

DROP-IN CENTERS FACILITATE SEX WORKER-LED  
**HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY**

# CENTERS FOR **CHANGE**



**OPEN SOCIETY**  
FOUNDATIONS

# PROMOTING SEX WORKER ADVOCACY **DROP-IN CENTERS**

Around the world, sex workers<sup>1</sup> face violations of their human rights including physical and sexual violence, unsafe and unjust working conditions, extortion, and lack of access to justice, health care, and social welfare services. In these contexts, drop-in centers providing health care, legal counseling and other direct services to sex workers serve a crucial role by meeting sex workers' essential needs, and providing a safe space for them to congregate, document abuses, and mobilize for advocacy. Despite adverse circumstances, including the criminalization of sex work in many regions worldwide, drop-in centers have been successful in providing a means for sex workers to access services and organize for the recognition of their human rights.

Supporting drop-in centers is an important strategy for strengthening sex worker-led activism to change the laws, policies, and practices that violate their human rights. Many drop-in centers, however, struggle to find the funding necessary to maintain building space, retain staff, and provide critical services that are often not supported by state programs.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper the term sex worker is used to describe adult women, men, and transgender people who consensually exchange sexual services for money and/or things of value.

The Open Society Foundations interviewed staff from seven drop-in centers in six countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia<sup>2</sup> to learn about the array of services offered, and the role these centers play in the development of human rights advocacy movements. The centers were chosen as examples of providers that strive to offer rights-based services, and have demonstrated varying degrees of success in supporting and promoting sex worker-led advocacy.

The findings indicate that donors interested in promoting sex workers' engagement in services and human rights advocacy can do so by providing sustained core funding and support for service providers and programs that:

- **Meaningfully engage** sex workers in the design and implementation of comprehensive medical, legal, psychosocial, and other services.
- **Provide** a safe physical environment for service delivery and community building among sex workers.
- **Develop** peer-led group activities and social programs directed towards establishing trust and cohesion among sex workers.
- **Integrate** sex workers into leadership positions within organizational structures.
- **Facilitate** the reporting and documentation of human rights abuses.
- **Build on and support** sex workers' formal and informal organizing for health, wellbeing, fair labor conditions, and human rights.

Based on these interview findings, this booklet explores the key themes for successful programs, from providing direct legal, medical, and social services to supporting collective organizing and joint advocacy.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews included staff at Demetra in Lithuania, Healthy Options Project Skopje (HOPS) in Macedonia, JAZAS in Serbia, NIKTA in Ukraine, Odysseus in Slovakia, and Tais Plus and Tais Plus II in Kyrgyzstan. The majority of these organizations are past or current grantees or sub-grantees of the Open Society Foundations. More information on these organizations can be found on the inside back cover.

You can't expect someone to get involved with a campaign until they have dealt with basic problems like documentation, material assistance, health insurance, a shower.

## JAZAS

SERBIA

## ENGAGING SEX WORKERS IN THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SERVICES

Sex workers usually first engage with services at times of dire need or personal crisis. Effective drop-in centers work together with individual sex workers to address day-to-day challenges and respond to immediate needs in a sustained and strengths-affirming way. Understanding this, the primary goal articulated by all drop-in center staff interviewed was to provide services that respond directly to the needs and wants of sex worker participants. The centers directly involve sex workers in determining the services they will provide by conducting needs assessments, either during outreach or in focus groups. Programs must also be responsive to the changing needs of sex workers and adapt their services as required.

The services provided by drop-in centers vary but generally include a combination of health care services, such as gynecological, psychological, and general health care. They also frequently offer legal consultation and assistance in accessing housing, identification documents, financial aid, and health insurance. In many areas, drop-in centers are the only places where comprehensive health, legal, and social services are available to sex workers who face discrimination or lack the documents necessary to access services. Centers also provide practical services like shower and laundry facilities, opportunities for informal gathering in communal areas with coffee, snacks, and kitchen supplies, and access to computers and internet, as well as education programs to teach computer and language skills.

All of the centers interviewed engage sex workers in services through peer support groups and peer education programs. Peer educators are usually participants in center activities who express interest in getting more involved, or are identified by staff for their initiative and leadership, and are trained to lead support groups and trainings for other sex workers and to engage in outreach work. They are often volunteers, but are sometimes compensated employees of the centers. Peer education programs can develop the leadership of individuals and provide opportunities for the creation of regional, national, or even transnational networks. Effective peer education is not limited to enlisting sex workers to conduct outreach or lead support groups, but includes sex worker involvement in developing and organizing services. In Kiev, for example, sex worker peer volunteers at NIKTA form "initiative groups" to propose changes to programs, propose new services, and set the center's agenda.

## PROVIDING SAFETY AND SECURITY, AND DEVELOPING TRUST

Drop-in center services are often paired with outreach programs, but serve an important function that outreach services cannot: centers provide a safe place for sex workers to gather. A physical space for socializing, resting, and holding meetings can be crucially important for sex workers, particularly street-based or mobile workers, who may not have other safe venues to congregate. Organizations face important challenges in establishing drop-in centers, however, including difficulties in identifying a safe and accessible location and viable working hours. Tais Plus II, in Jalalabad, Kyrgyzstan had trouble finding a property owner willing to lease to a drop-in center, and had to relocate after its first landlord ended its contract. The organization lost the investments it had made in renovations to the property and sex workers had to adjust to a new location.

Perhaps most importantly, centers must also address security concerns such as the possibility of police raids or hostility from neighbors. In some contexts, staff members have successfully cooperated with local police to ensure the safety and security of the center. After facing resistance from neighbors and frequent raids by local police, Tais Plus II organized meetings with community members and law enforcement and its new center now enjoys a peaceful relationship with both. NIKTA in Ukraine advises organizations interested in opening drop-in centers to obtain a signed agreement from local authorities that they will not interfere in the center's activities, because police will recognize their direct supervisor's name and signature and respect the agreement. Not all centers can ensure security, though, and in some places the threat of police raids persists. These centers must remain sensitive to the safety of sex workers in planning all of their services and activities.

Staff members from the centers interviewed also reported challenges in developing the trust necessary for sex workers to feel safe coming to the center and participating in group events. The first year that NIKTA was open, sex workers were afraid to participate in activities because they thought their personal information would become available to local police. These fears were well-founded, considering police in Ukraine had seized documents and sex worker contact lists from service organizations in the past. NIKTA took measures to ensure the safety of sex workers' information—such as establishing written agreements with police—and

For many women  
this is the only safe  
place they have...  
this may be the only  
place where they can  
have a break from  
a really hard life.

### ODYSEUS

SLOVAKIA

The drop-in center was the place where sex workers started to gather and create their first advocacy messages: “Rights not violence,” “My body, my choice,” “Sex work is work,” and “Violence is not part of any job description.” That was the beginning of sex workers mobilizing in Macedonia.

## HOPS

MACEDONIA

worked hard to gain the trust and respect of sex workers. Trust was built over time as sex workers observed their peers’ safe participation, and today sex workers are involved in the management of the center.

Sex workers also face regular abuses of their fundamental rights which can hinder their initial engagement in center activities. They are often denied basic rights to education, travel, and citizenship, and criminal laws against sex work can leave sex workers feeling isolated from society. In addition, some sex workers may lack knowledge of local languages, which can be a major barrier to accessing services. These experiences generally make group activities seem threatening for sex workers. It is therefore crucial that centers provide positive group experiences as a means toward more structured engagement in center activities. Drop-in centers best accomplish this through peer-led activities and events, including fun social events, performances, excursions, and art projects.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY

In addition to providing direct services and a place of refuge, drop-in centers help to build social movements by providing a space and the means for the development of communal identity. Collectivization strengthens civic engagement and activism as group members recognize shared problems and mobilize with group force to advocate for their rights.<sup>3</sup> Where already developed social and activist networks of sex workers exist, effective drop-in centers build on and support sex workers’ formal and informal organizing. In most of the cities discussed in this booklet, however, there was no strong cohesion or collective organizing among sex workers prior to the establishment of the drop-in centers. Many of these drop-in centers have played important roles in the ongoing development of sex worker activist communities.

In Macedonia, for example, HOPS described the status of the sex worker community when it first opened its center as divided: “Sex workers from the Roma community don’t meet with sex workers from other ethnic communities, and street sex workers don’t have contact with indoor sex workers, which was an obstacle for creating a sense of unity and solidarity and awareness of belonging to a larger sex worker community.” HOPS

<sup>3</sup> R.J. Sampson and J.D. Morenoff, “Public Health and Safety in Context: Lessons from Community-Level Theory on Social Capital.” In *Promoting Health Intervention Strategies from Social and Behavioral Research*, edited by B.D. Smedlet and S.L. Syme. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press (2000).

responded to the divisions among sex workers by providing services focused on creating a sense of community among sex workers, including peer education sessions, creative workshops, social events, and even a beauty salon. One particularly moving demonstration of community cohesion occurred on April Fools' Day in 2007, a day celebrated in Macedonia with masks and costumes. A group of sex workers and HOPS employees dressed up and marched to Parliament shouting "Sex workers' rights are human rights!" and "We want our rights!" For the people on the streets they may have been just another interesting group of masks, but for the participants this event was something both serious and fun. The group was a mix of people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and genders who felt accepted by each other and part of a community.

## SUPPORTING SEX WORKERS' LEADERSHIP

Drop-in centers vary in their organizational structure and the roles and responsibilities held by sex workers in service design and delivery. As previously described, the most effective drop-in centers meaningfully engage sex workers at all levels. Some centers integrate sex workers in their staff and leadership from day one, while others work hard to increase engagement over time. Many of the centers interviewed have been successful in increasing sex workers' involvement as community identity and activism have grown, and several of the centers have worked with sex workers to support the creation of distinct, sex worker-led advocacy organizations. Through center-sponsored activities and events such as the April Fools' Day march organized by HOPS, an advocacy community has grown in Macedonia and new leaders have emerged in the movement for sex workers' rights. One sex worker artist who was initially engaged by HOPS to perform and host a party has since orchestrated other events within the sex worker community and helped form an independent advocacy group, STAR-STAR, which was officially registered in 2010.

Often sex workers initially come to drop-in centers because of a specific service, such as legal consultation, HIV testing, or a social event, but later become more involved in the operations of the program or in activism. Many of the outreach workers and regional coordinators for Tais Plus in Kyrgyzstan, for example, first became involved with the organization through its drop-in center in Bishkek. One sex worker first came to the center when she needed help finding shelter, and later joined as a volunteer, then a staff member, and is now the leader of an independent

action group, Magdalena, based in a nearby Kyrgyz city. In 2006, she was one of the first sex workers in Kyrgyzstan to speak openly with Ministry representatives and Parliamentarians at a public hearing and provide interviews to the media about sex workers' rights. She described the role of the drop-in center in her life, saying, "When I came to Tais Plus, I found myself as a person. I received identification documents with help and support from colleagues. I also found a family that I didn't have—sisters and brothers. I started feeling that someone needs me."

## DOCUMENTING ABUSES AND ADVOCATING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

To be effective, advocacy must be organized to achieve goals that accurately reflect the needs of the community.<sup>4</sup> Successful advocacy for the rights of sex workers in particular requires a strong evidence-base to combat misconceptions and stigma. Because drop-in centers serve as gathering places for sex workers and provide services in response to sex workers' needs, staff and peer leaders at these centers are well positioned to work with sex workers to document human rights abuses, identify trends, and collaborate to use this documentation to change public opinion and policy. Center staff—who are often sex workers themselves—document common problems faced by the sex worker community in a variety of ways, including through questionnaires, support group discussions, and focus groups.

Demetra in Lithuania, for example, learned through interviews with sex worker participants that the lack of accessible medical services was a priority concern for the sex worker community. In response, it developed a contract with local public health clinics so that sex workers can come to the center for a consultation and no longer have to wait two months for an appointment. Similarly, Tais Plus II used its documentation of systemic denial of health care to sex workers to convince the director of a local clinic to sign a nondiscrimination agreement; the agreement was later used to facilitate the treatment of two severely injured sex workers who were initially turned away by clinic staff.

Drop-in centers also provide a centralized location for the growth of informal self-organizing among sex workers. A common example of this is the

<sup>4</sup> M. Minkler and K. Cox, "Creating Critical Consciousness in Health: Applications of Freire's Philosophy and Methods to a Health Care Setting," *International Journal of Health Services*, no. 2 (1980): 311-21.

maintenance of a “Bad Clients and Attackers” list posted in the center so that sex workers can share information about individuals who are abusive or dangerous. Drop-in centers provide a unique forum in which sex workers can efficiently and anonymously communicate this lifesaving information and protect each other. They may also ask centers to share this list with police so that their documentation can aid in bringing perpetrators of violence to justice.

Documentation collected through drop-in centers allows organizations to engage in national-level advocacy. In Serbia, JAZAS collaborated with the Ministry of Social Welfare to document and respond to cases of discrimination against sex workers by health care providers. Demetra in Lithuania has been documenting sex workers’ experiences of stigma and abuse and meeting with local journalists to relay this information in order to change public opinion about sex work. In Slovakia, Odysseus conducted research about police violence against sex workers that was used for a “Stop the Violence” campaign to reduce human rights abuses and hold police accountable for their actions. Similarly, HOPS in Macedonia worked with sex workers on a video illustrating the abuses sex workers experience from state actors, which sparked debate and brought sex workers’ rights into the spotlight. In Kyrgyzstan, sex workers who initially became involved with Tais Plus for its drop-in center services publicly spoke out against and successfully stopped efforts to criminalize sex work in 2006.

December 17, the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, has become an important platform for sex workers around the world to raise local and international awareness of human rights abuses. Drop-in centers play an important role in organizing impactful events to mark this day, using it to both build solidarity within, and increase understanding beyond, their communities. On December 17, 2010, JAZAS screened a video that was filmed in part at the drop-in center, and shared new data on violence and discrimination against sex workers. The group then hosted a discussion at a nearby cultural center, which 80 people attended, a quarter of whom were sex workers. During the discussion, sex workers stood and publicly spoke about their experiences of violence. JAZAS was founded in 1991 and began working with sex workers in 2004, but it wasn’t until it opened its drop-in center in 2008 that sex workers had a space to work together to organize for their rights. Their remarkable demonstration of courage, and the resulting dialogue, was made possible by preparation at the drop-in center, including workshops in which sex workers discussed the importance of organizing such an event and talked about the messages they wanted to share: “I am a Mother,” “I am a Good Neighbor,” “Rights Not Violence,” “I am a Human Being.”

The center plays an important role in advocacy and documentation. It serves as a hub to safely talk and come up with ideas.

## TAIS PLUS

KYRGYZSTAN

# CONCLUSION

The programs highlighted throughout this booklet have all relied on one crucial component: sex workers' active involvement. In each instance, drop-in centers played a key role in facilitating participation of sex workers by providing them with a safe place to gather, articulate their needs and experiences, and develop and guide appropriate responses.

The experiences of these centers illustrates that a successful approach for supporting sex worker-led advocacy for human rights is investing in drop-in centers that are committed to sex worker leadership and decision-making in service-delivery, documentation, and advocacy.

## CENTERS FOR CHANGE: IN FOCUS

Each of the drop-in centers detailed in this booklet has its own unique approach to engaging sex workers. Below you will find additional information and contacts for each program.

### Association of HIV Affected Women and their Families – Demetra

#### LITHUANIA

Demetra was founded in Vilnius in 1998 to provide HIV and STI testing, treatment and counseling to sex workers and drug users and education on methods of HIV and STI prevention and human rights.

#### CONTACT:

- + 370 5 2332533
- [demetralt@gmail.com](mailto:demetralt@gmail.com)
- [www.demetra.lt](http://www.demetra.lt)

### Healthy Options Project Skopje (HOPS)

#### MACEDONIA

HOPS was established in 1999 and implements health and rights programs for sex workers, people who use drugs, young people, and other vulnerable populations. HOPS operates a drop-in center for sex workers in Skopje and works in multiple cities throughout Macedonia. It was instrumental in the establishment of the sex worker-led organization STAR-STAR.

#### CONTACT:

- +389 (0)2 3 246 205
- [hops@hops.org.mk](mailto:hops@hops.org.mk)
- [www.hops.org.mk](http://www.hops.org.mk)

### JAZAS

#### SERBIA

Established in 1991 in Belgrade, JAZAS was the first NGO active in AIDS prevention in the former Yugoslavia. JAZAS focuses its activities on prevention, advocacy, and service provision. In addition to its drop-in center in Belgrade, it runs a mobile

support unit that provides health and social services for sex workers.

#### CONTACT:

- + 381 11 344 22 541
- [jzas.program@sezampro.rs](mailto:jzas.program@sezampro.rs)
- [www.jzas.net](http://www.jzas.net)

### NIKTA

#### UKRAINE

Since 2009, NIKTA has provided sex workers with medical, legal and psychosocial services, laundry and shower facilities, and a location for social and educational events. It provides meeting space for the Kiev-based chapter of League "LEGALIFE", a sex worker-led network, and supports the sex worker community in advocacy activities, including actions on December 17, the International Day to End Violence against Sex Workers.

#### CONTACT:

- +38 (044) 3532466
- [zuleman@meta.ua](mailto:zuleman@meta.ua)

### Odyseus

#### SLOVAKIA

Odyseus was established in 1997 to provide basic HIV, human rights and health services for vulnerable populations including sex workers, people who use drugs, young people and people living with HIV. Odyseus engages in harm reduction, outreach, advocacy, and safer sex education seminars. Due to lack of funding, Odyseus was forced to close its drop in center in 2007.

#### CONTACT:

- +421252494344
- [odyseus@ozodyseus.sk](mailto:odyseus@ozodyseus.sk)
- [www.odyseus.org](http://www.odyseus.org),  
[www.hivaid.sk](http://www.hivaid.sk),  
[www.drogy.org](http://www.drogy.org)

### Tais Plus

#### KYRGYZSTAN

Tais Plus was established in Bishkek in 1997 with financial support from sex workers to advocate for the health and rights of sex workers and people living with HIV. The organization provides services throughout Kyrgyzstan and has started a national network of sex workers entitled Shakh-Aiym. The entire board of Tais Plus and most of its staff are from the sex worker community.

#### CONTACT:

- +996 (312) 54 46 13
- [taisplus@gmail.com](mailto:taisplus@gmail.com)
- <http://taisplus.com/>

### Tais Plus II

#### KYRGYZSTAN

With support from Tais Plus, Tais Plus II was established in 2002 in Jalalabad as an HIV prevention organization working with sex workers in Kyrgyzstan's southern region. In addition to providing medical, social and legal services for sex workers, Tais Plus II conducts advocacy with police and healthcare providers to reduce stigma, discrimination and abuse against sex workers and increase their access to existing services.

#### CONTACT:

- +996 (3722) 2 19 20
- [baigazy@yandex.ru](mailto:baigazy@yandex.ru)



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