CHANGE STORY 1:
FROM SERVICE RECIPIENTS TO DRIVERS OF CHANGE – DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT DRUG USERS INTO LEADERS IN UKRAINE

INTRODUCTION
Bridging the Gaps partner AFEW Ukraine provides small grants to trained groups of youth leaders from key populations, which has worked as an effective method to influence the quality of information and services provided to young people. It also gives opportunities for personal development for adolescents who use drugs.

PROBLEM
In Ukraine the prevalence of HIV among adolescents who inject drugs is 4%, significantly higher than the 0.27% prevalence among the general population. In addition, 18% of 14-17 year old students have experience with using drugs. Adolescents who are most-at-risk of being infected with HIV include adolescents that use drugs and their partners, young people who are exploited sexually and young LGBT men. Although these at-risk adolescents were included in the 2014–2018 Ukraine National Targeted Social Programme on HIV/AIDS, many of the planned interventions targeting this group have not been implemented. As a result, the percentage of young people who can correctly identify ways to prevent HIV transmission decreased from 48% in 2014 to 27% in 2018. Most at-risk adolescents have also not been involved in developing policies designed to reach them with services and information, meaning the services often do not reflect their needs.

CHANGE
AFEW Ukraine has involved most-at-risk youth in local government policy development and service delivery since 2016. This was done through the Leaders Project, where at risk adolescents in four cities (Kharkiv, Chernivtsi, Kropyvnytskyi and Poltava) apply for small grants aimed at raising awareness on sexual and reproductive health, drug use and social services. In 2019, 35 leaders implemented five projects. In Chernivtsi, one of the youth leaders addressed the need to create a City Youth Center, which was agreed to by the City Council in May 2019. AFEW Ukraine’s partner NGO “New Family” will provide HIV, STI and safer drug use education and services at the center. In Poltava in June 2019, youth leaders were officially included in the Expert Group working on the city’s drug policy, showing that local authorities recognize the need to consult with at risk adolescents. Teams of youth leaders from Kharkiv and Chernivtsi received funds from UNICEF to set up a gym for project clients and to organize engaging classes for the project’s client.

Through the Leaders Project almost 700 at risk adolescents and their peers gained better access to information about HIV, STIs, sexual and reproductive health, and safer drug use.

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1 HIV-infection in Ukraine. Informational bulletin of the Center of Public Health #50
The Youth Leaders used guided tours, quest games, interactive cinema, and graffiti advertisements to reach their peers. Feedback gained through 20 interviews and 200 responses to an online questionnaire from the adolescents reached through the projects showed that the youth leaders and their use of modern, engaging approaches improved the acceptability of the information and services.

"The usual lectures are not so interesting, but the game is always fun and you remember everything much better."

– Young client reached via the Youth Leaders Project

**CONTRIBUTION**

*AFEW Ukraine* and local partners “New Family” (Chernivtsi), “Blago” (Kharkiv), “Return to Life” (Kropyvnytskyi), and “Public Health” (Poltava) started to involve at risk adolescents in the project and organizational policy design in 2016. These adolescents were trained to become youth leaders and improve quality and acceptability of services for their peers. The role of these youth leaders has been increasing every year since. The leaders are actively involved in a variety of activities in project planning, implementation, and monitoring. They participate in work meetings and advocacy events; monitor human rights violations; provide peer counselling on SRHR; and monitor quality of services in their cities.

The youth leaders received support from the local project staff at every stage of Leaders Project’s planning and implementation. *AFEW Ukraine* and their local partners conducted almost 80 trainings on human rights, health issues, and improving leadership skills for the youth leaders. More than 30 youth leaders participated in the Summer Camp organized by “New Family” and *AFEW Ukraine* in August 2019. Participants from the 4 project sites had opportunities to share their experiences, improve communication skills, and participate in team building exercises.

**ANALYSIS**

Through the Leaders Project, the youth leaders have become more independent, confident and able to address local policy makers. The project influenced the quality of information and services and their acceptability by teenagers on the local level. More at risk adolescents and their peers now have access to quality information of HIV, STIs and safer drug use. City administrations, police, and educational institutions have been widely involved in the activities and support for young leaders. The Leaders Project also received coverage in local and national media.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

In 2020, *AFEW Ukraine* and local partners will continue working with young leaders to empower them to influence services and policies for their peers. In 2020, *AFEW Ukraine* is piloting the programme ‘Journey4Life,’ developed by Dance4Life International.

**PERSONAL STORY**

When Artem, now 23, was a teenager, he systematically used drugs such as crystal meth, LSD, and ecstasy to escape reality. After a suggestion from his uncle, Artem spent three months in the rehabilitation centre at “Return to Life” and attended the Youth Center for counselling, support and educational activities. He then became an active volunteer in the organization, and eventually a youth leader with his own project. In 2019, Artem was selected as one of the facilitators of the youth-led program Journey4Life.

“If it were not for this project and the Center, I would probably still be an active drug user. Maybe I would even end up in jail. And what being a leader gave me... a basic set of knowledge, concepts of some kind, let’s say, in the field that we are all working. And in general, it’s like a foundation, a push in life.”

– Artem

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