On the occasion of the International Harm Reduction Day (May 7th), organization “Diogenis – Drug Policy Dialogue”, continues its awareness campaign entitled “Persons Who Use Drugs Count”. It is the third of the selected international / world days that the campaign is running through 2018. May 7th was established as the International Harm Reduction day by the international civil society in 2014, with the aim to promote evidence-based harm reduction interventions, focusing on respect for human rights and public health.

“Harm Reduction” is used as a general term to define interventions, programs and policies that seek to reduce the harmful consequences related to drug use and which affect individuals, communities and society (Regh et al. 2010). This is a pragmatic and integrative approach, consisting of a comprehensive package of interventions tailored to the local conditions and the corresponding needs of people using psychoactive substances as well as those of the wider community.

The "Persons Who Use Drugs Count" campaign aims to inform and raise awareness among the general population and all relevant stakeholders of the need to implement an integrated model of harm reduction interventions, taking into account the diverse needs of people using psychoactive substances. A prerequisite for achieving the above is the legal establishment of all harm reduction interventions, including services within hospitals and prisons. We also believe that the community of people who use drugs and civil society should be involved in the formulation, the implementation and the evaluation of harm reduction services. The objectives of these services are to: provide health care and psychosocial support, linkage with other health and welfare services, encourage drug users’ contact with the health system, reduce public nuisance, reduce drug related morbidity and mortality, reduce the prevalence of blood borne infectious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C, provide education, promote health and reduce high risk behaviors, and empower people who use drugs. Within these objectives, harm reduction offers a wide range of evidence-based and effective interventions, such as:

- Opioid Substitution Treatment (OST), Needle and Syringe Programs (NSP), Condom distribution, Prevention-Diagnosis and Treatment Services for infectious diseases, Outreach work, Drug Consumption Rooms, Naloxone Programs, Education / Counseling for Safe Use and Sex practices, Awareness and Empowerment Programs.

The negative effects of repressive and punitive policies on health became extremely noticeable in the mid-1980s, with the HIV epidemic among people who injected drugs. The need to adopt new approaches based on human rights and public health and recognition of the failure of existing policies can no longer be called into question. In this direction, harm reduction is gaining increased acceptance in managing the global drug problem. In our country the first Harm Reduction Services began to be implemented in the late 1990s with the launch of a methadone substitution program, the creation of Direct Assistance and Support Units for Active Users, street work programs, and NSP.

The basic principles of Harm Reduction are as follows:
(a) Pragmatism, (b) Focus on harm, (c) Human Rights’ Respect, (d) Maximizing intervention options, (e) Priority of immediate goals, (f) Active Involvement of People who Use Drugs.

This campaign is within the frame of the project “Strengthening NGO capacity and promoting public health and human rights oriented drug policy in South Eastern Europe”, funded by the European Commission and by the Open Society Foundations.