

Prime Minister of the Czech Republic

Mr Andrej Babiš

Office of Government, Czech Republic

nábřeží E. Beneše 4, 118 01 Prague 1

Dear Mr. Babiš,

we, the undersigned academics, professionals with expertise in drugs and drug addictions, and citizens, are concerned that one of the most successful modern drug policies – such that of the Czech Republic – is under a threat of misled administrative and political decisions. We have reasons to believe that this can cause irreversible damage to an evidence-based policy and a significant risk to the public health situation in the country.

The Czech drug policy is considered as a successful model of decriminalisation and balanced approach to drugs, with excellent public health outcomes (Csete, 2012). Since the early 1990s, it has had a four-pillar, integrative and inter-departmental approach to drugs and drug addiction that reflects the bio-psycho-social nature of drug use and addictive disorders and includes prevention, demand reduction, and supply reduction, as well as harm reduction measures. Drug services are being delivered by healthcare providers and, importantly, by a network of non-governmental organisations that provide harm reduction programs and social services.

The system is currently managed by the inter-ministerial Government Council for Drug Policy Coordination (SGCDPC) and is continuously informed by its National Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addictions (NMCDDA) that collects up to date data on the epidemiological situation and makes part of the SCDC. Also, the SGCDPC currently certifies the quality of drug service provision, assigns funding, and manages a network of drug policy coordinators who operate on the regional level. Both SGCDPC and NMCDDA have been located at the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic – this has assured an interdisciplinary and inter-departmental policy focusing not only on health, but also on psycho-social aspects of drug use.

This open letter responds to a recent intention of the Czech Government to move the SGCDPC and NMCDDA from the Office of the Government to the Ministry of Health. Such move presents a serious threat in terms of narrowing the drug policy to its health aspect and, potentially, restricting the drug service funding to existing healthcare providers. This would put at risk the continuation of existing network of (NGO-operated) harm reduction and social programs.

In other words, there is a real threat that – in consequence to such change – the Czech Republic will make a step back from its modern, inter-disciplinary approach to illicit drugs, and that the administrative decision will dismantle the wide network of harm reduction services. Of notice is that the present drug policy model has yielded excellent outcomes, as witnessed by the statistics of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

According to these, the occurrence of drug related harm is among the lowest in the European region:

- Between 2002 and 2015, the prevalence of hepatitis C among people who inject drugs in the Czech Republic ranged between 12% - 22% HCV; in other European countries which provided estimates, this has been 27 % - 81 % (EMCDDA, 2018a);
- in the same period, HIV prevalence among people who inject drugs in the Czech Republic ranged between 0.1% - 0.4%, compared to 0.4% - 49% in the remaining European countries (EMCDDA, 2018a);
- in 2015, there were only 7 cases of drug related deaths per 1 million population aged 15-64, which was among the lowest rates of such deaths (together with Portugal, Latvia, Bulgaria and Luxembourg) (EMCDDA, 2018b).

These important measures come together with an increasing, but still average rates of high-risk drug use. Estimated at 4.4 – 6.7 HRDUs per 1000 of Czech population in 2008 - 2015, it compares with 3.8 - 7.1 HRDUs per 1000 population in other European countries. Also, the low occurrence of harms is very much despite a relatively high proportion of the Czech population who report experiences with cannabis use.

We understand that drug policy is a complex, costly, and sometimes also politically difficult agenda for any government to manage. With this open letter though, we would like to express international recognition of the current Czech drug policy model in terms of its interdisciplinary, inter-departmental coordination, and its excellence in public health outcomes.

We would like to encourage the Czech Government to preserve its successful drug policy model and urge that the said Government avoids its intention to move the SGCDPC and NMCDDA under a single-department competence (Ministry of Health), as the move might cause irreparable changes to the provision of drug services and, related to that, create a risk of increasing (preventable) drug-related harm.

UNDERSIGNED

Vendula Belackova, Ph. D., Research Analyst (ResAd Ltd., Prague, Czech Republic) and Senior Adjunct Lecturer (Drug Policy Modelling Program, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Australia)

Josef Radimecky, Ph. D., Clinical Director (White Light I, Usti nad Labem, Czech Republic), Board Member (A.N.O. – Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, Prague, Czech Republic) and Former National Drug Coordinator (Secretariat of the Government Council for Drug Policy Coordination 1998 - 2004)

Jindrich Voboril, MA, Former National Drug Coordinator (Secretariat of the Government Council for Drug Policy Coordination, 2010 - 2018)

And all the respective signatories.

INTERNATIONAL SIGNATORIES

1. *Executive Director, Niamh Eastwood, on behalf of Release, London, UK*
2. *Executive Director, Naomi Burke-Shyne, on behalf of Harm Reduction International, London, UK*
3. *Executive Director, Ganna Dovbakh, on behalf of Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, Vilnius, Lithuania*
4. *Prof., Tom Decorte, Gent University, Gent, Belgium*
5. *Professor of Social Work, Bengt Svensson, Malmoe University, Malmoe, Sweden*
6. *Government Relations Advi, Natalia Podogova, Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, Moscow, Russia*
7. *Events Officer, Irena Zubkova, Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, Vilnius, Lithuania*
8. *Prof., Carla Rossi, Univeristy of Rome, Rome, Italy*
9. *Director, Juan Machín, Centro Cáritas de Formación para la Atención de las Farmacodependencias y Situaciones Críticas, Mexico, Mexico*
10. *General Secretary, Sahrul Syah, Indonesian Harm Reduction Network, Jakarta, Indonesia*
11. *Assistant Professor, Dan Werb, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada*
12. *Medical Director (MD), Marianne Jauncey, Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre, Sydney, Australia*
13. *Professor, Martin Iguchi, University of California, Los Angeles, USA*
14. *Prof., Director, Darejan Jana Javakhishvili, Institute of Addictology, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia*
15. *Researcher, Dr., Marcus Martens, Das Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Suchtforschung (ZIS), Universität Hamburg, Germany*
16. *Researcher, Dr., Jean-Paul Grund, CVO Addiction Research Centre, Rotterdam, Netherlands*
17. *Executive Director, Anke van Dam, AFEW International, Amsterdam, Netherlands*
18. *Director, MD, PhD, David Otiashvili, Addiction Research Centre - Alternative Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia*
19. *Assistant Professor, Dr., Irma Kirtadze, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia*
20. *Lecturer, Vano Tsertsvadze, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, Tbilisi, Georgia*
21. *Study assistant, Nino Duchidze, ISU, Tbilisi, Georgia*
22. *Ms, Lika Kirtadze, WFH, Tbilisi, Georgia*
23. *Research assistant, Ada Beselia, Addiction Research Center - Alternative Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia*
24. *Specialist, Mariam Pashalishvili, Natioanal Center for Disease Control and Public Health, Tbilisi, Georgia*
25. *Psychologist, Tamar Bokuchava, Drug Addiction Clinic, Tbilisi, Georgia*
26. *Research Assistant, Tamari Mgebrishvili, Alternative Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia*
27. *Professor, Nino Dolidze, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia*
28. *Senior researcher, Dr., Kirsimarja Raitasalo, National Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki, Finland*
29. *Professor, Sophio Beridze, Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Batumi, Georgia*

30. *Assistant Professor, Lela Serebryakova, Caucasus University, Tbilisi, Georgia*
31. *Patient, Mrs, Anda Buergi, Patient, Birrwil, Switzerland*
32. *Director, PhD., Nicole Maalsté, 420 Research BV, 'S-GRAVENHAGE, Netherlands*
33. *Ms, Neshalatha Govarthnapany, Universiti Sains Malaysia / Center for Drug Research, Teluk Intan, Malaysia*
34. *Director, Nana Agapishvili, Georgian Association for Psycho Social Aid Ndoba, Tbilisi, Georgia*
35. *Epidemiologist, Dr. Mzia Tabatadze, Addiction research Center Alternative Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia*
36. *The Head of the Board, Jury Kalikov, NGO AIDSi Tugikeskus, Tallinn, Estonia*
37. *Project Officer, Dr., Sofia Pereira, APDES, Porto, Portugal*
38. *Social counsellor, Juha Sedergren, Tukikohta ry/a-clinic foundation, Helsinki, Finland*
39. *Researcher, PhD., Robert Csák, Hungarian Association on Addictions, Budapest, Hungary*
40. *BASIS Leader, Stefanie Grabatsch, BASIS-Projekt, Hamburg, Germany*
41. *Teamleader drop-in centre, Aukje Polder, De regenboog groep, Amsterdam, Afghanistan*
42. *Director Mainline, Mac Busz, Mainline, Amsterdam, Netherlands*
43. *Head, NCD Department, Dr., Lela Sturua, National Center for Disease Control and Public Health, Tbilisi, Georgia*
44. *Drug researcher, Katerina Skarupova, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA*
45. *Executive Director, José Queiroz, APDES, Portugal, Portugal*
46. *Consumer, Mrs, Suzanne Nisbet, Interest in Drug field, Glasgow, UK*
47. *CEO, David Liddell, Scottish Drugs Forum, Glasgow, UK*
48. *Coordinator APDES, Diana Castro, APDES, Porto, Portugal*
49. *Outreach worker, Catarina Lameira, APDES, Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal*
50. *Dr. Erik Loosen, VVA Brussels, Brussels, Belgium*
51. *Health Lead, Michal Pawlega, Social AIDS Committee, Warszawa, Poland*
52. *Psychologist, Dragomir Padezhki, Health and social development foundation, Sofia, Bulgaria*
53. *Harm reduction worker, Melissa Scharwey, ALDP, Voerde, Germany*
54. *Head of NGO Unit, Natia Kharati, Tanadgoma NGO, Batumi, Georgia*
55. *Volunteer, Viken Darakjian, Positive People Armenian Network, Yerevan, Armenia*
56. *Executive Director, Mahendra Chalise, Helpless Rehabilitation Society, Kathmandu, Nepal*
57. *Director, Leonardo Fiorentini, Fuoriluogo, Ferrara, Italy*
58. *Professor in Sociology, Clayton Mosher, Washington State University, Vancouver, WA, USA*
59. *Lecturer, Tina Tsomaia, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, Tbilisi, Georgia*
60. *Student, Vitor Lima, Universidade de Brasilia, Brasília, Brazil*
61. *Independent expert, Danica Thanki, Independent expert in drugs field, Myjava, Slovakia*
62. *Addictologist, Nina Zvingerova, DRUG-OUT Klub, z.s., Praha 7,*
63. *Project Manager, Teresa Sousa, Agência Piaget para o Desenvolvimento, Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal*

64. *Clinical Nurse, William Wood, Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre, Kings Cross, Australia*
65. *Advocate, Georg Bröring, Global Network of People Living with HIV, Amsterdam, Netherlands*
66. *Lecturer, Dr., Zsuzsa Kalo, ELTE University, Budapest, Hungary*
67. *Network representative, Zaza Karchkhadze, NGO, Kutaisi, Georgia*
68. *Researcher, Shaun Shelly, University of Pretoria, TBHIV Care, SA Drug Policy, City of Tshwane and Cape Town, South Africa*
69. *Executive Director, Milutin Milošević, on behalf of Drug Policy Network South East Europe, Zemun, Serbia*
70. *Director, Dr., Elisabeth Avril, Gaia Paris, Paris, France*
71. *Project Officer, Roger Ferrer Montero, Heath & Community Foundation, Barcelona, Spain*
72. *Coordinator, Cristina Fierbinteanu, Romanian Association Against AIDS - ARAS, Bucharest, Romania*
73. *Program Coordinator, Ioan Petre, Carusel, Bucharesty, Romania*
74. *President of the Board, Rui Miguel Coimbra Morais, CASO - Portuguese Drug Users Union, Viseu, Portugal*
75. *Chair, Researcher, Kenzi Riboulet Zemouli, For Alternative Approaches to Addiction, Think & do tank (FAAAT), Barcelona, Spain*
76. *Student, Bc Marta Costa, University of Roehampton, London, UK*
77. *Advocate, researcher, Susanna Ronconi, Forum Droghe NGO, Torino, Italy*
78. *Director, Prof, Dr., Jozsef Racz, Blue Point Drug Counselling and Outpatient Centre, Budapest, Hungary*
79. *Chair, Daphne Chronopoulou, EuroNPUD, Mykonos, Greece*
80. *Founder & CEO, Martín Saaied, Altos del Plata SA, Montevideo, Uruguay*
81. *Outreach worker, Pedro Machado, APDES, Porto, Portugal*
82. *Acting President, Mr, Ranjit Tiwari, National Users Network of Nepal. (NUNN), Kathmandu, Nepal*
83. *Senior Research Fellow, D, Caitlin Hughes, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Australia, Sydney, Australia*
84. *Director, Prof. Dr., Ludwig Kraus, IFT Institut für Therapieforschung, Munich, Germany*
85. *Mr, Tony Fallon, New Zealand Needle Exchange Programme, Christchurch, New Zealand*
86. *Chairman, Msc, Martin Pazitny, PsyIT n. o., Bratislava, Slovakia*
87. *Student, Vakhtang Sardalishvili, Ilia State University, Georgia,*
88. *Mr, John Mozejko, Private, Marrickville, Australia*
89. *Registered Nurse, Marguerite White, Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre, Sydney, Australia*
90. *Communications Officer, Juan Fernandez Ochoa, International Drug Policy Consortium, London, UK*
91. *Peer worker, Estefan Rockatanski, Free Clinic, Antwerpen, Belgium*
92. *Senior researcher, Cas Barendregt, Addiction Research Institute, Rotterdam, Netherlands*
93. *Priest, therapist, trainee, Marek Jargus, Biskupství ostravsko-opavské, Ostrava,*
94. *former Head Epidemiology, Richard Hartnoll, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), Lisbon, Portugal*
95. *Association President, Borut Bah, Association for harm reduction Stigma, Ljubljana, Slovenia*
96. *Psychologist, Anna Říhová, DPS Ondřejov, Jesenice,*

97. *Chief Executive Officer, Mary Harrod, NSW Users and AIDS Association, Sydney, NSW, Australia*
98. *Head of Advocacy, Andrii Chernyshev, ALLIANCE.GLOBAL, Public Organization, Kyiv, Ukraine*
99. *Deputy Director, Prof., Zsuzsanna Elekes, Corvinus University of Budapest, Institute of Sociology and Social Policy, Budapest, Hungary*
100. *Head of Department, Dr., Ervin Toci, Institute of Public Health, Tirana, Albania*
101. *Mr, Jiri Fuxa, Majestic, London, UK*
102. *Psychologist, Niamh Warde, Self-employed, Bologna, Italy*
103. *Executive Director, Dr., Ivica Cekovski, HOPS - Healthy Options Project Skopje, Skopje, Macedonia, Republic of*
104. *Student, Dominik Risian, Masaryk University, Bratislava, Slovakia*
105. *Researcher, PhD., Ljiljana Golubovic, Institute of Public Health of Montenegro, Podgorica, Montenegro*
106. *Research Fellow, Dr. Katinka van de Ven, Drug Policy Modelling Program, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia*
107. *Research Coordinator, Dr. Geoff Noller, New Zealand Needle Exchange Programme, Dunedin, New Zealand*
108. *Director, Prof., Carla Treloar, Centre for Social Research in Health, Randwick, Australia*
109. *Mental Health Nurse, Peter Sheath, Drug treatment, Warrington, UK*
110. *Ms, Linda Vernout, Correlation, AMSTERDAM*
111. *Consultant, CEO, Damian Grainer, Damian Grainer Consultancy, Warrington, UK*
112. *Program Coordinator, Mariam Razmadze, Institute of Addictology, Tbilisi, Georgia*
113. *Campaign Coordinator, Anna Quigley, Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign, Dublin, Ireland*
114. *Director, Lisa Marie Taylor, Patient advocacy, Manchester, UK*
115. *Head, Tetyana Kozaretska, Ternopil Municipal Public Organization, Ternopol, Ukraine*
116. *Director, Colomera Aguilá, Red Cross Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain*
117. *Researcher, Dr., Samuel Tomczyk, University of Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany*
118. *Director, Dominika Jasekova, ODYSEUS, Martin, Slovakia*
119. *Program Officer, Eliza Kurcevič, Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, Vilnius, Lithuania*
120. *Project coordinator, Miriama Hrehová, OZ Odyseus, Bratislava, Slovakia*
121. *Researcher, Lecturer, Dr., Rachel Horsley, Nottingham Trent University/National Institute of Mental Health, Nottingham, UK*
122. *Trainer, Karel Planský, United Nations Refugee Agency, praha 3, Andorra*
123. *Mr, Ondrej Hronsky, Bratislava, Slovakia*
124. *Director, Hans Wijnands, De Regenboog Groep, Amsterdam, Netherlands*
125. *Head of Reitox National F, Lies Gremeaux, Sciensano, Brussels, Belgium*
126. *Director, Aura Roig, Metzineres, Barcelona, Spain*
127. *Coordenator, João Santa Maria, GAT, Lisboa, Portugal*
128. *Project Leader, Kristof Bryssinck, Free Clinic, Antwerpen, Belgium*
129. *Project Coordinator, Marília Costa, Centro Social de Paramos, Harm Reduction Project, Paramos, Portugal*
130. *Student, Jan Stranak, University, Düsseldorf, Germany*
131. *Plenipotentiary, Iveta Chovancová, City of Bratislava, Bratislava, Slovakia*

132. *Project officer, Ruth Kasper, FEANTSA Brussels, Belgium*
133. *Program coordinator, Tomislav Ruzhin, Healthy Options Project Skopje, Drop in center, Skopje, Macedonia, Republic of*

CZECH SIGNATORIES

134. *Fundraiser, Michael Jettmar, Rozkos bez Rizika, Prague*
135. *Postdoctoral Researcher, Michal Pitoňák, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
136. *Mgr., Petra Kymlová, University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice*
137. *Psychologist, Mgr., Lenka Varyšová, 1st Faculty of Medicine, Charles University in Prague, Prague*
138. *Psychiatrist, Dr., Filip Tylš, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
139. *MD, PhD, Filip Španiel, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
140. *Psychologist, PhD., Pavel Nepustil, Podane ruce NGO, Brno*
141. *Researcher, Alexandr Kasal, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
142. *Researcher, PhDr. Ladislav Csémy, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
143. *Mgr., Martin Zupko, Palackeho University, Olomouc*
144. *Student, Bc. et Bc., Lucie Ráčková, Masaryk University, Rozdrojovice*
145. *Program leader, Otakar Veselý, Společnost Podané ruce, Brno*
146. *Clinical psychologist, Michaela Viktorinová, National Institute of Mental Health, Klecany*
147. *Addictologist, Johana Ruzkova, Magdalena, o.p.s./BONA, o.p.s., Votice*
148. *Chief of Department, Petr Blazek, Podane ruce, NGO, Brno*
149. *Mr, Jiří Koreš, Nelátkové závislosti, Pištín*
150. *Coordinator, Daniela Koubková, PsyCare, Praha 7*
151. *Researcher, Renata Androvicova, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
152. *Drop-in centre worker, Bc, Ria AL-Halabiová, Sananim, Praha 5*
153. *Research coordinator, Martina Kolarova, National Institute of Mental Health, Klecany*
154. *Phd candidate, Eva Kozakova, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
155. *Outreach worker, Romana Pacakova, Most k nadeji, Liberec*
156. *Outreach worker, Lenka Cimrmanova, CSS DECIN, Decin*
157. *Mr, Daniel Tlamka, Amden, Praha 7-Holešovice*
158. *Mr, Alois Primes, -, Vsetín*
159. *Mrs, Zuzana Kozáková, ABS Jets, Praha*
160. *Harmreduction coordinator, Frantisek Petho, Progressive, Praha*
161. *Outreach worker, Tereza Maydlová, KOTEC, o.p.s., Cheb*
162. *Clinical Deputy Chief, Tomas Jandac, Sananim, Beroun*
163. *Social worker, Pavlína Mádlová, Proxima Sociale o.p.s., Praha*
164. *Mr Adéla Stichová, Kabinet Múz, Liberec*
165. *Psychologist, MSc., Jarmila Krajčová, Společnost Podané ruce o.p.s., Uh. Hradiště*
166. *Mr Anežka Turková, Není, Nový Bydžov*
167. *Outreach worker, Martin Safar, K-Centrum Pardubice, Pardubice*
168. *Social worker, Magdalena Chaloupková, Magdaléna o.p.s., Příbram*
169. *Addictologist, Bc., Anna Radimecká, White Light I, Praha*
170. *Mr Miroslav Kyselovský, xxx, Prague*
171. *Clinical Director, Mgr., Ivana Radimecká, White Light I, Děčín*

172. *Clinical Psychologist, Jan Haase, Terapeutika, s.r.o., Roudnice nad Labem*
173. *Manager, Bc., Kamil Podzimek, Prevent 99 Z.Ú., České Budějovice*
174. *Therapist, Martin Zahalka, White Light I, Malá Veleň*
175. *Social worker, Michaela Jančálková, SPR o.p.s., Staré Město*
176. *Mr Roman Sležek, self employer, Prague*
177. *Outreach worker, Andrea Štefková, K-centrum Pardubice, Pardubice*
178. *Outreach worker, Michaela Benešová, K-centrum Pardubice, Pardubice*
179. *Social worker, Mgr., Denisa Grigarová, SPR o.p.s., Kunovice*
180. *Social worker, Václav Hovorka, Péče o duševní zdraví z.s., Lázně Bohdaneč*
181. *Addictologist, Mgr., Bc., Lucie Vojíková, CPPT, Plzeň*
182. *Mr Ivana Brezinova, Ecoterm, Ruda Nad Moravou*
183. *Ms, Gabriela Kovalčíková, Ela, Praha*
184. *Psychologist, Researcher, Barbora Orlíková, National Institute of Mental Health, Klecany*
185. *Ms, Sylva Ficová, osvč, Brno*
186. *Mrs, Marie Richterová, OSVČ, Praha 7*
187. *Physician, Dr., Ivo Prochazka, Institute of Sexuology, Prague*
188. *Ms, Anna Bártková, 1.LF UK, Chomutov*
189. *Outreach worker, Jakub Babnič, Spolecnost podane ruce o.p.s., Libina*
190. *Researcher, Barbora Drbohlavová, National Institute of Mental Health, Černošice*
191. *Mr Maria Kostrabova, 1st. Faculty of Medicine, Charles University, Prague*
192. *Chairman, Mgr., Vojtech Janouskovec, Czech Association of Addictologists, Praha 3*
193. *Ms, Tereza Zelenková, Samostana osoba, Prague*
194. *Volunteer, MA, Vojtěch Čáp, Czeps, Praha*
195. *Mr Sára Svobodová, Advertising, Praha*
196. *Nurse, social worker, Lucie Vyskocilova, Sananim z.u., Kutna Hora*
197. *Ms, Barbora Kratochvílová, Důchodkyně, Praha 10*
198. *Social worker, Bc., Eva Petřivalská, Kontaktní centrum Plus, Holešov*
199. *Social pedagogist, Zuzana Šimrádová, Sociální pedagog, Praha*
200. *Outreach worker, Barbora Fárová, Prevent99, České Budějovice*
201. *Student, Bc., Jana Machová, Charles University, Kamenice nad Lipou*
202. *Outreach worker, Aleš Termer, SANANIM NGO, Praha*
203. *Outreach worker, Martin Chromčák, Podane ruce o.p.s., Trhové Sviny*
204. *Addictologist, Dominika Púčiková, Magdaléna o.p.s., Prague*
205. *Program coordinator, Josef Sedivy, SANANIM, Prague*
206. *Psychiatrist, Dr., Andrea Miklovičová, Psychiatric Hospital Šternberk, Šternberk*
207. *Trainer, Radim Šebestík, Sananim, Prague*
208. *Researcher, PhD., Michaela Roubalova, Institute for Criminology and Social Prevention, Prague*
209. *Lawyer, Mgr., Michal Kyjonka, Czeps - Czech Psychedelic Society, Prague*
210. *Student, Filip Trbušek, VFU, MU, Brno*
211. *Manager, Oto Kovanda, WHITE LIGHT I, Teplice*
212. *Physiotherapist, Kristýna Šedivá, hospital, Praha*
213. *Student, Ivana Čáповá, Charles University, Vinařice*
214. *Social worker, Šárka Sedláčková, Point14, z.ú., Plzeň*
215. *Mr Radim Gottvald, Industry, Vyškov*
216. *Mr, Matyáš Richter, University, Praha*
217. *Harmreduction worker, Bc., Matyáš Stiburek, Sananim, Praha*
218. *Social worker, Jan Kopic, none, Hradec Králové*

219. Geneticist, MUDr., Blanka Laudova, Pronatal, Hradec Kralove
220. Study Coordinator, Mgr., Zuzana Postránecká, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague
221. Lawyer, Vojtech Hrdlička, Lawyer, Praha
222. Psychologist, Aneta Dorazilova, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague
223. Researcher, Dr., Tomas Zabransky, Charles University, Prague
224. Drug Policy Expert, Mgr., Jakub Černý, Municipality of Brno, Drug and addiction policy coordination team, Viklefova 14
225. Association Member, Ing., Václav Štrupl, Czech Psychedelic Society, Prague
226. Psychologist, Dr., Michal Smotek, National Institute of Mental Health, Klecany
227. Cardiologist, MUDr., Roman Cerman, Dopravní zdravotnictví Agel, Olomouc
228. Clinical psychologist, Re, Martin Paštrnák, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague
229. Chief Executive Officer, Boris Banas, Preco nie konope?, NGO, Dolny Kubin
230. Mr Václav Hrubý, Akraz s.r.o., Bílovice nad Svitavou
231. Student, Bc., Josef Baltazar Šenkyřík, Mendel University in Brno, Opava
232. Association Member, Jakub Španihel, Czech Psychedelic Society, Brno
233. Peer, recovery coach, Johana Břešťáková, Podané ruce, Brno
234. Deputy Head, Adiktolog, Radek Jurnikl, SANANIM z.ú., Prague
235. Social worker, Martina Píšťková, Společnost Podané ruce, Ivanovice na Hané
236. Psychologist, Petra Mechyrova, Psychiatric Hospital Bohnice, Prague
237. Council President, Mgr., Helena Rampachová, A.N.O. - Association of Non-Governmental Organizations, Praha
238. Manager, Kristýna Karpíšková, Spolek Ulice Plzeň, Plzeň
239. Outreach worker, Nikola Brenvasserová, Podané ruce o.p.s., Křídlovická
240. School psychologist, Mgr., Jana Šnajderová, Střední škola TE, Brno
241. Director, Mgr., Marek Novotný, Středisko křesťanské pomoci, Plzeň, Pilsen
242. Student, Tereza Nikodymová, Charles university, Prague
243. Head of Program, Martin Hulik, SANANANIM - Therapeutic Community Němčice, Velešín
244. Director, Martin Parula, Spolek Ulice Plzeň, Plzeň
245. Lead, Mgr., Bohuslava Mužiková, Dětská skupina Ministerstva obrany, Tábor
246. Manager, Mgr., Břetislav Kantor, Therapy center Renarkon o.p.s., Havířov
247. Mrs, Jitka Bodrovova, No institutuin, Plzen
248. Advisor, František Šuranský, Green Doors, Uherské Hradiště
249. Psychologist, Jan Zahradník, K-centrum Kroměříž, Kroměříž
250. Outreach social worker, D, Jana Řezáčová, Spolek Ulice Plzeň, Plzeň
251. Project officer, Ms, Gaziza Lutseva, Odbor protidrogove politiky, Prague
252. Social worker, Mgr., Kateřina Tichá, Spolek Ulice Plzeň, Stod
253. Social worker, Lucie Zittová, Drop In NGO, Lipnice nad Sazavou
254. Head of Services, Mgr., Jaroslav František Žák, Diecezni charita Trebic, Třebíč
255. Outreach worker, Bc., Kateřina Lenartová, Společnost Podané ruce, o.p.s., Ostrava
256. Social worker, Klára Poppová, People in need, Plzeň
257. Psychologist, Michal Petr, Centrum sociálních služeb Praha, Kladno
258. CEO, MUDr., Pavel Kubu, International Cannabis and Cannabinoids Institute, Prague
259. Head of Program, Mgr., Markéta Ackrmannová, Spolek Ulice Plzeň, Substituční program, Plzeň

260. Mr Jiří Sláma, self-employed, Brno
261. Mr, Kryštof Mertelik, 4nature, Průhonice
262. Social worker, therapist Jakub Larisch, Renarkon, o.p.s., Frýdek-Místek
263. Researcher, MUDr., PhD, Tomáš Páleníček, National Institute of Mental Health, Praha
264. Social worker, Bc.DiS, Růža Hausnerová, SKP Plzeň, Plzeň
265. Mr Májka Chytrá, Sananim, Prague
266. Outreach worker, Jiří Frýbert, Spolek Ulice Plzeň, Plzeň
267. Prof., MUDr., Ph.D., FCMA, Jiri Horacek, 3rd Medical Faculty of Charles University, Praha
268. Mr Lukáš Pokorný, none, Praha
269. Outreach social worker, Jitka Vrbova, NNO, Pilsen
270. Psychologist, Jana Adamkova, psychologická ambulance v Rychnově nad Kněžnou, Prague
271. Psychologist, Mgr., Jiří Ammer, Krizové centrum pro děti a dospívající, Hapalova, Brno
272. Junior Researcher, Mgr., Zuzana Dvořáková, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague 3
273. Social worker, Bc., Jakub Nepejchal, Společnost Podané ruce o.p.s., Olomouc
274. Ms, Annika Schubertová, Student, Praha
275. Head of Interventions, Mg, Lenka Plicková, Centrum sociálních služeb Děčín, Děčín 1
276. Director, PhDr., Dagmar Krutilová, P-centrum, Olomouc
277. Supervisor, Helena Fialova, Magdaléna, o.p.s., Praha 2
278. Mr, Igor Hamko, soukromá osoba, Praha - Prosek
279. Head of Program, Ph.D., Ondřej Skopal, P-centrum, Olomouc
280. Student, Bc., Kristýna Fišerová, First Faculty of Medicine, Charles University, Děčín 4
281. Educational Coordinator, Martin Florián, Mousou.cz, Borohrádek
282. Trainer, Karina Langová, P-centrum, Primary prevention, Olomouc
283. Mr Daniel Randák, PREVENT99 z.ú., Strakonice
284. Counsellor, Social worker, Marcel Skyba, P-centrum, spolek, Olomouc
285. Head of Program, Mgr, Hana Vavrincova, Magdalena o.p.s., Příbram
286. Social Assistent, Petr Klásek, Charita Olomouc, Horka nad Moravou
287. Head of Program, Denisa Holá, Point 14, z.ú., Primary Prevention and Drop in Center, Plzeň
288. Psychologist, Mgr, Gabriela Kosíková, Společnost Podané ruce o.p.s., Zlín-Prštné
289. Mrs, Ph.D., Jana Žáková, -, Prague
290. Project manager, Martina Jocovová, Magdalena, o.p.s., Dobruška
291. Ms, Hana Grygarova, none, Brno
292. Program Coordinator, Kateřina Vašková, Magdaléna o.p.s., Outreach program, Příbram
293. Outreach worker, Nikola Mezková, Magdaléna, o.p.s., Dobruška
294. Mgr., Aneta Rothová, Point 14, z.ú., Plasy
295. Ms, Adéla Koutná, Company, Praha 10
296. Addictologist, Mgr., Michaela Kešnerová, Psychiatric ambulance, Prague
297. Researcher, PhD, Pavla Dolezalova, National Institute of Mental Health, Klecany
298. Mr, Aleš Kavalír, NGO, Lhůta
299. Social worker, Bc., Jiří Klimeš, P-centrum, spolek, Olomouc

300. *Psychiatrist, Dr., Adéla Stoklasová, Psychiatrická nemocnice, Kroměříž*
301. *Psychologist, Marcela Ševčíková, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
302. *PhD candidate, Adéla Plechatá, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
303. *Hear of Program, Iveta Neradová, Magdaléna o.p.s., low-threshold facility for children and teenagers, Bystřice*
304. *Researcher, Lead, Dr., Martin Brunovsky, National Institute of Mental Health, Klecany*
305. *Special pedagogist, Mgr., Marketa Jirka, Stredisko vychovne pece, Trebic*
306. *Student, Vendula Kunová, Charles University, Jaromer*
307. *Social worker, Bc., Andula Novotna, SANANIM, Prague*
308. *Outreach worker, Barbora Pompová, Světlo Kadaň z.s., Jirkov*
309. *Addictologist, Mgr., Ludmila Vodickova, Fokus Mlada Boleslav, z.s., Kolin*
310. *Social worker, Therapist, Petr Šeda, P-centrum, spolek, Hlubočky*
311. *Researcher, Dr., Lenka Martinec Novakova, National Institute of Mental Health, Klecany*
312. *Social worker, Žaneta Martínková, FOKUS, Nymburk*
313. *Volunteer, Hana Řádková, Psycare, Brno*
314. *Mr Johana Rejlová, Tachov*
315. *Psychologist, Lucie Franova, Podane ruce, Brno*
316. *Addictologist, Therapist Petr Přibyl, Substitution treatment outpatient clinic, Prague*
317. *Social worker, Alžběta Stromšíková, Společnost Podané ruce o.p.s., Brno*
318. *Mr, Denis Veselý, Uherský Brod*
319. *Mr, Pavel Kymla, Příčovy*
320. *Social worker, Bc., Markéta Nepejchalová, maternity leave, Olomouc*
321. *Trainer, Dominika Jančíková, P-centrum, spolek, Olomouc*
322. *Outreach worker, Barbora Kodešová, Drop In, Praha*
323. *Social worker, Vlastimila Feistingerova, NGO, Stříbro*
324. *Social worker, Hana Pospíšilová, K-centrum, Šumperk*
325. *Researcher, Ph.D., Alena Pařízková, University of West Bohemia, Plzeň*
326. *Student, Erika Langerová, Czech Technical University, dolní břežany*
327. *Social worker, Mgr., Tereza Dvořáková, SPOLEČNOST TADY A TEĎ, o.p.s., Plzeň*
328. *Media specialist, Eva Césarová, National Institute of Mental Health, Ivanovice na Hané*
329. *Director, Mgr. MSc. MHA M, Simona Sedláčková, Centrum pro rodinu PSS a klinické adiktologie, z.ú., Praha 6*
330. *Outreach social worker, Amrit Sen, SANANIM z. ú., Praha*
331. *Director, Michaela Hirtová, SPOLEČNOST TADY A TEĎ, o. p. s., Břasy*
332. *Ms, Martina Wolfová, Praha 4*
333. *Social worker, Mgr., Michaela Strašíková, Nizkoprahove zarizeni pro deti a mladez, Pacov*
334. *Mr, František Veselý, Prague*
335. *Addictologist, Kateřina Syrovátková, Prison, Aš*
336. *Social worker, Tereza Baudišová, Low-threshold facility Pacific, Prague*
337. *Therapist, Jana Kadlecová, Centrum protidrogové prevence a terapie, o.p.s., Plzeň*
338. *Director, Mgr Olga Merglová, Advaita, z. ú., Liberec*
339. *Lead doctor, outpatients Jan Hanka, Národní ústav duševního zdraví, Klecany*
340. *Mr Adéla Žočková, Prague*
341. *Addictologist, Mgr., Markéta Šídová, Prev-Centrum, z.ú., Praha*

342. *Psychologist, PhDr., Tomas Málek, Psychiatrická nemocnice Bohnice, Praha*
343. *Social worker, Barbora Eisová, Poradna pro integraci, Čenkov*
344. *Mgr., Barbora Spěváková, University, Hradec Králové*
345. *Therapist, Tereza Kosíková, Magdalena o.p.s., Sedlčany*
346. *Board member, Daniela Kmetonyova, AdRes Institut, Prague*
347. *Researcher, Daniela Dudysova, National Institute of Mental Health, Klecany*
348. *Deputy Head of Outreach, Filip Dvořák, Společnost Podané ruce o.p.s., Brno*
349. *Manager, Karel Nyerges, Point 14, z.ú., Plzeň*
350. *Trainer in prevention, Josef Hruška, DO SVĚTA z.s., Strakonice*
351. *Mr Soňa Špilarová, Pilsen*
352. *Researcher, Dr., Klára Bártová, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague*
353. *Mr, Leopold Trdý, Praha 8*
354. *Youth team coordinator, Monika Mačasová, Probation and mediation service, Pilsen*
355. *Primary prevention worker, Michaela Hlavová, Point 14, Plzeň*
356. *Social worker, Pavlína Kubečková, Point 14, z. ú., Plzeň*
357. *Social worker, Jana Jindrová, Point 14, z.ú., Pilsen*
358. *Outreach worker, Kateřina Jannová, SKP Plzeň, Plzeň*
359. *Social worker, Markéta Michálková, SKP, Plzeň*
360. *Outreach worker, Bc., Dominika Čížkovská, Magdaléna, o.p.s., Praha*
361. *Social worker, Kateřina Němečková, Network East - West, z.s., Domažlice*
362. *Outreach worker, Johana Cihelková, CAS Benešov, Jiráskova 2222*
363. *Miss, Gabriela Landová, Praha*
364. *Psychotherapist, Mgr., Kateřina Jeníková, Point 14, z.ú., Plzeň*
365. *Mr Martin Zahálka, Usti Nad Orlici*
366. *Ms Eva Vodičková, P-centrum, spolek, Hněvotín, Czech Republic*
367. *Student, Laura Delgado, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic*
368. *Mr Jakub Rychtar, Městská knihovna v Praze, Prague, Czech Republic*
369. *Ms Lucia Gogoláková, Praha, Czech Republic*
370. *Program lead, Mgr. Ondřej Ostrovský, Středisko následné péče, Plzeň, Czech Republic*
371. *Therapist, Social worker, Romana Jakubcová, Terapeutická komunita, Praha, Czech Republic*
372. *Program coordinator, Dis., Soňa Černá, Point14, SNP, Plzeň, Czech Republic*
373. *Social worker, Barbora Mendlová, SPOLEČNOST TADY TEĎ, o.p.s., Plzeň, Czech Republic*
374. *Mr Viktor Davídek, Plzen, Czech Republic*
375. *Mgr. Jan Hrouda, Praha 10, Czech Republic*
376. *Therapist, Petr Buchta, Magdaléna, o.p.s., CHRPA, Mníšek pod Brdy, Czech Republic*
377. *Social worker, Kristýna Szijjártová, Prostor plus o.p.s, Kolín, Czech Republic*
378. *Mrs Kristina Glushakova, Praha, Czech Republic*
379. *Specialist, Dr. Matyáš Müller, National Institute of Mental Health, Prague, Czech Republic*
380. *Social worker, Bc. Lucie Solovjevová, OS Ceskeho cerveneho krize, Vrbice - Vetlá, Czech Republic*
381. *Social worker, Mgr. Klára Huzlíková, Společnost Podané ruce, Brno, Czech Republic*
382. *Mr Petr Černý, Ratboř, Czech Republic*
383. *Social worker, Adina Kleinova, Podane ruce o.p.s., Brno, Czech Republic*
384. *Case Manager, Mgr. Jana Buchtová, Fokus Praha, Prague, Czech Republic*
385. *Outreach worker, Daniel Martínek, Prevent99, Horažďovice, Czech Republic*

386. *Psychologist, Executive member, Jaroslav Farkas, Česká psychedelická společnost, z.s., Klecany, Czech Republic*
387. *Lecturer, Dr. Miroslav Charvát, Department of psychology, Faculty of Arts, Palacky University, Olomouc, Olomouc, Czech Republic*
388. *Social worker, psychotherapist, Jan Horák, Renarkon Choryně, Czech Republic*
389. *Researcher, Ph.D. Eva Dragomirecka, Charles University, Praha, Czech Republic*
390. *PhD. candidate, Mgr. Tomáš Dominik, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, Olomouc, Czech Republic*
391. *Executive director, Mgr. Veronika Jurečková, P-centrum, spolek, Majetín, Czech Republic*
392. *Assistant professor, Dr. Martin Dolejš, Katedra psychologie FF UP Olomouc, Olomouc, Czech Republic*
393. *Head of Outreach, Jan Šroub, Světlo Kadaň, z. s., Litvínov, Czech Republic*
394. *Peer worker, Barbora Demková, Podané ruce o.p.s., Brno, Czech Republic*
395. *Trainer in Primary Prevention, Jan Neuwirth, Do Světa z.s. a DM Holečkova, České Budějovice, Czech Republic*
396. *Head of program, Richard Vodička, Světlo Kadaň z.s., Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic*
397. *Student, Jana Jetelinova, 1. lékařská fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, Praha, Czech Republic*
398. *Student, Bc. Michaela Skokanová, Klinika adiktologie 1. LF UK, Olomouc, Czech Republic*
399. *Psychologist, Jana Lidická, Education sector, Praha, Czech Republic*
400. *Social worker, Miluše Šroubová, Světlo Kadaň, z.s., Litvínov, Czech Republic*
401. *Nurse, Bara Hladikova, Spolek Ulice Plzeň, Pilsen, Czech Republic*
402. *Director, Dr. Miroslav Scheinost, Institute of criminology and social prevention, Prague, Czech Republic*
403. *Psychologist, Martin Novák, Práh jižní Morava, Brno, Czech Republic*
404. *PhD candidate, Jaroslava Suchá, Palacký University Olomouc, Nové Město na Moravě, Czech Republic*
405. *Mr Jiří Návrat, Plzeň, Czech Republic*
406. *Ms Lenka Brožková, Hostivice, Czech Republic*

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