



## **DOCTORS OF THE WORLD-USA in Russia: Access to HIV Testing, Care, and Prevention Services for At-Risk Children and Youth**



In response to the crisis of HIV/AIDS among street youth and in collaboration with a network of local providers, Doctors of the World-USA (DOW) is implementing a replicable, community-based model to facilitate treatment preparedness for HIV-infected Russian street youth. This program focuses on access to care, treatment, support, crisis intervention, prevention, education and outreach.

### **Background: The Crisis of HIV among Street Youth**

With an estimated 1.2 million Russians infected with HIV/AIDS, the UN has declared Russia home to the world's fastest growing HIV epidemic. Of those infected, 80% are under age 30 and 80% became infected through contaminated needles. HIV is spreading rapidly among street youth, a bridge group for HIV transmission to the general population. There are an estimated one million street youth in Russia, with up to 80,000 street youth in St. Petersburg alone. These youth usually do not have the local residency permits required to access public health and social services, and are thus routinely denied assistance. Street youth are at particular risk of HIV infection due to the widespread lack of accurate information about HIV and engagement in high-risk behaviors such as drug use and unprotected sex.

DOW expanded its efforts to assist children affected by HIV in Russia in 2005, after finding an alarming 31% HIV seroprevalence in small samples of our youth clients. In the spring of 2006, DOW designed and implemented a surveillance study in partnership with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to gain a broader understanding of the prevalence of HIV in street children in St. Petersburg. The study tested more than 300 street youth from the area and demonstrated prevalence of over 37%. This increasing rate of infection is poised to cause high rates of mortality among this population. In order to avoid this catastrophic outcome, treatment preparedness and access to HIV prevention and care services must be strengthened. These youth must be engaged in health and social service systems to enable them to access psychosocial and medical care, including anti-retroviral therapy (ART). Provider capacity must be enhanced so that services are more widely available and of better quality. Of equal importance, prevention knowledge and tools must also be strengthened in order to decrease transmission rates among street youth.

### **DOW Response: Improving Access to Testing, Care, and Prevention**

To meet the challenge of HIV/AIDS among street youth, DOW, in partnership with the local Russian NGO Doctors to Children (DTC) and in collaboration with other Russian NGOs and partners, is implementing **"Access to HIV Testing, Care, and Prevention Services for At-Risk Children and Youth"** to offer support to and prevent HIV transmission among street youth in St. Petersburg.

Key to this initiative is a unique collaboration between the public sector and NGOs. DOW is building upon its well-established relationships with the Committee on Labor and Social Protection, and most vitally the St. Petersburg City AIDS Center, and continues to engage the coalition of care providers that it has been working with in St. Petersburg, including medical facilities, harm reduction providers, and NGOs interacting with street children.

This collaboration is increasing the availability of services at the community level and promotes sustainability of the treatment preparedness and service access model, including:

- Outreach to street youth and availability of HIV testing
  - Referral mechanisms to facilitate treatment utilization by high risk, HIV-positive youth
  - An incentive model to engage and retain youth in HIV care and other health interventions
  - Harm reduction counseling and activities for youth around drug abuse and sexual health
  - Prevention activities, including HIV educational events for youth and development of age and literacy-appropriate educational materials
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Building upon DOW's more than 12 years of experience serving more than 8,000 street children and youth in St. Petersburg, the program addresses this latest threat to their survival. DOW's current efforts call attention to the rapidly growing HIV prevalence among Russia's street children and demonstrate a replicable model for HIV prevention, testing, and care.

In addition to increasing access to care and support for the street youth who tested HIV-positive in the study in Spring 2006, DOW is continuing HIV testing, care and support with newly engaged youth. DOW has already achieved substantial progress towards the project goals of reaching 200 new youth, testing 100, and engaging 150 in prevention workshops or events each year.

### **DOW's Work with At-Risk Youth in Russia**

Since 1993, Doctors of the World-USA (DOW) has provided comprehensive medical, mental health, and social services to thousands of at-risk children and youth in St. Petersburg, Russia. In 2001, DOW developed some of the first foster care programs in the country. DOW has also created drop-in centers for street youth, including one established through an innovative partnership with the city government. These centers provide health and social services to street youth, and help them transition from the streets to shelter services, foster families or independent living. DOW works in close partnership with local organizations in all of its programs, creating local capacity and ensuring the existence of local leadership for community-based support to at-risk youth in Russia.

### **Building Capacity**

**Training:** Many youth cite the problems of inconvenient hours or location, unfriendly staff and lack of privacy as reasons for not using health clinics. Adolescents have indicated that they would like clinics to be private, confidential, affordable, accessible, and staffed with sensitive providers. All staff at clinics and facilities participating directly in the DOW project receive training on the special needs of street youth. Particular attention is paid to training public sector providers, such as AIDS Center employees. In addition, partner NGOs will be trained in providing counseling and related services to HIV-positive youth on drug use and sexual health.

**International Exchange:** DOW project staff have been able to gain from the experiences and best practices of other service organizations through international exchange. Larkin Street Youth Services, the premier organization working with street youth in the U.S. has hosted project staff, and sent volunteers to train DOW staff in St. Petersburg on issues concerning street youth and HIV. The DOW Regional Director for Russia participated in a tour of established service providers in the New York City area, learning from their years of experience serving this population. DOW is also collaborating with the international NGO Street Kids International and the Central Asian NGO Accord.

**Documentation and Dissemination:** Through this project, DOW is developing a manual covering all aspects of the treatment preparedness and prevention model, many of which are new in the Russian context. This document will be distributed locally, among the health and social services communities and at related trainings and conferences. An electronic version will be available online. Following model publication and dissemination, DOW and DTC will provide workshops to members of the local health and social services communities in order to disseminate the model and facilitate its replication.

Founded in 1990 by a group of volunteer physicians including the late Dr. Jonathan Mann, **Doctors of the World-USA** is an international health and human rights organization working where health is diminished or endangered by violations of human rights and civil liberties. For more information, please contact:

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