



Press release
Montreal, July 29, 2022

AIDS 2022 Conference in Montreal: for the health of people who use drugs Coalition PLUS celebrates its "Harm Reduction Dealers"

On the occasion of the 24th International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2022), Coalition PLUS is launching its “Proud Harm Reduction Dealers” campaign to celebrate community workers who are committed to ensuring an access to harm reduction (HR) services for people who use drugs. Through this campaign, Coalition PLUS also denounces the lack of political will, which still deprives millions of people of yet effective services to preserve their health, avoid overdoses and prevent new infections of HIV and viral hepatitis.

The UNAIDS annual report, presented this Wednesday, July 27 in Montreal ahead of the AIDS 2022 conference, reveals that people who inject drugs and their partners represent 10% of the 1.5 million new HIV infections recorded in the world in 2021. This proportion reaches nearly 20% outside sub-Saharan Africa. The risk of HIV infection in this group of people is 35 times higher and nearly 39% of new hepatitis C virus infections are recorded in this population.

Still limited access to harm reduction services around the world

Despite this high risk of infection, only 1% of people who inject drugs globally have access to harm reduction services. Even today, these essential services for reversing the curves of HIV and viral hepatitis among users and their partners were still not available in 108 countries around the world.

“These inequalities in access to vital health services are intolerable! We have known for decades that harm reduction measures are effective against HIV and viral hepatitis, especially hepatitis C and overdoses which are devastating in certain regions of the world, particularly in North America. Unfortunately, when it comes to drug policy, some leaders still prefer indifference, or even worse, repression, to

public health!” says Professor Hakima Himmich, President of Coalition PLUS, indignantly.

“As UNAIDS says in its report, the response to HIV is in danger! The time to act is now, ensuring access to prevention and care services for those most at risk, including people who use drugs, wherever they are in the world. This requires a reform of the legal frameworks in which these services are part, but also more dedicated funding”, she urges.

Harm reduction dealers, heroes in the fight against AIDS and viral hepatitis

Harm reduction services include, among others, needle exchange programs, opioid substitution treatment, overdose prevention and treatment, and psychosocial support for people who use drugs. In Estonia, the roll-out of such services reduced new infections among people who inject drugs by 97% between 2007 and 2016, while in Portugal the needle exchange program helped reduce new HIV infections among people who use drugs from 1,497 to 78 per year between 2000 and 2013.

These successes are largely attributable to community workers and who do field work. Often themselves using drugs, these people are committed to demanding the implementation of health programs adapted to the needs of their communities and to offer their peers tailor-made support, without judgment and in complete confidentiality. Thus, the expertise of these “harm reduction dealers” remains crucial to guarantee that people who use drugs have access to the prevention and care tools necessary to take charge of their health. Coalition PLUS pays tribute to them through the campaign “Proud Harm Reduction Dealers ”, presented at the AIDS 2022 conference in Montreal.

“We celebrate the courage of these too often forgotten heroes, because they are the ones who really act on the epidemics of HIV and viral hepatitis, by expanding the offer of prevention and care to the most vulnerable and far from care. It is all the more admirable that they work in often hostile contexts and with financial means that are still too limited in relation to the needs”, emphasizes Hakima Himmich.

Representatives of communities affected by HIV in countries of the South, conspicuously absent from the AIDS 2022 conference in Montreal

While, 33 years earlier, in 1989, activists in the fight against AIDS claimed for the first time their central place in the response to the epidemic, the voices of the communities most affected, in particular from the countries of the South, will be few this year. For example, the Coalition PLUS delegation was cut by 15% of its delegates due to refusals of entry visas to Canada.

Hakima Himmich, President of the organization, deplors this situation: “Not only does community work remain little recognized, but in addition, as we are still seeing with this conference that many of our representatives cannot take part in the exchanges and scientific and political events which concern them in the first place. It is a great injustice and, once again, a denial of their contribution to the struggle.”

On the occasion of the 24th International AIDS Conference AIDS 2022, Coalition PLUS calls on States and actors involved in global public health to:

- Decriminalize consumers of psychoactive products
- Fully recognize the fundamental rights of people who use drugs
- Strengthen funding for community harm reduction programs
- Systematically involve people who use or ex-use psychoactive products in the development of policies that concern them
- Experiment, with the communities concerned, with innovative systems and responses, such as Less Risk Consumption Rooms (SCMR)
- Commit to using existing provisions in international law to make patented medicines more widely available
- Recognize, value and remunerate community actors and actresses who are committed to access to health within their communities.

About Coalition PLUS: International union of community NGOs fighting against AIDS and viral hepatitis founded in 2008, Coalition PLUS operates in 52 countries and with around a hundred civil society organizations. Our member associations and partners involve the communities most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and hepatitis in the definition and implementation of health policies and programs that directly affect them. They promote innovative methods, adapted to the people most discriminated against in access to health. Coalition PLUS is currently chaired by Prof. Hakima Himmich.

[Learn more about Coalition PLUS' mobilization at AIDS 2022](#)

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