



ROUND TABLE "THE FUTURE OF SERBIA IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HIV / AIDS"

National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 11/17/2016.

HIV is now equally health, social and legal challenge, and more and more general problem. Without common engagement of state institutions and civil society organizations on prevention, quality of treatment, care and support as well as antistigma and discrimination activities, it threatens to become larger as the number of infected increase each year, and the consequences can be more serious and more expensive than the price of prevention – it was agreed on the round table "The future of Serbia in the fight against HIV / AIDS" held on 17th November 2016 in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia.

The Round table brought together about 60 representatives of the highest state organs, institutions and independent human rights mechanisms of the Republic of Serbia, followed by international organizations as well as civil society organizations and people living with HIV / AIDS, and organized by the Union Organization of Serbia involved in the protection of persons living with HIV / AIDS (USOP). The Round table was organized within the project "Towards the standardization of community based social services provision for people living with HIV and AIDS in Serbia", that is implementing as a part of program "European Union support to inclusive society", which is financed by the EU with 5,4 million euros and implemented by the European Union Delegation to the Republic of Serbia in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs. The round table was supported by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and the pharmaceutical company "GlaxoSmithKline".

- In the last two decades Serbia has made great achievement in this field. Today, we speak openly about HIV, there are different plans and prevention program, a special attention is given to activities aimed at protecting and assisting people living with HIV and AIDS – said Mrs. Jasmina Mitrovic Maric, Advisor of the President of the Republic of Serbia and recalled that the President of Serbia, Mr. Tomislav Nikolic, has provided support to associations of people living with HIV / AIDS and also promised that such good practice will continue in the future with a tendency to raise cooperation to a higher level with the aim of preventing consequences of HIV epidemic .

Representative of the Delegation of European Union in Serbia, Mr. Nicolas Bizel said that, in addition to prevention programs, Serbia has to develop quality programs that reduce stigma and discrimination against all vulnerable groups, including towards people living with HIV and AIDS, as well as to consider the possibilities of sustainability of the programs through standardization of services provided by civil society organizations in this field.

- In the latest report on Serbia's progress in meeting the conditions of accession, the European Union has recognized that the human rights situation in the field of HIV / AIDS in Serbia is still unsatisfactory and that there is still much to be done in this field, and Serbia will have the full support along the way – said Mr. Nicolas Bizel.

Although the largest donor to Serbia in HIV programs, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in Geneva, who in the course of a decade in our country invested about \$ 30 million, two years ago ceased to finance programs to fight AIDS finding that Serbia is sufficiently developed in this field. It turns out that is not so, and the problems in the HIV field still exists. Therefore, the invitation to attend the Round table





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was responded by Mrs. Corina Maxim, specialist for transition and sustainability of the office of portfolio manager of the Global Fund. She pointed out that Serbia is, due to epidemics and other indicators related to HIV, again qualified for funding by Global Fund, but the possibility of affiliation and amount of funds required for this type of support to Serbia will be discussed on Global Fund Board meeting in mid-December this year.

- When and if the Board of the Global Fund decide to financially support Serbia and also decide about the content of this particular program, then Serbia will be able to re-apply for financial assistance in 2017, but it is necessary for Serbia to issue a priority when it comes to the fight against AIDS, then be prepared to take timely and respond to the invitation of the Global Fund for the possibility of allocating funds for these programs, and to provide their own funds for the sustainability of these programs - explained Mrs. Corina Maxim.

Representatives of the United Nations who attended the Round table also gave full support to associations of people living with HIV / AIDS to advocate and lobby government authorities to fulfill all human rights of this population, and to continue prevention programs, and raise importance of the quality of treatment in order to stop the epidemic.

At the Round table in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, current national response to HIV and the challenges actors face in this response was discussed. The discussion has three separate sessions that included health, social and legal protection and policy, in order to help participants to understand what the main challenges in the response to HIV are and what steps need to be taken in the future. Within the first thematic area the situation in the national response to the HIV response after the cessation of funding by the Global Fund was discussed. It was emphasized that, beside of HIV treatment, the state does not support any program and activity related to HIV. Prevention programs for vulnerable groups are not at the place, and particular concern is about fact that there is no the Commission for the fight against HIV / AIDS for a long time, although USOP warned Serbian Government and relevant ministries several times. The participants stressed importance of the Commission for continuation of fighting against this epidemic, but also for applying to various funds related to the fight against AIDS. It is also heard that at this moment Serbia does not have a Strategy on HIV infection and AIDS since the previous five-year expired in 2015, and that one was without action plan and budget, which USOP also repeatedly pointed to the competent authorities. It is proposed to continue and intensify lobbying for the re-establishment of the Commission for the fight against HIV / AIDS of the Republic of Serbia, and then to take advantage of the new opportunity and apply for the funds of the Global Fund, as well as to adopt a sustainable plan for the country in the fight against AIDS with a clear budget for the next period.

During the discussion on the standardization of peer counselling service for people living with HIV, licensed service providers and other representatives of social systems talked about the possibilities of creating standards of this service and the licensing process, highlighting the challenges that USOP and its partner organizations are expected. The first draft of the peer counselling service for PLHIV standards, created within the project were presented and the agreement was made, between all present, to give feedback and to support USOP in further development of standards. State Secretary at the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Mr. Redzepovic Zaim, who joined the Round table during the discussion, stressed that this Ministry will support associations of people living with HIV / AIDS and their



„Towards standardization of community based social services provision for people living with HIV and AIDS (PLHIV) in Serbia”
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umbrella federation to reach the right solution in order to obtain a high quality proposal for the standardization of service. He also said that people living with HIV can be sure that Ministry will be a good partner on the way to better quality of life of people living with HIV.

During the discussion on human rights and HIV, it was highlighted the gap existing between legislation and independent mechanisms for the protection of human rights and experiences of people living with HIV and vulnerable to HIV. The very high stigma and discrimination in all systems of society was discussed, the lack of knowledge of the people about basic rights and human rights protection mechanisms, but also considerable inactivity of civil society organizations in the field of HIV when it comes to human rights. On the other hand, civil society organizations have pointed out that even in the strongest Serbian law, the Criminal Code, there is Article 250, which directly stigmatize and discriminate against people living with HIV and AIDS and that they have already written amendments to delete or modify this article, bearing in mind that the previous 249 already talks about infectious diseases and that there is no need to HIV / AIDS stands out as sanction. There has been no progress in this field so far.

The Round table was attended by representatives of organizations, institutions and individuals active in the field of HIV, health and social protection, and protection of rights. USOP drew attention on the fact that HIV infection becomes a chronic condition with regular use of the therapy, why is necessary to modernize the HIV treatment and start to use drugs as in other countries in the world.

- Knowing that HIV infection can exist for many years without any signs or symptoms, the only way to detect HIV infection is that a person who has had some risk go to be tested to HIV – USOP representatives emphasized and explained that HIV is now a chronic infection that could be controlled by timely and adequate treatment.

Today, more than 37 million people living with HIV in the world. In Serbia, about 3,000 people are living with HIV, while about 1,500 do not even know they are HIV positive because HIV testing is at a low level in our country comparing to other European countries.

- Improving the quality of life of people living with HIV and AIDS in Serbia and stop the epidemic is possible if many people, communities, civil society organizations, the government and donors engage together in order to end this epidemic, to educate present and future generations of HIV infection, treatment, prevention and to empower people living with HIV / AIDS to fight for their rights and a live free of stigma and discrimination. In the fight against stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV, both community as a whole and institutions and organisations have important role. Stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV / AIDS in Serbia and their causes and consequences permeate all levels / structures of society. Stigma and discrimination are major obstacles to the implementation of preventive activities and one of the consequences of small number of people who decide to get tested for HIV – it was heard at the end of the Round table "The future of Serbia in the fight against AIDS" in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia.

Belgrade, November 18th, 2016.

