

HIV prevention services for injecting drug users (IDUs) in Romanian penitentiaries

In February 2008 the National Administration of Penitentiaries (ANP) and UNODC Project Office in Romania launched the common initiative of introducing HIV prevention services for IDUs in three Romanian penitentiaries.

The National Anti-drug Strategy 2005-2012, its Action Plan for 2005-2008 and a Ministerial Order endorsed in 2006 by the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reform and Ministry of Justice created the legal premises for the introduction of the opiate substitution treatment (OST) and needle syringe programs (NSP) in the Romanian penitentiary system. By the Romanian law, NSP refers to all the activities and measures targeting IDUs and aiming to reduce risks related to injecting drug use, including exchange of needles and syringes.

Arguments for the initiative included the increased number of the inmates with drug use history and the reported HIV and Hepatitis C risks among prisoners (including sharing of injecting equipments). The number of inmates who self declare the drug addiction before detention doubled in the last 5 years, with 2.435 inmates reporting drug addiction before detention in 2007 and bringing a 7.43% prevalence of drug use among Romanian prison population¹.

The initiation of the HIV prevention services for IDUs was fully supported by prison management teams and inmates. However, the novelty and the practical aspects of the interventions and the limited access to information regarding drug use behaviors and related risks, raise challenges in the program implementation.

In order to overcome these challenges, a coordination team was established including ANP, UNODC and prison staff representatives. The team developed working protocols for OST and NSP that regulate the organization of services within the selected prison units, describe the tasks and responsibilities of the involved prison staff and inmates as well as the rights and responsibilities of the beneficiaries of the newly established services. The protocols were officially endorsed by the top management of the National Administration of Penitentiaries.

The UNODC Romania team ensured specific training on NSP and OST services for prison staff (medical, psycho-social and security) and inmates and facilitated the networking with similar community services from Romania and other countries. At the end of June, after only 3 weeks of implementation of NSP, in the two piloted penitentiaries 15 inmates are already registered in the NSP. The program is implemented through the network of inmates peer educators under the coordination of the medical and social department.

The high commitment of the ANP decision makers and prisons management teams are the key elements for ensuring sustainability of the newly established services.

¹ "Introduction of NSPs in Romanian penitentiaries system" – ANP/UNODC Presentation to XVIII International Harm Reduction Conference, Spain May 2008.