

Commission on Narcotic Drugs
Side Event March 14th 2022

SPEECH

Police and Drug Treatment Together: the Global Emergence of Deflection as a Humanitarian Crime Reduction Approach to Drugs

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

Welcome to this Side Event...a further step of the Rome Consensus 2.0 alliance which is growing every day, with new supporters across the world. Thank you for being here with us. The RC2 manifesto is designed to bring together CSOs, professionals, leaders and public authorities to explore ways to effectively combine humanitarian attitudes in health, criminal justice, prevention and community responses to addiction problems.

Is it possible for the Police and drug treatment providers to work together? This is the main question we would like to address today.

The spread of drugs and their use is faster than our ability to respond to the problem. Most governments' energies and resources have been spent combatting the drug market, with the hope of reducing demand. We have seen how limited this strategy is.

It would seem that in many cases authorities are shielding themselves from requests for assistance by placing obstacles in the path of those who are attempting to deal with their addiction, including long waiting lists for treatment, and often the use of force.

We believe in the opposite approach; we believe that it is in the interest of each Member State to reach and treat all drug users. This is one of the founding principles of the Rome Consensus humanitarian initiative – to make efforts to provide or improve access to health services for drug addicts.

Within this framework, Police forces have a key role, and not only in the field of demand reduction. They have easy access to the so-called hard-to-reach; they meet vulnerable groups on a daily basis, including drug users, and we believe they can play a key role in offering a public service that is not limited to repression, but that can also be of assistance to those who seek to

improve their health and change their situation. They can even have a therapeutic role!

Law enforcement authorities have mainly obeyed their public order priorities with a punitive / repressive attitude. Historically, Police and drug treatment providers have an unsteady relationship, consisting mainly of not collaborating with each other, and which often includes distrust, disrespect, and avoidance.

Experience shows that treatment and repression can't work together! Repressive measures decrease the opportunities for recovery and reintegration. If we want to improve our communities' wellbeing, every person suffering from drug disorder should have easy access to treatment.

In my experience, for example, at the Villa Maraini Foundation, the *therapeutic* drug rehabilitation center I founded in Rome, one of our services is to provide health support to persons with drug problems who have been arrested. Our experienced doctors and social workers, at the request of the police, are able to bring various therapies, including methadone, directly to the police station. This best practice, started in the '90's, has a positive impact on the patient who needs treatment, and also improves the mutual understanding between police and the person arrested, who otherwise could become difficult to handle due to having withdrawal symptoms.

Ours is a unique service, which addresses all drug-related emergencies, not only at the police station, but also at the Courthouse and in hospitals, where we go to assist people in custody or hospitalized, 24 hours a day.

Villa Maraini is a reference point for all the drug users of Rome; we have built up trust, and that's why law enforcement officials call on us to support them when they deal with people with drug disorders. In this way, we reduce violence and we positively influence law enforcement officials, who have begun to believe in the value of the health approach, and to recognize that drug abuse is a complex disease that needs to be addressed as a health problem by health professionals.

But still in Italy this is not a common practice, and certainly the priority of law enforcement is not to encourage access to treatment services or to build collaboration with health professionals who know how to deal with people with drug disorders.

The question is this: Is it possible that in 2022, the police can only arrest these people? Is it possible that the only goal of the authorities is imprisonment, and not the recovery and rehabilitation of people in need?

As the Red Cross and Red Crescent, we base our actions on the Fundamental Principles of the Movement, inspired primarily by the principle of humanity. As promoters of the Rome Consensus, we are here to encourage a collective reflection among the various international stakeholders who work with drug users and/or defend human rights and drug patients every day.

In an institutional world where law enforcement personnel are the interface - the intersection between the vulnerable and the rule of law - we can say that they have a crucial role between the two worlds, and they are in a unique position to be able to switch from a repressive approach to a supportive one.

The point of contact between the world of law and the world of outlaws is represented by law enforcement, and the change should start from here!

The following example of pre-arrest deflection that Jac Charlier will talk about in his speech represents a valid alternative that can reduce the harm to, and increase the well-being of, people with a problematic use of drugs. Instead of utilizing traditional police interventions (i.e., arrest, charge and punish), deflection relies on law enforcement to be the referral source to community-based drug treatment and mental health services prior to potential crises or violence.

We believe that taking charge of people with drug disorders is the first step. It not only increases the patient's chances of recovery, but also represents a concrete support of public safety. In fact, a drug user is dangerous for himself and for others.

Punishment decreases the therapeutic and recovery opportunities for people with drug problems. It has been shown that when a person is treated, he is less dangerous for himself and for others.

And now I have the pleasure to give the floor to the main organizer, who inspired the path of the Rome Consensus 2.0 initiative, with its humanitarian witness in the United States, where police and treatment services have begun to work together to improve the health conditions of people who use drugs, who deserve a second chance and an alternative to punishment.