

## **MAKING HEPATITIS C TREATMENT A NATIONAL PRIORITY IN GEORGIA THROUGH DRUG USERS COMMUNITY ADVOCACY**

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**Introduction:** Prevalence of Hepatitis C in Georgia is estimated at 6.7%. The highest prevalence is evidenced among drug users (up to 70%). HCV was stigmatized as drug user disease and major drive for treatment access came from drug user community groups. Georgia pursues punitive drug policy, therefore it has proven difficult to push for decisions to fund treatment for drug user community. The approach taken by drug user groups was to train patients for drug user community to advocate on behalf of entire patient population.

**Methods:** GHRN has launched advocacy campaign to gradually push for government funding. In 2011, campaign aimed at raising public awareness on Hepatitis C. In 2012, trained patients from drug user community demanded treatment for all patients. In 2013, the main target of the campaign were pharmaceutical companies to demand price reductions from. Finally, in 2014, treatment access advocates requested the immediate access to free of charge treatment with DAAs for all.

**Results:** As a result of the campaign, activists were able to convince penitentiary system to introduce treatment in prisons (one third of inmates convicted for drug related offenses). Drug user patient groups were included in treatment program working group. In 2014, patients were included in the state commission of elimination program. They are part of patient inclusion commission to ensure non-discrimination in phase 1 of elimination program (treatment of 5000 patients with DAAs). Elimination program prioritizes drug users as number 1 priority group to treat.

**Conclusion:** Mainstreaming the problem through mobilizing drug user groups has resulted in their inclusion in decision making process and eventually making them a number 1 priority group to treat in frames of elimination program.

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