

## **Summary Virtual ECAD Mayors Conference – “Times to Unite - Collective Actions in Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery”, June 12th, 2024**

On June 12th, ECAD, in collaboration with Kaunas City Municipality, held its 29th ECADs Mayor’s Conference virtually. This year, the Conference was titled “Times to Unite – Collective Actions in Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery”. During the 1.5h Conference, several tremendous experts in prevention and recovery shared their best practices, experiences, and tools in the field.

The Conference was officially opened by Göran Gredfors, Chair of ECAD, and the Mayor of Kaunas, Visvaldas Matijosaitis. Before the keynote speaker was introduced, Cressida de Witte (ECAD), shared information about the project implemented by ECAD, Kaunas, Tallinn, and Riga, titled: Building Networks Promoting Health - Developing Substance Use Prevention Awareness Models in the Baltic Cities, which is funded by the Swedish Institute and implemented between December 2023 and February 2025. The project aims to create sustainable prevention awareness-raising models while strengthening capacities and connecting cities.

The keynote speaker of the Conference was Wadih Malouf (UNODC). He emphasised that prevention does not target a specific age group and can happen way before the span of development, even during pregnancy. Prevention focuses more on the persons who have not initiated yet, are contemplating, or early initiators who face a certain issue that needs to be addressed before it escalates to a bigger problem. Prevention requires a person-centred approach understanding that not all people have the same level of risks, vulnerabilities, or symptoms. It also needs to include a gender approach. Prevention is a long-term investment and has a large return of investment on other costs also, such as violence and crime. Within this framework, UNODC launched the CHAMPS initiative during the mid-term review in 2024. CHAMPS is based on evidence-based services that are part of a system that coordinates the responses and is sustainable. It is about amplification in multiple domains and is a tool supporting governments reviewing their prevention system and creating a sustainable infrastructure. CHAMPS is implemented voluntarily in a few pilot countries and hopefully, more countries will follow suit. Its initiative is a call for partnerships at a multisectoral level between governments, civil society organisations, UN agencies, etc. Within its framework, this year’s World Drug Day theme is declared “Evidence is Clear - Invest in Prevention”. Wadih Malouf also shared information about the Declaration of Oviedo, an initiative by different civil society organisations that presents 10 proposals for incorporating effective prevention in drug policies at a global and local level.

Based on the questions asked, Wadih reiterated that there are no specific requirements for cities/countries to join the CHAMPS initiative. However, it is an engagement of 5 years (one wavelength), already having some investment in prevention and is guided by the prevention standards. In case a country is interested, they can reach out to the UNODC. Furthermore, on the question of whether there is an approximate age for prevention and, if one must choose if there is one effective tool to focus on first, Wadih answered that if one has to choose one tool, the focus on family is necessary. Family is a social institution that empowers and carries an effect on the life of children for a long span in their development. However, he also highlighted that no family could do it alone, nor can any institution or policy change do it alone. That’s why it is important to amplify the services as it takes a village to raise a child.

The second speaker, Dave Higham from the Well Communities, shared the importance of having persons with lived experiences involved in the treatment and rehabilitation system. Together with other lived-experience organisations in the United Kingdom, they have established the National

Standard for the treatment system. He shared the history of the Well Communities, which is a result of his own lived experience of crime and substance use. Once he found recovery, he felt lost. With the need to create a community in which one can grow and thrive, which is one of the core conditions of recovery, he created the Well community. They provide 24/7 accommodation together with intensive support for people to overcome their trauma. He reiterated that an environment could create the addict and the current 'rat hell' is adverse child experiences, emotional abuse, domestic abuse, violence, etc. Hence, we need to create the right environment in which we create building blocks. Only by bringing in persons with lived experiences, the gaps within these building blocks can be recognised and covered.

Based on the questions asked, Dave shared that the National standards map how the different stages and types of support exist and identify the people in the community while empowering them to see the value in their lived experience. Starting a Lived Experience Organisation is impossible for all but while developing it, one has to maintain the culture and the values of creating the community space and empowering individuals to engage with the wider communities.

The third speaker was Tina Miller, Florida Recovery Schools of Tampa Bay, Inc. She shared more information on the Recovery Schools concept, which students attend, which usually do not conform with the regular high schools and often face medical traumas, substance use, homelessness, etc. The schools are non-profit, and their primary goal is to save people's lives, reduce dropout rates, increase graduation rates, improve mental health, and reduce society costs. The schools accept both females and males and support multiple pathways of recovery, including harm reduction, total abstinence, or other required support. The system is based on accountability and trust students will also get their blood levels tested (after one month for example) to see whether the levels of substances are decreasing in their bodies. However, the system is not punitive. The maximum number of youths that can attend is 25 to allow close connections with peers and the staff. The schools work together with the parents and guardians as well. After their graduation, they receive training for a job. They have also started the peer-to-peer support programme, which is important for the students to continue their daily routine. They get paid as staff and can help other students out. The schools are like family for the students, making them feel part of a connection. Over 323 classes have been completed. The recovery rate is 98 per cent and the attendance rate is 96 per cent. It showcases that students love attending the school. Every morning there is a mental health check-in to see where the students stand that day emotionally and evaluate themselves whether they experience high-anxiety, overstimulation, focus, tiredness, etc. that day and how to approach the day.

The fourth speaker, Stig Erik Solheim (EURAD), highlighted the changing cannabis policy in the world as well as in Europe. He shared that the United Nations Convention allows for medical cannabis or scientific cannabis but not commercial sale. Due to the European Union having signed the convention, the European Nations are obliged to follow the convention. The discussion of cannabis legalisation started in North America, after a referendum in Colorado and Washington. Countries for legalisation argue that they can achieve the goals of the Convention by breaking it by legalising the drug. However, since its legalisation in these states in 2011, the commercialisation of cannabis increased, and the industry has been actively promoting the sales to increase their profits. In Europe, the approach varies among countries. For example, the Netherlands does tolerate the sale of cannabis in coffee shops but does not legalise the drug itself. Hence, the coffee shops rely on the black market to be supplied, which feeds into their income stream. In other countries, industrial hemp was introduced in which the THC is low and

doesn't lead to a high. However, there is a control issue and it is difficult to distinguish between legal and illegal growing. Besides this, a lot of hemp is processed to CBD which then is processed into cannabinoids, which can lead to a high. Furthermore, countries have started putting medical cannabis on the agenda and pushing for the expansion of it. Germany partly legalised cannabis this year and is planning to allow cannabis clubs this summer. Nevertheless, its setup is yet unclear. There are also plans to start a pilot in certain areas in which the commercial sale is legal. Under the radar, Germany removed cannabis from the narcotic list and allowed easier access to medical use of cannabis, which has led to an increase in patients. With all the different approaches, the black markets remain, and the unstable models can be a step towards full legalisation. To counteract or prevent drugs from being legalised, we need to understand the developments and be more proactive rather than reactive. We need to get as much evidence from the legal markets. We already see that the black market has not been reduced, there is a higher use in pregnancy, more addiction among young people, more traffic accidents, etc.

The conference was concluded with a panel discussion in which Martina Rojnic Kuzman, City of Zagreb, Prof Mindaugas Stelemekas, Kaunas City Municipality, and Johannes-Emmanuel Allas, City of Tallinn took the stage and presented the situation in their cities and discussed presented questions. Martina Rojnic Kuzman shared that in their prevention programmes, they try to enhance the mental health, particularly of children who are prone to being involved in drugs. They also implemented the month against addiction (September) in which they organised a symposium for awareness for various stakeholders. They also integrate the youth by organising a competition for a slogan. Prof Mindaugas Stelemekas shared that alcohol use is declining as is regular smoking. However, when it comes to electronic cigarettes, Lithuania has the highest use among 15-year-olds. Johannes-Emmanuel Allas highlighted the Planet Youth Programme that is being implemented in Tallinn. The programme is paired with research among youth, showcasing the use among youth. Based on the discussion question on their future plans in prevention, Prof Mindaugas Stelemekas highlighted that in Kaunas attention is given to the prevention of suicide, which would need to be expanded to [psychoactive] substance use as it is closely interlinked. The importance of the complex and multipolicy approach needs to be highlighted and integrated into local initiatives to properly coordinate these activities. Johannes-Emmanuel Allas highlighted that Tallinn aims to reduce drug and e-cigarette use. Based on the results from the Planet Youth Survey, they developed an action plan, which focuses on the sleep habits of children. Martina Rojnic Kuzman shared that Zagreb has made an action plan in which prevention activities are included. For newer addictions, such as gaming and the internet, prevention activities need to be further developed.