



## PERSON-CENTRED PROGRAMMES

# RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF WOMEN WHO USE DRUGS IN UKRAINE

In 2017 there were 13,000 new HIV infections in Ukraine, with 25 per cent of these among people who inject drugs.<sup>1</sup> People who inject drugs are not just defined by their drug use – like everyone, they have many roles in life and have many different needs.

*Convictus Ukraine* is a non-governmental organisation that responds to these needs using a person-centred approach to ensure that its health and other support services effectively meet the diverse needs of people most at-risk of HIV in Kyiv.

In 2008, *Convictus Ukraine* launched a comprehensive HIV prevention programme, setting up the *Convictus* Community Centre offering free needles, syringes, condoms and lubricants; anonymous counselling; legal and psychological services; and a variety of other support services and referrals. *Convictus Ukraine* outreach workers also go out onto the streets of Kiev to provide information, and to distribute free clean needles and syringes, as well as condoms and lubricants to people who use drugs.

By 2018, *Convictus Ukraine* was reaching over 15,000 people each year, with its centres across Kyiv offering comprehensive information on HIV, rapid testing, quality care and support, and assistance with dispensary registration and HIV treatment. The programmes also include prevention of HIV co-infections such as TB and Hepatitis C, and interventions to tackle gender inequality.

These vital services are supported by the Alliance for Public Health (APH), a Frontline AIDS partner, which has been providing grants to *Convictus Ukraine* since 2008.

# ABOUT FRONTLINE AIDS

Frontline AIDS wants a future free from AIDS for everyone, everywhere. Around the world, millions of people are denied HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care simply because of who they are and where they live.

As a result, almost 2 million people were infected with HIV in 2017 and almost 1 million died of AIDS-related illness.

Together with partners on the frontline, we work to break down the social, political and legal barriers that marginalised people face, and innovate to create a future free from AIDS.

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Unless otherwise stated, the appearance of individuals in this publication gives no indication of HIV status.

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## SOURCES

1. UNAIDS 'Global AIDS Monitoring 2018: Ukraine Summary'
2. These services were only available during the duration of a specific programme funded by the Clinton Health Access Initiative (from 2009 to 2013).
3. Disinfectant for needle wounds

## WHAT ARE PERSON-CENTRED PROGRAMMES?



In recent years, 'person-centred' approaches have gained momentum in HIV programmes and health services. While models and definitions vary, they share core principles such as: empowering people to participate in joint decision-making; tailoring services to respond to specific needs and preferences; and adapting and linking services to ensure that a full range of physical, emotional and psychological needs are met throughout people's lives.

Frontline AIDS believes that many of the community-led programmes around the world, especially those reaching marginalised people, take a person-centred approach. We are undertaking rapid case studies in different contexts to illustrate this, and to document and provide practical examples of what person-centred HIV programmes look like on the ground. The aim is to inform future programming by learning from the real-life experiences and perspectives of the people who benefit from these programmes.



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Outreach worker with condoms.

## THE CONVICTUS UKRAINE SERVICE PACKAGE

From 2008 to 2015, *Convictus Ukraine* offered a comprehensive package of services specifically tailored to the needs of people who use drugs. Many of the services were provided in the *Convictus* Community Centre and via outreach workers. Importantly, *Convictus* also built an excellent working relationship with the Kyiv City AIDS Centre, enabling them to not only refer clients for specialist HIV-related services, but to follow up on referrals.

### THE SERVICE PACKAGE INCLUDED:

#### Direct provision

- Counselling and rapid testing for HIV and Hepatitis C
- Free needles, syringes, condoms and lubricants
- Peer to peer support
- A community-based safe space
- Self-help groups (including women only groups)
- Narcotics Anonymous group
- Professional psychological support
- Legal advice

#### Through referrals

- Antiretroviral treatment (ART) and HIV related services
- Opioid substitution therapy (OST)
- Treatment for Hepatitis C
- Ante natal and post-natal care <sup>2</sup>
- Gynaecological services

“Everybody thinks people only come for syringes. But you can get any consultation here, they will help you in whatever way they can. *Maria*”



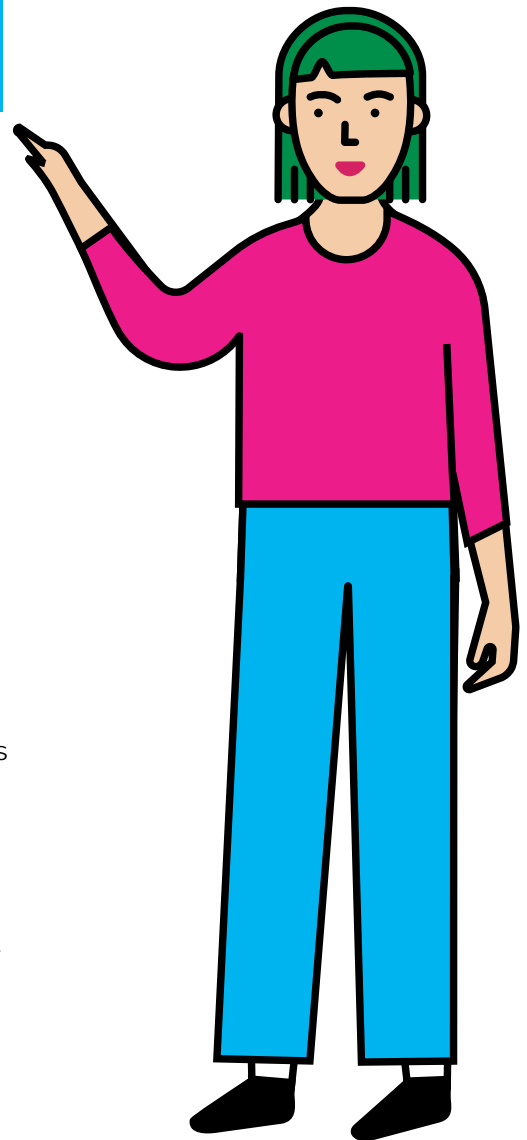
## HOW DID CONVICTUS UKRAINE USE A PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH TO MEET THE NEEDS OF WOMEN WHO USE DRUGS?

*Convictus Ukraine* provides services and support for a variety of people who are vulnerable to HIV, including young people, people who use drugs, sex workers and former prisoners. This case study focuses specifically on the harm reduction programme for women who use drugs, which *Convictus Ukraine* implemented between 2008 and early 2015 with APH support.

The study, conducted by Frontline AIDS and APH, explores the characteristics of a person-centred approach to service provision for women who use drugs. Without trying to evaluate the programme, it examines the ways in which *Convictus* adopted a person-centred approach to service provision – in other words, what services and how they were provided. Because it was important to hear directly from the people who were accessing services, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were held with women who use drugs at the *Convictus* Community Centre, as well as with key informants involved in managing and delivering services.

The discussions aimed to find out whether beneficiaries felt the services met their needs more holistically – not just as people who use drugs, but as individuals with a variety of needs. Interviewers asked whether the programme had responded effectively, and if it had adapted to the women's context and changing needs – including through linking to other services beyond HIV and harm reduction. Most importantly, the interviews also aimed to find out if and how *Convictus Ukraine* built trust amongst this highly stigmatised and criminalised community, and if the women were made to feel respected and empowered when accessing its services.

The results were very positive. Below are the main findings of the study, together with some quotes from participants' discussions. (All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality).



### → A SAFE AND WELCOMING PLACE

The women who participated in the study are very marginalised in their society. They are all accustomed to the harsh realities of life on the streets, particularly in the winter. They felt that, in addition to offering specialist HIV services, the *Convictus* Community Centre provided them with a much-valued 'safe place' to get together. Some of them came to the Centre simply to escape the cold and have a cup of tea, but during their visits they were made aware of the wide range of services available to them. Others arrived at the Centre seeking a particular service, such as free syringes, and then found it also offered them a space where they could gather, socialise, talk and be heard. Many of the women spoke about the support groups at the Centre, which they said offered them a chance to meet with their peers and discuss their problems, free from judgement.

**"We had our group session, 10 people, my friends... We discussed the dangers of drug use. We talked about how to protect ourselves. Not how to stop using drugs, but how to minimise harm."** *Maria*

**"It is nice and handy in winter. You can come here and drink tea. I have a home, so I am alright. Some people don't have a home. They come here to do laundry, and just not to sit in the street... Maybe in this social circle they can get help, be encouraged to do something."** *Yana*

**” The attitude is nice and friendly. I come here to talk.** *Alina*

→ **A RANGE OF FREE SERVICES**

Many of the women were surprised that they were offered such a wide range of supplies and services. They may have initially come to *Convictus Ukraine* to get free syringes, but often also left with free condoms, lubricant and alcohol wipes, as well as having accessed many other free services including legal advice and tests for Hepatitis C and HIV.

“ I took tests, and also went to the lawyer here. I asked, and when my friend had a trial hearing, she also came here to a lawyer, and got a good consultation. *Maria*

“Your social workers approached me at the Lesnoy district. They offered me tests, said I could get tested for HIV and hepatitis free of charge. I agreed, they issued me a card and said that there was a site here on Saburova which is the nearest for me to come to. Said I can come here and get condoms, lubricants and chlorhexidine.”<sup>3</sup> *Alina*

→ **APPROACHABLE AND RESPECTFUL STAFF**

The importance of dignity was a recurrent theme during discussions with the women. They spoke very positively about the attitude of *Convictus Ukraine* staff – from the outreach workers on the streets, to doctors, nurses and other staff, both in the Community Centre and the Kyiv AIDS Centre. They constantly stressed that they were treated with respect, like ‘normal’ people, and really appreciated how approachable the staff were – always available to help and offer support, without criticism.

“You ask for help and you get it. They don’t treat you as a broken addict, but as a normal person in society. You can feel fine and have the same rules as for normal people.” *Alina*

“When I found out that I acquired HIV, I felt disgusted with myself and thought it’s an end. But when they talked to me like to a normal person and explained that everything is fine, thanks to them I began to take ART.” *Sofia*

“ They understand that you are a human being, that you won’t infect them through air, won’t do anything bad. You’re the same, as others and not a special kind of a sick person. *Yana*

Repeatedly, women said that before coming to *Convictus Ukraine*, many of them had faced stigma from health workers who were reluctant to carry out their blood tests. Most had come across health workers who were unable to take blood because their veins were damaged. However, they found that the *Convictus Ukraine* doctors and nurses didn’t stigmatise them and were able to take their blood.

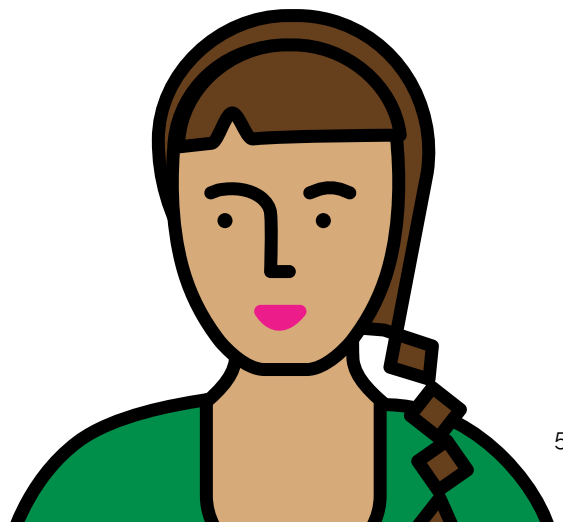
“ If you go there... for example, when you face something. I know at least you would be referred to doctors who will perceive you as a normal person, not as a castaway. *Sofia*

→ **MOTIVATIONAL SUPPORT**

The women referred to *Convictus Ukraine* staff in various ways – as case managers, outreach workers or social workers – but importantly, they also described them as ‘motivators’. The women talked about how these individuals kept in touch with them, followed up on their concerns, and were an ongoing source of encouragement. With their help, the women felt able to achieve things that they could not do on their own. For example, one woman explained that her social worker would call her when she had not been to the Centre for some time, or when she knew her HIV drugs were running out, and would encourage her to come in for a visit.

“ I wish we had more social workers like her. She was the one who was driving me...with any problem I had she was great. *Daria*

“They told me to listen, [they] found good doctors for me... [they] were chasing me. They are doing a good job and help a lot.” *Sofia*



→ **INSPIRATIONAL ROLE MODELS**

The women were clearly inspired by peers they met through the Community Centre – other women who had formerly used drugs – who were able to show them how much they had been able to improve their own lives. Many of these peers were now helping to run programmes and had become social workers themselves.

**“I knew people who had been coming to group sessions. Now, it is a pleasure to look at them. Who would think? Both of them came pretty wasted, an absolute disappointment. And now they live so well.”** *Natalia*

**” You look at people and see that they can make it – so I also tried to quit.** *Alina*

→ **SOURCE OF RELIABLE INFORMATION**

The *Convictus Ukraine* staff are a valuable source of information for women who use drugs. All of those who took part in the focus groups said how knowledgeable the staff were. They felt able to approach them with any question and to ask for help with many different aspects of their lives, not just medical issues.

**“All the guys in here can help, inform, explain all the questions you’re interested in, any problem you have within their scope of knowledge. Or any health-related problems. They help with anything, it is not a problem. You just have to be willing to ask.”** *Khrystyna*

**” I remember there were meetings for girls here. They were kind of educational... I learned many things I didn’t know. For example, how HIV is transmitted... about hygiene... not to harm yourself.** *Alina*

→ **NAVIGATING THE HEALTH SYSTEM**

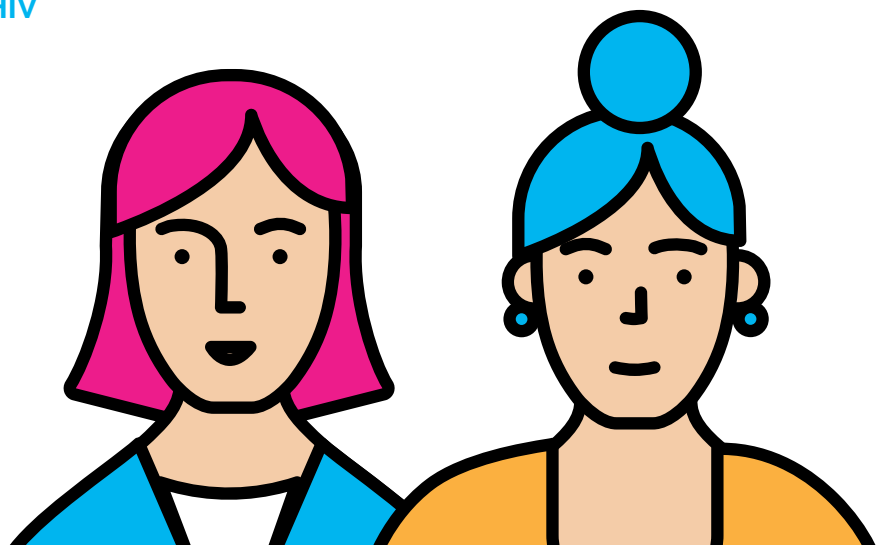
From their testimonies, it’s clear that previously many of the women were unsure of the support and services available to them, particularly those that were free. For them, what they found really helpful was that *Convictus Ukraine* staff guided them through the complex systems.

*Convictus Ukraine* did not work in isolation. Where possible, it offered services on the streets and in its Community Centre, but also had strong links with state-run specialist health facilities. Instead of the women having to find their own way to a clinic or hospital, *Convictus Ukraine* referred women directly to the services best suited to them, and to health care workers who understood the particular concerns of people who use drugs.

Many of the women were mothers who had been using drugs during their pregnancy. They had found their pregnancies particularly challenging and had been very concerned about the welfare of their babies. With guidance from *Convictus Ukraine* staff, they were able to access a wide range of support, from counselling to free infant formula, often through referrals to the Kyiv AIDS Centre.

**” I was pregnant... people in here helped me. I did all the tests in here. They motivated me, I got a social worker, he managed my case. They just pulled me out of it, I was enrolled into an [OST] programme.** *Sofia*

**“My friend was pregnant. She was using drugs... and got pregnant at the same time... I brought her here... they directed her, put her on OST, helped to deliver. Did all the things before the baby was born. The baby was born dependent on drugs and had to go through withdrawal... And everything was great. And they gave her food rations, and other things... They cared for her to the fullest.”** *Natalia*



→ **TAILORED AND PERSONAL APPROACHES**

The women described frequently being mistreated by society because they use drugs, and they felt that people had written them off. However, they found the staff at *Convictus Ukraine* to be very different – treating them as normal people, aiming to meet their needs as people who use drugs, but also as individuals with many other identities and needs. The women gave examples of moments of crisis in their lives, such as a bereavement or illness, when an individual staff member had gone out of their way to ensure that they received the particular care and support they required. They also felt that the needs they have in their different roles were catered for, for example *Convictus Ukraine* organised couples counselling, and mothers felt comfortable bringing their children in to the Centre with them.

**“I couldn’t even get out of bed. A social worker visited me. She helped me with blood collection, it was difficult. She took blood for tests for me at home and took it to the clinic, and brought me ART home... She did a great job, I am grateful.”**  
*Maria*

**“When my mother died, I was in rehab. I didn’t know she had died. No one told me. I couldn’t get my treatment. I asked him and he came, got the ART and helped me.”** *Natalia*

**A CHANGE IN FOCUS**

UNAIDS has set ambitious targets, with the aim that by 2020, 90% of all people living with HIV will know their HIV status; 90% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection will be on treatment; and 90% of all people receiving antiretroviral therapy will have achieved viral suppression. Partly because of these targets, from 2015 much of the funding for HIV programming began to shift towards case finding and clinical management of HIV positive cases.

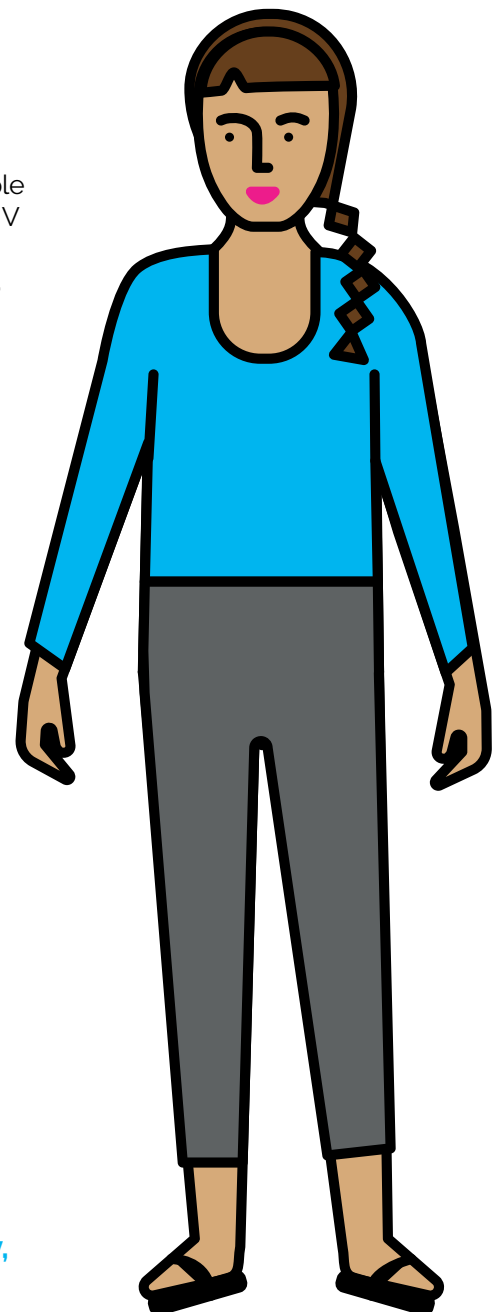
This shift can be observed in the *Convictus Ukraine* programme for people who use drugs. Starting in 2015, *Convictus Ukraine* increased its focus on identifying new HIV cases and ensuring linkage to and retention in HIV treatment programmes. This also meant that it has become increasingly difficult to identify sources of funding to continue providing many of the services that *Convictus Ukraine* was able to provide in the past. Even though the organisation continues to offer high-quality services for women who use drugs, the package of non-medical services available to them has become smaller.

The women who participated in the focus groups not only wanted to see *Convictus Ukraine* continue to provide the full package of services that was available in the past, they also had suggestions for additional services. They called for work opportunities and access to health services that fit around working hours; sensitisation of health workers to understand more about HIV and how it’s contracted; easier access to OST and detox programmes; support to engage and educate families of people who use drugs; and a warm place to live in the winter for the homeless.

*Convictus Ukraine* works tirelessly to ensure its programmes respond to the needs and realities of women who use drugs.

**“Thank God such an organisation exists.”** *Sofia*

**“Don’t take this organisation away, it is cool. It is very good.”** *Yana*





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