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## NEW POLICY FOR EMERGENCY PERSONNEL HAILED AS TRIUMPH FOR GEORGIAN HARM REDUCTION NETWORK

Georgian Harm Reduction Network (GHRN) advocates are hailing the decision by government to overturn a requirement that ambulance and emergency personnel notify police when they respond to a possible drug overdose.

The decision, taken in August, means that people who inject drugs can access the care they may need without fear of persecution — or prosecution.

Stigma and fear remain considerable barriers to service use, according to surveys conducted by local NGOs with support from the Global Fund. A survey conducted by GHRN in early 2014 found that more than one in four drug users aged 30-35 had overdosed at least once in the six months prior. Tellingly, although nearly half of the survey respondents also reported witnessing a drug overdose during the same period, only 15.8% called an ambulance.

The policy change was driven by both street- and high-level advocacy campaigns supporting the slogan “our repression is your regression” and was led by GHRN in partnership with the Georgian Network of People who use Drugs (GeNPUD). Some of the funding for the advocacy campaign was provided by the Global Fund under a Round 10 grant.

The lifting of the requirement for emergency personnel is just one step in a long process to change the highly contentious criminalization of drug use in Georgia, and one step towards mitigating the consequences of those drug policies on public health.

HIV infection rates are growing faster among people who inject drugs than any other population in the

country; of the 4,463 people estimated to be living with HIV in Georgia, more than half have self-identified as injected drug users.

“Georgia is among the countries with a currently low HIV prevalence rate but high potential for developing a widespread epidemic,” Global Fund-supported research conducted by a local NGO in 2012 concluded.

This has prompted the need of a strategic refocusing of priorities under the national strategic plan (NSP) for HIV to develop a more coherent approach to harm reduction and prevention specifically targeting people who inject drugs.

The problem, according to Konstantine Labartkava, board director of GeNPUD, is that although the state funds harm reduction and provides hospital resources for detox programs, these public health initiatives are superseded by the punitive legal environment that applies harsher sentences for drug use than for homicide.

GHRN is hoping that the \$33.9 million allocated to Georgia under the new funding model (NFM) will include some funding for advocacy work to overturn some of the more repressive drug policies in the country. A package of policy changes has been developed and presented to parliament but the recommendations have not gone far due to significant resistance from a core bloc of legislators keen to hold the line against liberalization.

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