

Greece: HIV curbed among drug users (Update)

29 November 2013, by Theodora Tongas

Greek health officials said Friday they have curbed an alarming spike in the number of HIV infections among drug users, but warned of dangers from austerity cuts in health care.

The number of new recorded HIV infections among drug users for January to October 2013 dropped to 230 from 506 for the same period last year, the Health Ministry said.

World AIDS Day is on Sunday.

New infections among drug users in Greece spiked 1,500 percent between 2011 and 2012, despite a general decline elsewhere in Europe.

Despite steep funding cuts in crisis-hit Greece, the state-run Organization Against Drugs, OKANA, made progress by expanding clean-needle programs and access points.

A European Union-funded supervised injection site—the first of its kind in Greece—was also opened last month in a run-down part of central Athens.

Despite the progress, OKANA director Meni Malliori said Greece's major financial crisis is altering drug use patterns and challenging health care officials, along with reports that some drugs users are reselling potentially infected used syringes on the black markets for as little as 50 euro cents (\$0.68).

In an interview with AP Television, Malliori said the crises had created an increased number of homeless drug users who were more likely to exchange needles and having increased sexual activity in exchange for money.

"Substances being used are less expensive and more dangerous," she added. "We see an increase of intravenous use because they have a smaller amount but want the same effect."

Drug experts and policy makers from around Europe gathered in Athens earlier this week to urge governments to exclude drug-abuse treatment and AIDS-related programs from austerity budget cuts, citing the rise in Greek HIV infections.

The 230 new infections among drug users, were out of the total 1,058 total new HIV infections reported in the first 10 months of 2013, the Health Ministry said, with 258 recorded among gay and bisexual men, 98 among heterosexual men and women, and 206 others.

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