

To: Nursultan Nazarbayev  
President of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
Copy: Yelzhan Birtanov  
Minister of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan

26 June, 2018  
№ 21-06/18-EHRA-06

Honorable President Nazarbayev,

We, the signed below, express our deep concern as to the threatened closure of the life-saving opioid substitution treatment (OST) program in Kazakhstan. OST has been recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Joint UN Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) as the most efficient and effective healthcare measure to treat opioid drug dependence and is an essential measure to prevent the spread of HIV, to improve HIV treatment outcomes among people who use drugs, and to improve the quality of life of such people. OST is being implemented in more than 80 countries globally, including the USA, Canada, China, Iran, all member states of the European Union (EU), and in the majority of countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Initiated in 2008, the pilot OST program in Kazakhstan was positively assessed by a number of international expert bodies and was found to be effective in the local context and recommended for scale-up throughout the country. Today, the OST program operates in 13 cities across all of Kazakhstan and is helping 320 clients to stop, or to significantly reduce, their drug use, to start HIV and tuberculosis treatment, and to return to productive social lives. In addition, most OST clients are employed or receiving professional training. Furthermore, the OST program has seen healthy children born to drug dependent mothers. OST literary saves the lives of people with opioid dependence.

If the quality of services were to be improved, and its coverage increased to reach at least 20% of people with opioid dependence, the OST program would have an impact on the HIV epidemic and will increase life expectancy in Kazakhstan. However, rather than expanding OST services, a number of interest groups in Kazakhstan have initiated a campaign to have it closed, ignoring all the evidence of its positive effects<sup>1</sup>, as well as international recommendations and the positive worldwide experience in providing OST services.

OST is a long-term treatment, and its interruption will most likely cause relapse to drug use among a large number of clients, resulting in new HIV infections, social isolation and renewed suffering of opioid dependent people and their families.

Your strong position in support of an effective national HIV response in Kazakhstan, and for access to OST services by those who need them, will be crucial to sustain the results of the Kazakhstan AIDS program and to ensure progress towards the international targets of Sustainable Development Goals.

With respect,

  
Anna Dovbakh, Executive Director, Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA)

<sup>1</sup> On 30 October 2017, Working Group initiated by the Ministry of Interior produced a Resolution with the conclusions that OST is effective in Kazakhstan and it should be continued with some improvements regarding the accessibility and the quality of services.