

# Ukraine: Light of Hope's Work Improving Social Services For Marginalized Groups

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Light of Hope was founded in 1999 as a charity association with the mission of helping persons with HIV/AIDS in the Ukrainian city of Poltava and the surrounding region. Over time its mission, and the range of services it has provided, has expanded to encompass other neglected groups. The organization began to work with people struggling with substance abuse, a group particularly susceptible to HIV/AIDSs, and then former inmates. Light of Hope eventually became one of Ukraine's largest and most successful service delivery organizations.

With funding coming mostly from donations and grants, Light of Hope conducted this work much like any other Ukrainian charity that provides services. But in 2011 it embarked on a pioneering campaign to collaborate with the city government of Poltava. This case study examines the Light of Hope's efforts to establish the Poltava Social Adaptation Center, which received unprecedented fiscal support from the local government. It documents how Light of Hope managed to successfully establish a facility to deliver a complex array of services to ex-prisoners, drug users, people who are HIV-positive, and the homeless. Light of Hope was able to garner an unprecedented level of support from the city government for the center, including funding from the city budget. In the process, the organization also challenged the stigma surrounding marginalized groups that is prevalent in Ukrainian society.

The case provides useful lessons for service delivery organizations seeking a wider strategy for winning social change.

# THE ISSUE: A LACK OF SYMPATHY FOR THE MARGINALIZED

In the decade that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine's gross domestic product plunged by more than half. The economy began to recover in the early 2000s, but despite a decade of steady economic growth, Ukraine was yet to confront the social woes that had accumulated during its transition to democracy and a market economy.

The 1996 Constitution of Ukraine grants citizens many social rights, including the right to employment, social protection, housing, and free health care. These basic rights remain unrealized for some Ukrainians, however, because the public resources allocated to areas of social need are insufficient. Ex-prisoners, people struggling with substance abuse problems, people living with HIV, and homeless people face strong social stigma and lack influential advocates to represent them.

Drug use, prostitution, homelessness, and HIV infection have been often been characterized as matters best left to the police rather than social issues to be addressed through public spending. The Ukrainian government failed to even acknowledge homelessness as a problem until 2005, when a law was passed requiring local authorities to provide temporary accommodation; social, medical, legal and educational services; and assistance with reintegration into society. Importantly, the law stipulated that local governments could outsource these services to CSOs. Local governments, however, did not feel compelled to provide these services and continued to flout the law for years without political repercussions.

In 2009 Light of Hope had initiated a project to socially rehabilitate prisoners. The organization noted that former prisoners accounted for nearly half of all the homeless population and that the longer a person remains homeless, the more difficult rehabilitation is, and providing services becomes more expensive. Light of Hope reasoned that providing social services to prisoners upon their release was a sensible way to prevent them from becoming homeless in the first place. Partly due to this work, the law was revised in 2010 to ensure services were extended to former prisoners.

During the harsh winter of 2010-11, six people in Ukraine's Poltava Region froze to death, two of them in Poltava city. One of the victims, a homeless young woman with a history of substance abuse, was found frozen to death after sleeping out in the open. Her death made it clear to Light of Hope that a single facility could achieve more if it was equipped to face the challenges of the

overlapping populations of former prisoners, people living with HIV-AIDS, drug users, and homeless people.

## THE CAMPAIGN

Light of Home decided to establish a Social Adaption Center that would not only provide marginalized groups with short-term accommodation, but also with a wide range of other services tailored to their needs. While the organization had the resources to operate such a center itself, it decided that it was strategically important to secure financial support from the city government. The idea was to push for the implementation of the 2010 law that already bound the city to provide the sort of services that Light of Hope envisaged providing through the center.

Light of Hope was able to draw on a range of human resources for the campaign. Along with years of accumulated knowledge on the needs of marginalized groups, and the challenges they face, the organization had staff with legal expertise, experience of budget advocacy and working with city officials, and experience of working with the press. Such skills and experience were all put to use during the course of the campaign.

Light of Hope's advocacy efforts targeted local government. Under the 2010 law, the regional government was responsible for providing shelter for the homeless but the city government was responsible for providing the actual premises. Light of Hope knew it needed both levels of government to endorse the project.

At the city level, Light of Hope first approached the heads of departments, seeking endorsement for the center among civil servants, and then approached elected city officials. After securing commitments, it made those details available to the press. The press coverage was largely positive, reflecting the city government's commitment to an issue of growing public concern.

Light of Hope knew the importance of the commitments being a matter of public record, reasoning that the government would be more vulnerable to criticism if it failed to keep its promises. It also wanted to continue to stoke public concern about the issue, fearing that sympathy occasioned by the winter deaths would fade over time, and with it the political will to address the issue. There was also the need to overcome the opposition of residents to having shelter facilities in their neighborhoods. To address these challenges, Light of Hope encouraged and facilitated television and radio journalists to cover the personal stories of homeless people.

Light of Hope also made the crucial decision to seek municipal premises for the Social Adaptation Center. It initially used its own funds to operate the center, expecting that the demonstrable success of the center would make it easier to persuade the city to contribute to ongoing expenses. Light of Hope knew the budget cycle well; they understood that new budget items would take two years to be established under Ukrainian law, and were prepared to fund the center for the duration.

The city government and Light of Hope identified a site for the facility together that was both convenient for its likely users and cost-efficient, opening the center in November 2011. Light of Hope again turned to the media to publicize the opening as well as mobilize citizens to contribute donations. In this period, they also assessed how much it would cost to run the center, and found they could provide services at considerably cheaper rates. Using the costs of the sites operated by other city governments, they estimated that that it would cost the city UAH 1 million (US\$ 42,000) to run such a facility; Light of Hope's assessment showed it could do it for a third of the cost. This financial advantage was a crucial factor in finally persuading the city to support the project.

Arranging the support, however, turned out to be complicated. No precedent existed for such a partnership in Ukraine, and the city was unsure about how to proceed. Rather than depending on the bureaucracy to establish the procedure, Light of Hope took the initiative and assisted the city to design a transparent bidding process. Not everything went smoothly. Some members of the city council continued to question whether there were more pressing issues than homeless people and drug users, but Light of Hope engaged with opponents one-on-one to overcome their skepticism.

Once the funding was approved, timely and accurate payments became a problem. In the first quarter of the first year that the city pledged to support the Social Adaptation Center, no money was forthcoming. This put Light of Hope in a difficult position. It had worked hard to build an amiable partnership with the city and was concerned that criticizing the city for the failure to transfer the funds would jeopardize this relationship. Light of Hope instead worked through a partner organization, the Institute of Analysis and Advocacy (IAA), to exert pressure.

IAA, a fully independent think tank, was in a better position to publicly criticize the city. With some assistance from Light of Hope, IAA did some digging into the budget. They found that the city government planned to spend more resources on a dog shelter than on the Social Adaptation Center in 2013. The think tank disseminated a leaflet illustrating that the city would spend 30

times more on stray dogs than on homeless people that year. The tactic worked. Within just a few days, the city allocated the money from the city's reserve fund.

Light of Hope realized that it was dealing with the symptoms of the problem, but failing to address the root causes. To help homeless people secure employment and a place to live they needed to be granted temporary resident registration. Light of Hope successfully persuaded the authorities to grant them the right to offer registration, something completely new in Ukraine.

Light of Hope noted that many of the beneficiaries, who were largely uneducated and unskilled, had a difficult time finding secure jobs. To address this they established a training center and even persuaded the city to commit additional funds to public works projects that they organized. Finally, recognizing the special needs of women and children, Light of Hope opened separate women's and family center. This evolution demonstrates Light of Hope's commitment to fully realizing its goal of integrated and holistic support for marginalized and vulnerable groups. It also shows the organization's ability to strive for ever more ambitious goals while keeping government officials supportive and engaged.

## TACTICS USED BY LIGHT OF HOPE TO WIN GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR A SOCIAL ADAPTION CENTER

- Assembling a skilled management team.
- Lobbying regional and city officials separately.
- Exploiting political differences for leverage.
- Using media to pressure officials and to maintain public support.
- Establishing the center with private funds to demonstrate its effectiveness.
- Providing a detailed cost assessment to demonstrate the advantages of outsourcing to a CSO.
- Using an alliance with a think tank to indirectly pressure officials when promises for funding went unfulfilled.

## CHANGES DUE TO THE CAMPAIGN

In its first three years of operation, the Social Adaptation Center provided services to hundreds of people: a place to stay, warm showers, clothes, food, medical and legal assistance, child care, and counseling. It helped former prisoners and homeless people to register as residents, allowing them to seek employment and other government services. Less than two years after it opened, not a single person froze to death in the streets, crime rates in the city had fallen, and many of the beneficiaries succeeded in their transition to a happier and more productive life. Regional officials also attribute improvements in health to the opening of the center. Indeed, the model has proven so successful that Light of Hope has been asked to share what it has learned with CSOs in other parts of the country who are interested in tackling the same issues.

Although Light of Hope was successful in its efforts to secure public funding for the center, the amount of funding they have received has fluctuated from year to year and rarely covered more than the minimum costs of utilities, meals, and salaries. Still, the organization hopes that its demonstrable success will allow it to attract additional funds from regional authorities in the future.

While Light of Hope's strategy can be credited with its achievement, a few contextual factors were also at play. The 2010 changes to legislation had placed the burden of responsibility on local officials, and the deaths of six homeless people in the winter of 2011 made it difficult for officials to continue to shirk this responsibility. Light of Hope understood and seized the opportunity for change that this situation created.

Furthermore, Light of Hope benefitted from a new administration, staffed by many former CSO representatives, that was more amenable to the issue and to working collaboratively with CSOs. Finally, the lack of experience among Poltava city authorities in delivering social services to marginalized groups meant that outsourcing may have been their only option — and the cost benefits of this outsourcing were made explicit by Light of Hope.

## OUTCOMES RELATED TO THE CAMPAIGN

- Opening a Social Adaptation Center to provide services to ex-prisoners, homeless people, drug addicts, and other marginalized groups.
- Winning financial support from the city of Poltava for the Social Adaptation Center and for public works projects.
- Opening a training center to help individuals from marginalized groups to find employment.
- Raising public awareness and concern for the plight of homeless people.
- Contributing to halting deaths from exposure and a reduction in crime rates.
- Helping other organizations to establish similar centers elsewhere in the country.

## CONCLUSION

By combining a variety of advocacy instruments — a media campaign, budget analysis, personal engagement, lobbying, and partnering with the government — Light of Hope succeeded in its campaign to establish a Social Adaptation Center and increase government support for marginalized groups.

The case highlights that a successful advocacy strategy can be built on a critical partnership in which Light of Hope pushed the government to take action, all the while offering collaborative solutions. But this strategy is not without risks. When promises failed to materialize, Light of Hope relied on its partners to exert pressure. The project is still largely dependent on private sources of funding and at the time of writing the government seems reluctant to contribute more. Still, having won over the skeptics in the government, and among the public, Light of Hope has overcome such reluctance before.