars, clubs and parks where completely closed.
- Infection clinics that used to be involved in HIV treatment, have been transformed into COVID-19 clinics, so that certain interventions in relation to the HIV have been postponed for the period after the COVID-19 crisis.
- ARV can be collected at designated pharmacies, or they can organize home delivery of ARV



Description of adapted services during COVID -19

- We had to adapt the services so that they stay in accordance with both the needs of our clients and with the state of emergency regulations that were in power
- The only services we were able to provide to our target groups, during the very outbreak of the COVID epidemic in Serbia, were communication and information distributions to our clients via phone, internet and social networks, dating apps and online counselling
- We have also translated to the local language, and distributed, the most important messages given by relevant international organisation such as UNAIDS and International AIDS Society regarding HIV/AIDS and COVID-19.
- At the very beginning of epidemic we have providing social support services including delivering basic food, hygiene products and humanitarian assistance for vulnerable populations in our community



- Based on the guidelines of relevant international organizations such as UNAIDS on the HIV counselling and testing during the COVID-19 epidemic, we made a decision to continue with our services in this field
- Work method in these circumstances is provision of standard counselling and testing services with special precaution measures such as usage of protective masks, gloves and protective visors (provided not only to our staff but to the each client, too) as well as application of the means for disinfection, before and after each intervention. The information given by the counsellors also include basic information on the measure of protection from COVID-19 and its potential joint impact with HIV/AIDS



- Since our organization has established long term cooperation with the public health care institutions relevant for HIV, we were able to refer each new HIV diagnosed client to the respective institution for confirmatory testing and linkage to care, with the option to accompany each individual through the entire process, if needed.



Lessons learned

- What we have learned and concluded during the above mentioned challenges is that the risk from HIV was constantly present among most vulnerable population, as well as their need for the information and our services (primarily counselling and testing, as well as informative and protective materials such as lubricants and condoms). Moreover, the need was even greater due to the fact that most of the services of this kind were completely unavailable to our target population during the first two weeks of the epidemic outbreak. This situation clearly showed that it is necessary to introduce additional options in the future, for example self-testing (combined with the online counselling).

Thank you for your attention!



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