

Greek Drug & Substitution Users Union / Greece

"In 2013 Greece had been in the centre of attention. Things like the austerity measures, public health service cuts and the social costs of all these measures draw a lot of international media attention. One of the most significant aspects of the social crises was the impact on health systems. Greece is has been witnessing a HIV crisis, especially among vulnerable groups like migrants, sex workers and injecting drug users (IDUs). The conditions among these groups have worsened severely over the last few years and their condition is now reflected in the statistics. The number of new HIV cases among drug users has gone up from a couple of people in the years before 2010, to 250 people in 2011, and 350 people in 2012.

However, during these difficult conditions, drug users seem more prepared than ever to support advocacy for their rights and contribute their experience and practical knowledge. Our initiative, the Greek Drug and Substitution Users Union, started in 2011 out of the need to advocate for our peers' rights. Rights which were completely abolished and to stop letting others decide for us without us. We just felt we were ready to take action and let ourselves, not professionals, speak for ourselves.

"Nothing about us without us". Our initiative is a movement at a national level. We have 213 members registered, and a basic board of 5, with 3 alternate members who all work as volunteers.

An important target of our work is the board of the public OST program called OKANA. We want to increase treatment and the quality of treatment for people who use drugs. An important item for our group is the OST waiting list. Until recently an individual drug user had to wait 8 years before they could enter OST treatment. Now that's been reduced to 4 years. But still, can you imagine 4 years? No medical and social care, legally. Causing many who want OST to depend on illegal street drugs, in the middle of police raids, in the middle of a HIV crisis.



Successful rallies in front of the Ministry of Health to prevent closing OST services

Advocacy for policies that will enhance access to quality health services is also a top priority. We will show our face on every occasion. From drop-in centres and OST clinics to media and public events like World AIDS Day and the Anti-Prohibition festival or even in the parliament.

We work closely together with our partners POSITIVE VOICE (Union of people living with HIV) and Prometheus (Union of patients with liver disease). A large part of our work is accelerated by our presence on the Internet. We have a very active Facebook group that ethically supports user-to-user discussions and we also have our webpage: okanatherapevomenoi.blogspot.com.

A great success of our initiative was stopping the planned methadone reduction at the OST programmes when they ran out of methadone supplies on May 2013. We rallied and held demonstrations in front of the Ministry of Health, which resulted in a supplementary methadone order from Italy. Another success was the formation of a Unified Framework of Function where several of our suggestions and proposals were included by OKANA. Finally, we have managed to have a meeting with the national coordinator of drug policy in Greece, and helped to set the themes for the Greek representation in Brussels.

Until recently our action was in isolation, we had no other ideas on involvement other than activism on our own. Since some months ago we have received lots of support from the international user communities and other supportive networks overseas. Now we hope that others might be inspired by us as well."

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